

Reconstructing Herbert Marcuse's Theory of Imperialism

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Abstract

This thesis reconstructs Herbert Marcuse's writings on imperialism, which are scattered across his various works, lectures, and interviews. This analysis aims to present a consistent theory of imperialism based on Marcuse's variable and unsystematic writings on the subject. A key objective of this analysis is to demonstrate that Marcuse's understanding of imperialism drew heavily from the work of Vladimir Lenin, despite Marcuse's belief that the earliest Marxist theories of imperialism were no longer relevant in the post-WWII era. Chapter 1 reconstructs Marcuse's engagement with the 'classical' theories of imperialism, focusing on the notion of inter-imperialist rivalry. Chapter 2 engages with a discussion of the 'affluent society' in Marcuse's work, suggesting that Marcuse expands Lenin's notion of the labour aristocracy to include the entire organized labour force in the imperial metropole. This thesis aims to challenge and reinvigorate the secondary literature on the philosopher, which has until now omitted imperialism from the contemporary reception of Marcuse's work.

Résumé

Cette mémoire reconstruit les écrits d'Herbert Marcuse sur l'impérialisme, qui sont dispersés dans ses différents ouvrages, conférences et entrevues. Cette analyse vise à présenter une théorie cohérente de l'impérialisme à partir de ses écrits variables et non systématiques. L'un des objectifs de cette analyse est de démontrer que la compréhension de l'impérialisme par Marcuse s'inspire fortement des travaux de Vladimir Lénine, bien que Marcuse pense que les premières théories marxistes de l'impérialisme n'étaient plus pertinentes dans l'ère de l'après-Seconde Guerre mondiale. Le chapitre 1 reconstruit l'engagement de Marcuse dans les théories "classiques" de l'impérialisme, en se concentrant sur la notion de rivalité inter-impérialiste. Le chapitre 2 aborde une discussion sur la "société d'abondance" dans l'œuvre de Marcuse, suggérant que Marcuse élargit la notion d'aristocratie ouvrière de Lénine pour y inclure l'ensemble de la prolétariat organisée dans la métropole impériale. Cette mémoire vise à revigorer la littérature secondaire sur le philosophe, qui a jusqu'à présent omis l'impérialisme dans la réception contemporaine de l'œuvre de Marcuse.

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Introduction

This thesis examines the concept of imperialism in the work of Herbert Marcuse. My primary aim is to reconstruct a Marcusean theory of imperialism from his critique of late capitalism in his work from the late 1950s until his death in 1979. While Marcuse never dedicated one specific work to his analysis of imperialism, this thesis argues that imperialism underlies his understanding of the developments in the capitalist mode of production in the twentieth century. Briefly, Marcuse thought that imperialism temporarily stabilized capitalism against its internal contradictions in the imperial core, on two intersecting and mutually reinforcing levels. First, imperialism stabilized conflict between the imperialist rival nations, and second, it stabilized class conflict within the imperialist nations. These changes in the structure of capitalism represented a major crisis in Marxist theory. As a result, Marcuse dedicated the bulk of his oeuvre to the historical changes in the capitalist mode of production to reinterpret the revolutionary subject for the imperialist age.

This thesis presents Marcuse's work as a response to theories of imperialism of the first two decades of the 20th century. Vladimir Lenin, Nikolai Bukharin, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, and Rudolf Hilferding were the first¹ to apply Marx's theory of capitalism to the emerging tendencies the imperialist era. Their theories influenced Marcuse's understanding of the historical evolution of capitalism; at the same time, Marcuse sought to demonstrate the limitations of their foresight. I situate Marcuse's understanding of imperialism in the orthodox Marxist tradition, as he was indebted to both Luxemburg and Lenin.² In this tradition, imperialism denotes the most advanced stage of

¹ The first to attempt a systematic theory of imperialism was the liberal heterodox economist John A. Hobson. His *Imperialism* (1902) influenced not only Lenin, Luxemburg, Hilferding and Kautsky, but also Marcuse. I discuss Hobson's influence in the second chapter.

