

Human models and economic systems

Contemporary radical thought attacks capitalism on the grounds that it leads to an unequal distribution of goods. But it also argues that capitalism imposes certain limitations on the human personality, and falsifies relations between individuals in capitalist society.

An economic system allocates resources in a particular way. An economic system is also a set of relations between individuals, relations of control and subordination, of co-operation and conflict. These relations find expression in certain norms of interpersonal behaviour, and underlying these norms, in certain norms of human fulfilment.

When we came to judge these relations in terms of ethical criteria we have to decide to what extent they are natural features, and hence, of course, beyond the scope of ethical judgement, or to what extent people could act in different ways, and so could be judged for acting in the way that they do. I want to stress this point, because very often people accept as being part of nature reactions and drives which are merely the result of the socialisation process characteristic of a particular society. Even if we take something as basic as the sexual drive, we see that although it is present in nearly all individuals, nevertheless the way in which individuals experience their sexuality differs from society to society, as do accepted patterns of sexual behaviour.

Potentialities

That is, and individual has [sic] a wide set of potentialities, and the socialising process selects certain of these potentialities and changes them into norms. The reason why particular potentialities are selected over others must be found in the need for stability of that particular society. Of course the process of socialisation may be incomplete and may therefore not in fact guarantee the stability of the society but the point is that the dominant cultural patterns of the society are of this nature. (Otherwise it would be a different society). In *Eros and Civilisation* Marcuse uses the distinction

between “repression” and “surplus repression” to analyse this. Using his own version of Freudian psychology, he accepts that social living requires a certain amount of repression of libidinal drives, since both the material situation and the necessity of working in collaboration with other people makes some abnegation inevitable. In order to prevent frustration and conflict every time this occurs it is desirable that the socialisation process should impose a certain amount of repression. The less gratification possible in a given social situation, the more repression is necessary.

Marcuse argues that in any given social situation one can distinguish between the optimum distribution of possibilities of gratification available with the best utilisation of the social and productive forces, and the actual distribution, which is a function of the way in which the society actually uses its resources, which is in turn a function of social organisation, and in particular of class structure. That is, in order to produce people who will accept the type of life which the society can offer them, it may be necessary to impose upon them a highly limiting set of “needs”.

This argument can be reformulated by saying that in any particular society a certain ‘human model’ is imposed on individuals. That is, they are taught to find fulfillment in certain ways. To judge a particular society we need to see what human model is required for its continuing functioning and then compare this model with an ideal model to see what human potentialities are being suppressed. I would suggest as criterion an ideal human model in which fulfillment is found in freedom and in love. Freedom means self-determination - that is, means using one’s power of reason to the full in order to understand oneself and one’s world, and in order to act in terms of one’s understanding. An individual remains unfree if he acts in terms of unquestioned acquired norms.

Community

The principle of love implies that a certain type of relation with other people is a way of achieving fulfillment. That is, community with other people is a good in itself, not a way of obtaining other goods. (The famous argument between Thrasymachus and Socrates in the Republic hinges on this. Socrates believes that community (or love) is a good in itself — hence that it is better to be just than unjust, better to suffer injustice than to do it. Thrasymachus believes that the goal of human existence is material consumption, and that therefore other people should be used to help one become rich.) Love and freedom are interdependent. On the one hand to love someone means to be open to them to explore them, and this cannot occur if

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one reacts to the other in terms of a set of socially imposed norms. On the other hand the development of reason and consciousness which underlies freedom can only occur in interaction with other people, in community. Let us now look at the human model underlying a capitalist economy. What behaviour patterns, hence what norms of human fulfilment are involved? The first important motive is the profit motive. The primary objective of the business man is to accumulate profit, and any other purpose he may have is secondary. In one sense, of course, this is inevitable, since if a business doesn't make profits, it cannot continue. But to say that the profit motive is dominant means more than this. It means that the objective is to control an expanded business and to acquire more consumer goods. In this situation the relationship to other people becomes instrumental. This is the second important feature. Other people are to be used as a means to satisfy one's own ends. They may be used more or less skilfully, but 'industrial psychology' doesn't change the basic relation of instrumentality. The

worker has no real say in his work situation, where he is subject to the final authority of the employer. He has no say in what shall be produced, in how it shall be produced, in what will happen to the profits. That is, he merely takes orders, and so is dehumanised and alienated.

Consumption

The drive for profit is not a 'natural' drive. In many societies it plays no important role. Even in our society it is necessary to distinguish between the profit drive of the businessman and other people's search for a higher standard of living. The latter is connected primarily with consumption, while in the former case the individual is aiming not at consuming but at possessing. The desire to consume seems to be much more reasonable than the desire to possess. However the third feature of our human model seems to be a perversion even of the desire to consume. That is, there is a tendency to see consumption of material goods as the main area of human fulfilment. Advertisements not only encourage the consumption of a particular good. Each advert also carries the message that it is through consumption that one achieves happiness. We have an economy that is good at producing individual consumer goods. However, because of the profit motive there is a continued drive for expansion. This means that markets must be found, so that people must be trained to consume the sort of things which the economy needs them to consume. People must be moulded to the needs of the economy, instead of the economy being designed to satisfy real human needs.

To summarise, the human model underlying the capitalist economy sees human fulfilment as lying in possessing or consuming material goods, and sees other humans essentially as means to this end. This denies the principle of love. It makes the sphere of work into an area where one is not expected to fulfill oneself, and the consumption norms which it imposes make men unfree by subjecting them to unexamined and non-natural norms.

Efficiency

One's criteria of economic efficiency depend on one's human model. In our economy the ultimate criterion of efficiency is the difference between production cost and price expressed in material terms. However, if one assumed that one of the objectives of an industry was to produce workers' satisfaction, then a factory which merely produced a money profit might be

judged highly inefficient. I do not wish to suggest that material goods are not important. A certain material basis is necessary for the expression of love and freedom. Leisure and freedom are in many ways linked, and leisure assumes a certain distance from nature which can only be ensured by a satisfactory technology. But on the one hand priority must be given to the satisfaction of collective needs, and on the other hand people must be left free to decide, without advertising and social pressure, what consumer goods they want.

Radical groups of all kinds - student groups, women's liberation groups, black power groups - are criticizing western society along these lines. Black power groups, in particular, are attacking "white civilization" not because it is white, but because it is inadequate in human terms. White exploitation of blacks is merely a more dramatic expression of white willingness to exploit other whites. That is, if, in 'western civilisation' it were not normal to treat other people as means rather than as ends, the whole vicious circle of imperialism producing race discrimination and inequality producing more inequality would never have begun.

For whites the importance of this is that what they do to blacks they do also, in more mundane ways, to one another. If we look away from the consumption-oriented business model to a model based on love and freedom, we can see the extent to which whites damage themselves in damaging others.

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