² Marcuse's intellectual debt to Luxemburg is well documented. See Caroline Ashcroft, "From the German Revolution to the New Left: Revolution and Dissent in Arendt and Marcuse," *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 3 (2022): 835–58., and Richard Wolin and John Abromeit, *Heideggerian Marxism*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

capitalist development, encompassing the political and economic control by the advanced capitalist (i.e., imperialist) countries over the exploited so-called ‘backwards’ countries.³

Following Lenin, Marcuse viewed imperialism as a historical stage of the capitalist mode of production, and as the defining tendency of 20th century capitalism. Marcuse used the term state-monopoly capitalism to describe the domestic configuration of capitalism in the imperialist states (i.e., the beneficiaries of imperial exploitation), whereas imperialism describes the overarching development of a global capitalist economy. However, the Leninist theory of imperialism – the authoritative Marxist theory of imperialism until the early 1960s⁴ – predicted competition between the imperialist states and could not explain the international cooperation between the imperialist nations after the Second World War. As such, Marcuse suggested that a new stage of imperialism, neo-imperialism, overtook the classical form by the mid-century.

For Marcuse, the most apparent outcome of imperialism is the weakened class struggle in the imperial metropole, which he traced to the improved standard of living of the metropolitan proletariat. In the metropole, the proletariat remained separated from control over the means of production, but it gained an interest in the maintenance of the capitalist mode of production. Their affluence is generated by the super-exploitation of workers in the periphery i.e. the “greater than average rate of exploitation imperialist capitalism submits workers in colonial or neo-colonial nations to.”⁵ The increased standard of living of the proletariat in the core is inversely related to its revolutionary capacity. This affluence, in the form of higher real wages, produced the objective basis for the failure

³ In Marxist theory, the term ‘backwards’ describes the level of development of countries with feudal or semi-feudal modes of production, or otherwise modes of production deemed prior to the industrial capitalist mode of production. Critics have pointed out the negative moral connotations of the term, arguing that its use perpetuates a Eurocentric view of cultural inferiority in the periphery, and does not sufficiently deal with the causes of backwardness. Since much of the work discussed in this thesis was written prior to this shift in terminology, this term will be inevitably used in citations from Marcuse and other theorists.

⁴ Anthony Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey*, (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁵ Cope, Zak. *Divided World, Divided Class*, (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2012), 186.

of socialist revolutions in the imperialist countries. However, this stabilization of the contradictions of capitalism only operates within the imperial core, and as a result, the contradictions are accentuated elsewhere, i.e., in the periphery and neo-colonies. Marcuse argued that if Marxists can no longer rely on the proletariat in the advanced capitalist countries to carry the socialist revolution, they must re-evaluate the revolutionary subject for the imperialist age.

In what follows, I reconstruct Marcuse's diffuse writings on imperialism into a cohesive account. This thesis challenges the secondary literature on Marcuse, which has not adequately recognized the significance of imperialism in his oeuvre.⁶ Marcuse's work, especially concerning the metropolitan working class, is misunderstood without his theory of imperialism. Moreover, this thesis presents a materialist Marcuse. Many theorists have questioned Marcuse's Marxist credentials (Alasdair MacIntyre)⁷ and view his work as an idealistic deviation from Marx (Lucio Colletti)⁸ Less contentiously, other critics (Raymond Geuss, Ellen Meiksins-Wood, Jason Hickel & Arsalan Khan⁹) locate Marcuse's work in the Western Marxist tradition that is reliant on the idea of 'false consciousness' and "replace[s] a critique of class, labor, and exploitation with a critique of the suppression of individual autonomy in totalitarian society."¹⁰ This reconstruction of Marcuse's theory of imperialism demonstrates the centrality of class, labour, and exploitation in his work. It also shows that Marcuse's work was steeped in the broader Marxist tradition – he was indebted not only to Western Marxists like György Lukács and Karl Korsch, but to orthodox Marxists like Lenin. Indeed, I will demonstrate Lenin's influence on Marcuse's historical materialism. Marcuse never gave an

⁶ There are a few exceptions, namely Marcel Stoetzler's chapter "Critical Theory and the Critique of Anti-Imperialism" in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, Sarah Hornstein's 2018 PhD dissertation "On Alienation and Imperialism: Synthesizing the Work of Herbert Marcuse and Samir Amin". Douglas Kellner and Charles Reitz, editors of the *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, reference Marcuse's anti-imperialist politics, but provide little analysis.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and a Polemic*. (New York: Viking Press, 1970).

⁸ Lucio Colletti, "From Hegel to Marcuse," *Foundations of the Frankfurt School of Social Research*, (London: Routledge, 1984).

⁹ Jason Hickel and Arsalan Khan, "The Culture of Capitalism and the Crisis of Critique," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (Winter 2012), 203-227

¹⁰ Ibid, 212.

explicit definition of historical materialism, but Charles Mills provides a simple definition which seems commensurate with Marcuse's understanding. Mills defines Marx and Engels' historical materialism as the notion that "the overall course of history is determined by economic causes."¹¹

This thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter deals with Marcuse's diagnosis of the transition from imperialism to neo-imperialism. The main tendency of this transition is the move from inter-imperialist rivalry to cooperation in the international capitalist market, and the full development of state-monopoly capitalism. The first part of this section deals with the influence of Rudolf Hilferding, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin on Marcuse's understanding of imperialism and state-monopoly capitalism. Marcuse's theory of imperialism was strongly marked by these earlier theorists, and his work attempted to revise their theories to account for the Cold War and the post-war American economic boom.

The second section considers how imperialism stabilizes class conflict in the metropole. I present a Marcusean version of the labour aristocracy, which expands Lenin's theory. Marcuse, like Lenin, thought that the bourgeoisie bribes the metropolitan working class with higher wages to diminish class conflict in the core. The advent of a mass consumer society within staves off crises of overaccumulation. The improved material conditions of the metropolitan proletariat sufficiently prevent the development of a revolutionary working-class movement in the imperialist countries. The traditional mass organizations of the working class, the Marxist-Leninist parties and trade unions, are oriented towards reformist -- rather than revolutionary -- ends. Moreover, the rise of national chauvinism in the imperial core undermines the international nature of the class struggle. These developments call into question the relevance of the orthodox Marxist theory of revolution.

¹¹ Charles Mills, *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 11.

Chapter 1: Marcuse's Theory of Neo-Imperialism

In this chapter, I will show how Marcuse understood the changes in the international capitalist system from the early 20th century to the mid-century. Imperialism, for Marcuse, is an international system of economic and political domination waged by the advanced capitalist countries (Western Europe and North America) over non-capitalist, so-called “backward countries.”¹² Marcuse’s conception of imperialism is based in the Leninist tradition, which sees imperialism as a historical stage of the capitalist mode of production, and as a manifestation of capitalism on an international level, as entire nations are economically exploited by other nations. Marcuse thought that by the late 19th century, capitalism reached a stage where it cannot grow without imperialism. In *Essay on Liberation*, he argued that this society “has long since passed the stage where it could grow on its own resources, its own market, and on normal trade with other areas.” As such, “it has grown into an imperialist power.”¹³

Marcuse thought that the Leninist “theoretical framework” should be re-evaluated in light of changes in the capitalist mode of production after the Second World War. In his “Re-examination of the Concept of Revolution” published in *New Left Review* in 1969, he claimed that a theoretical framework of revolution must “become a global one: no concept, no action, no strategy which does not have to be projected and evaluated, as element and chance and choice in the international constellation.”¹⁴ Marcuse sought to go beyond an analysis of class war as exclusive to the conflict between national bourgeoisie and proletariat. Marcuse maintained that while “Marxian theory has always been ‘international’,”

[...] this ‘internationalism’ was orientated on the industrial working classes as a counterforce within industrial capitalism; today, they are not a subversive force. Marxian theory paid attention to the peoples in the colonial and backward areas, but they appeared mainly as adjunct, ally, ‘réservoir’ (Lenin’s term) for the primary historical agent of revolution. The Third

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 81.

¹³ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 80.

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, ‘Re-examination of the Concept of Revolution,’ in *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 6*, ed. Douglas Kellner & Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge, 2014) 201.

World obtained full theoretical and strategic recognition only in the wake of the Second World War.¹⁵

Marcuse hoped to provide a Marxist analysis of the post-war dynamic between the First, Second and Third Worlds which was absent from previous theories of imperialism. Through a critique of the first Marxist theories of imperialism, Marcuse sought to explain the mid-century evolution of neo-imperialism. A fundamental characteristic of Marcuse's neo-imperialism, as against classical imperialism, was the formation of a united capitalist bloc (united against the Soviet Union). Cooperation between the capitalist states generated a new form of imperialism by waging imperialist wars in the interest of *international* capital, rather than national capital. This in turn changed the political mode of imperialist exploitation from *direct colonial rule* to *indirect neo-colonial rule*.

This chapter takes Marcuse's historical analysis of imperialism in the works of Lenin, Luxemburg, Kautsky and Hilferding as a starting point, to show Marcuse's continuities and ruptures with these initial Marxist theorists of imperialism. This first section deals with the common ground between these theorists, who according to Marcuse captured the 'classical' era of imperialism. Following this, I turn to their major disagreements to show where Marcuse stands in the debates on the nature of imperialism. From there, I reconstruct what Marcuse termed 'neo-imperialism'.

a) Marcuse's historical analysis of 'classical' imperialism

The first broad outlines of the Marxist theory of imperialism were developed by Vladimir Lenin, Rudolf Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky, all of whom were part of the Second International until its collapse in 1916. In his equivocally titled chapter "The Obsolescence of Marxism," Marcuse argued that their contributions were integral to the Marxist understanding of imperialism and deserve reconsideration: "I do not make the distinction that some of my colleagues

¹⁵ Ibid.

make, between Marx and Engels themselves and later Marxian theory. Rather I consider for example Rosa Luxemburg's, Hilferding's and Lenin's theory of imperialism as genuine developments of the original Marxian theory."¹⁶ The Second International was primarily concerned with the growing imperialist tendencies that reached a zenith with the outbreak of the First World War. According to historian of economics Anthony Brewer, for these theorists, imperialism generally referred to the "rivalry between major capitalist countries, rivalry expressed in conflict over territory, taking political and military as well as economic forms, and tending, ultimately, to inter-imperialist war."¹⁷ This section deals with the debates on inter-imperialist war, which are central to Marcuse's definition of classical imperialism. As we will see, Marcuse thought that a defining feature of neo-imperialism is the obsolescence of inter-imperialist war and the stabilization of inter-imperialist relations. For now, I shall demonstrate how Marcuse's understanding of classical imperialism emerged directly from these initial debates.

Marcuse's historical analysis of classical imperialism is by and large found in his *Soviet Marxism*, perhaps the most overlooked text in his corpus. This text begins by sketching the transformation of competitive industrial capitalism into imperialism in the works of these early theorists. Borrowing directly from Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Marcuse described imperialism as a historical period; a development in the capitalist mode of production, which produced a crisis in and among the capitalist nations. He claims that the historical "advent of 'imperialism'" in the late 19th century "terminates the 'classical' period of capitalism and initiates its general crisis."¹⁸ For Marcuse, 'classical' capitalism is characterized by "(relatively) free enterprise and (relatively) free competition, with the economic laws asserting themselves freely," wherein capital is accumulated primarily via

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, "The Obsolescence of Marxism," *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 6*, ed. Douglas Kellner & Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge, 2014) 188.

¹⁷ Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism*, 89.

¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) 62.

industrial production.¹⁹ Freely competitive capitalism eventually rose to the level of international competition between the advanced capitalist nations. The imperialist tendencies among Western European powers ushered in a new era of capitalism, which in concrete historical terms culminated in the First World War.

According to Marcuse, Marxists theorists refer to this transition from late 19th century to the First World War as capitalism's 'general crisis', a period of structural transformation in the capitalist mode of production. General crisis "means at the same time the continued existence of the capitalist system, and far from excluding 'stabilizations,' it implies them as its very essence."²⁰ Marcuse challenged a crude version of Marxist crisis theory which he believed was employed by the official theorists of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The 'general crisis' of capitalism did not instigate "impending collapse and a revolutionary situation, but rather a whole stage of historical development."²¹ The crisis forced a restructuring of the capitalist system, which "can continue to function only through expanding state controls with monopolistic regimentation and domination, wars or preparation for wars, and 'intensified exploitation.'"²² These developments in the mode of production, like monopoly, state expansion, and imperialism, on Marcuse's account, were not present in the era of 'classical' capitalism and indicate that this era has passed.

Marcuse's historical account of the transition from classical capitalism to imperialism drew on Marx's brief notes on monopoly and finance, posthumously compiled by Engels in volume three of *Capital*. On Marcuse's account, the first volume of *Capital* presents a "'theoretical model' of capitalism which omits all features (such as foreign trade, government intervention, 'third persons') that do not

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

pertain to the basic economic process which constitutes the capitalist system.”²³ Marcuse thought that the third volume of *Capital* was the most relevant to the historical developments in the mode of production at the turn of the twentieth century. Marcuse explained that “in its historical reality capitalism develops ‘countertrends’ against its inherent contradictions, for example, capital export (economic and political), monopolies, government intervention.”²⁴ While Marx did not live to see the most blatant examples of imperialism or monopoly capitalism, Marcuse thought that Marx’s marginal discussion of countertendencies “moves into the center of Marxian theory” in the early 20th century in the works of Hilferding and Lenin.²⁵ Countertrends like the development of monopoly, the strengthening of the state, and imperialism, Marcuse argued, are outcomes of instability which paradoxically work to stabilize capitalism against its internal contradictions. Marcuse stressed that these countertrends were not *simply* willed or imposed by a colluding capitalist class; rather, monopolistic regimentation, which leads to the expansion of state control, were inevitable outcomes of competitive capitalism.

The first Marxist to embark on a systematic economic analysis of this new era was Austro-Marxist Rudolf Hilferding, whom Marcuse cites in *Soviet Marxism* and *One-Dimensional Man*. In his influential work *Finance Capital* (1910), Hilferding argued that modern capitalism marked a move away from freely competitive capitalism “bring[ing] bank and industrial capital into an ever more intimate relationship.”²⁶ The distinction between different capitalists faded as “representatives of banks sat on the boards of industrial firms, and industrialists sat on the boards of banks.”²⁷ Hilferding’s most influential theoretical innovation was his analysis of the “the unification of capital.”

²³ Ibid, 27.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 27-8.

²⁶ Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital: A study of the latest phase of capitalist development*, trans. Tom Bottomore (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 21.

²⁷ Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism*, 105.

The previously separate spheres of industrial, commercial and bank capital are now brought under the common direction of high finance, in which the masters of industry and of the banks are united in a close personal association. The basis of this association is the elimination of free competition among individual capitalists by the large monopolistic combines. This naturally involves at the same time a change in the relation of the capitalist class to state power.²⁸

On his account, the alliance of industrial and financial capitalists led to the consolidation of capital in the form of monopoly, and the end of free competition prompted a stronger relationship between capital and state power, as monopolies rely on the protection of tariffs imposed by the state.

For the classical theorists of imperialism, Marcuse claimed that monopoly capitalism was an inevitable stage of development in the “advanced industrial societies”; these are societies “in which the mechanization of large-scale industry [have] already embarked on the stage of automation.”²⁹ These technological innovations in the means of production are a necessary result of the normal process of capitalism, which forces capitalists to compete against one another to increase productivity and decrease the amount of socially necessary labour time in production, to sell the same commodity for a lower price, outpricing their competitors. Competition tends to increase the organic composition of capital,³⁰ to produce technological innovations, to increase productivity while reducing socially necessary labour time. Consequently, the most competitive, technologically advanced firm in a given sector will undercut and wipe out their competition. In turn, the most advanced companies absorb their former competitors through mergers and acquisitions. This is the traditional Marxist theory of how competition produces monopolies. Monopolistic control of key sectors of the economy allows corporations to engage in price fixing to prevent a race to the bottom.

²⁸ Hilferding, *Finance Capital*, 302.

²⁹ Herbert Marcuse, ‘Socialism in the Developed Countries’, in *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 6*, ed. Douglas Kellner & Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge, 2014) 171.

³⁰ The growing organic composition of capital refers to the increased ratio of constant capital (technological developments in the means of production) against variable capital (labour power) in the productive process.

Monopoly capitalism does not (and cannot) eliminate competition, as this is a central characteristic of capitalism; but, capitalism is no longer ‘freely’ competitive. Monopoly capitalism requires a ‘manager’ to ensure that the market is competitive enough to maintain growth while at the same time protecting the market against competition-induced crises. For Marcuse, the state assumes this ‘managerial’ role.³¹ Lenin introduced the term ‘state-monopoly capitalism’ to account for the new managerial role of the state over capital in the era of imperialism. In *State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin asserted that monopoly no longer stands on its own; monopoly capitalism turns into state-monopoly capitalism.³² Following Lenin’s insights, Marcuse believed that at this stage, state and capital were no longer distinguishable, as they were increasingly integrated into one another. Marcuse discussed this transition from competitive to organized capitalism in ‘Socialism in the Developed Countries’:

The former free market economy is transformed into a regulated profit economy, controlled by the state and the large monopolies, into the system of ‘organized capitalism.’ In this kind of society, the cultural, political and economic power is concentrated to an unprecedented degree. To a large extent, economics are determined by politics and the economy can only function because of the direct or indirect intervention of the State in vital sectors.³³

Competitive capitalism, on Marcuse’s account, was driven by the interests of particular capitalists, dynamically influencing and influenced by the ‘invisible hand’ of the market. In this new era, “the particular capitalist enterprises in all sectors of the economy are being subordinated *to* the requirements of capital as a whole (*Gesamtkapital*)” which is finally represented by the state.³⁴ Marcuse’s emphasis that the political overtakes the economic in the age of state-monopoly capitalism is certainly hyperbolic. A more modest characterisation of Marcuse’s analysis is that the state (the political organ of capital) seems to dominate individual capitals for the sake of fostering total capital accumulation as such. There remains an ambiguity in Marcuse’s use of the term political, but ultimately, for Marcuse,

³¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 9.

³² V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020) 1.

³³ Marcuse, ‘Socialism in the Developed Countries’, 171.

³⁴ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 9.

the economic remains dominant, but is reconfigured in this stage, from competitive to cartelized.

Lenin and Hilferding were not the first to theorize the role of the state in the management of capital. Marcuse recognized that the state already occupied some version of this role prior to the advent of state-monopoly capitalism, as Marx and Engels had already characterized the state as the executive committee of the bourgeoisie as early as 1848 in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.³⁵ However, Marcuse argued that the nature state management of capital had changed in the era of monopoly. Previously, “during the period of free competition,” Marcuse wrote, “bankruptcy threatened the indifferent and the inefficient. Today, when a whole sector of the economy (agriculture) and a large sector of industry depend on government subsidies, bankruptcy is no longer a threat.”³⁶ The state is subordinated by the interests of capital when it codifies the “needs of the big corporations” into domestic and international policy.³⁷ On the other hand, the state organizes and manages domestic competition to in the interests of total capital, which is invested in the stability of the system, preventing the biggest firms from completely taking over the market. As such, the government acts “as a stimulating, supporting, and sometimes even controlling force.”³⁸ The state directs and is directed by capital. Marcuse thought that the main characteristic of state-monopoly capitalism is the dominance of politics over economics, or in other words, state control over the economy.

The theorists of the Second International largely agreed that imperialism, monopoly and state expansion arose simultaneously, ending the period of classical capitalism. However, these theorists disagreed on the ultimate outcome of these tendencies, which led to a revisionist and orthodox split in the movement.³⁹ Marcuse valued both the reformist and the revolutionary positions on the question

³⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978) 475.

³⁶ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 22.

³⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 2002), 21.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 28.

of stability. This is an important question for Marcuse, because he thought the Leninist account of inter-imperialist rivalry tending towards decay did not come to fruition, and that imperialism had to be reconsidered on these grounds. Few have paid much attention to the influence of the specific political divides in the Second International on Marcuse's work. I will show that he clearly respected both the reformist and revolutionary theories of imperialism, as he often used Hilferding's reformist term 'organized capitalism' and Lenin's term "state-monopoly capitalism" interchangeably.

b) The question of stability in the age of imperialism

According to Marcuse in *Soviet Marxism*, reformist theory "emerging in Eduard Bernstein's writings of 1900-1901 and culminating in the doctrine of economic democracy (*Wirtschaftsdemokratie*)" the latter term Marcuse ascribed to Rudolf Hilferding's address to the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) at Kiel in 1927.⁴⁰ The reformists "maintained that, within the framework of 'organized capitalism,' the proletariat could continue to improve its economic as well as its political position and ultimately establish socialism by legal and democratic means through the increasing economic and political influence of organized labour."⁴¹ The moderate political aims of the reformists thus presuppose the long-term stability of capitalism.

In stark contrast, the orthodox position represented by Lenin and Luxemburg "saw in the growth of capitalism a tenuous and temporary stabilization bound to explode in armed conflicts among the imperialist powers and in sharpening economic crises."⁴² Both the reformists and the orthodox Marxists agreed that finance and monopoly capital had overtaken competitive capitalism, and that this was the leading cause for the First World War. Their analyses were also deeply influenced by one another - for instance, Lenin's *Imperialism* drew from Hilferding's "very valuable theoretical

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 28-9.

⁴² Ibid, 29.

analysis” in *Finance Capital*.⁴³ However, the main point of contention between Hilferding and Kautsky on the one hand and Lenin and Luxemburg on the other, John Willoughby writes, “is whether the imperialist dominance of finance capital is an inevitable feature of late capitalism, or whether the strains and contradictions that develop with nation-state conflict can be overcome and develop into ultra-imperialistic capitalism.”⁴⁴

The reformist analysis of capitalist stability relied on the ‘general cartel’, the idea that the capitalist class would eventually unite and dictate society in its unified interest. This idea features prominently in the work of Hilferding prior to his reformist shift following the German revolution. According to Marcuse’s reading of *Finance Capital*, “In the huge dominion of such a “general cartel,” the contradictions of the capitalist system could be greatly controlled, profits for the ruling groups secured, and a high level of wages for labor within the dominion sustained—at the expense of the intensified exploitation of markets and populations outside the dominion.”⁴⁵ Of importance to Marcuse was that Hilferding foresaw the possibility that the general cartel could contain the contradictions of capitalism.

Karl Kautsky continued to develop this idea of the general cartel in *Der Imperialismus* published in the September 1914 issue of *Die Neue Zeit*. At the outset of the First World War, Kautsky thought that it would ultimately end with the international integration and consolidation of capital, ushering in the era of peaceful ultra-imperialism, so termed because it would supersede the imperialist era. Kautsky hoped that the “World War between the great imperialist powers” would be the war to end all wars, possibly resulting in “a federation of the strongest, who renounce their arms race.”⁴⁶ Kautsky’s analysis

⁴³ V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020) 11.

⁴⁴ John A. Willoughby, “The Lenin-Kautsky Unity-Rivalry Debate,” *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 93.

⁴⁵ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 33.

⁴⁶ Karl Kautsky, “Ultra-imperialism,” *New Left Review* I, no. 59 (Jan/Feb 1970): 46.

went beyond Hilferding's in that he foresaw an inevitable political alliance between the imperialist national capitals. The concentration of capital in the hands of an international alliance of the capitalist class would abolish competition writ large, leading to the end of war. "From the purely economic standpoint," he wrote, "there is nothing further to prevent this violent explosion finally replacing imperialism by a holy alliance of the imperialists."⁴⁷ These conclusions are paradigmatic of this early reformist position: not only is revolution futile, but peace is on the horizon. For these theorists, the general cartel and ultra-imperialism implied the indefinite stability of capitalism, as it would lead to the termination of competition between the capitalists and imperialists. This analysis led the reformists to believe that socialism could only arise through gradual democratic means.

Conversely, the orthodox theorists thought that to argue for permanent stability, let alone the possibility of peace in capitalism, would be to abandon a Marxist analysis of capitalism. Lenin's critique of Kautsky featured as the introduction to Bukharin's *Imperialism and World Economy*. Lenin discredited Kautsky's Marxist credentials; his "open break with Marxism has led him [...] to dream about a 'peaceful capitalism.'" For Lenin, ultra-imperialism was nothing more than petty-bourgeois nostalgia for 1871 to 1914, the interwar period of peace between the European capitalist states. Lenin argued that Kautsky overlooked the fact that capitalism always requires the mass immiseration of people, which cannot be considered peaceful. Lenin mused that the reformists hoped for ultra-imperialism because it "demands no such 'sharp' tactics" like revolutionary organizing.⁴⁸ This reformist renunciation of class struggle is utopian according to Lenin, as "he who denies the sharp tasks of today in the name of dreams about soft tasks of the future becomes an opportunist."⁴⁹ He thought that a revolutionary Marxism, against an opportunistic kind, must retain Marx's understanding of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ V.I. Lenin, "Introduction," in Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy* (London: Martin Lawrence Ltd., 1918) 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 14.

capitalism's inherent instability and war-producing tendencies.

Likewise, Rosa Luxemburg recognized that the permanent stabilization of capitalism was not an option. Writing her *Junius Pamphlet* in prison in the winter of 1915, she declared that there were only two options: socialism or barbarism. Following Engels, who first foresaw this crossroad, Luxemburg wrote:

Either the triumph of imperialism and the destruction of all culture [...] or, the victory of Socialism, that is, the conscious struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism, against its methods, against war. This is the dilemma of world history, its inevitable choice, whose scales are trembling in the balance, awaiting the decision of the proletariat.⁵⁰

For Luxemburg and Lenin, socialism would only come to pass with the concerted revolutionary fight against the imperialists.

Marcuse sympathized with Kautsky and Hilferding's visions of capitalist stability. Marcuse thought that capitalist stability emerged gradually, albeit with interruptions and breaks, "under the impact of two World Wars, atomic productivity, and the growth of Communist power. These events altered the structure of capitalism as defined by Marx and created the basis of a new economic and political organization of the Western world."⁵¹ Against Lenin, Marcuse admired the foresight of Kautsky and Hilferding, as they had audaciously outlined the rise of the 'general cartel', and the conditions "under which the capitalist world could be stabilized and hierarchically integrated – conditions which in Marxian theory appeared as Utopian unless the actual forces which would supersede the contradictions and conflicts among the imperialist powers developed."⁵² Marcuse refused to discount their analyses of capitalism's stabilization as opportunistic petty-bourgeois utopianism. Instead, he interpreted Hilferding and Kautsky as radical pessimists, who foresaw crises

⁵⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Franz Mehring, *The Crisis in the German Social Democracy (The 'Junius' Pamphlet)*, (New York: The Socialist Publication Society, 1918), 18.

⁵¹ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 34.

⁵² *Ibid*, 33-4.

in the form of “the abolition of democratic liberalism in the economy as well as in the political and ideological sphere; individualism and humanism would be replaced by an aggressive militarist nationalism and authoritarianism.”⁵³ Writing at the height of the Cold War red scare, it is unsurprising that Marcuse favoured an analysis of capitalism that thought possible the long-term stability of capitalism and erosion of liberal individualism.

However, Marcuse’s defense of the reformists is based in a creative misreading. Marcuse conflates Hilferding’s critique of the anti-democratic tendencies in capitalism in *Finance Capital* with his later reformist project in his concept ‘organized capitalism’, which Hilferding developed nearly two decades later. In his intellectual biography of Hilferding, Jonas Zoninsein writes that the early Hilferding’s stress on anti-democratization was inextricable from his doubts that total integration of capitalism was possible; *Finance Capital* “evade[s] the conclusion that monopolies do indeed render capitalism more manageable.”⁵⁴ The Hilferding of *Finance Capital* was on the same page as Lenin and Luxemburg - even monopoly capitalism could not sustain itself in the long term. Marcuse’s reverence for the reformist position conflates Hilferding’s conflicting and changing views on the democratic potential of capitalism. As such, Marcuse’s appraisal does not deal with the incongruities produced by Hilferding’s reformist political shift after 1918.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Marcuse’s misreading is generative. He established a link between the stabilization of capitalism and anti-democratizing tendencies which was not simultaneously held by Hilferding. Whereas the reformists held the belief that stabilization of capitalism would produce

⁵³ Ibid, 33.

⁵⁴ Jonas Zoninsein, *Monopoly Capital Theory: Hilferding and Twentieth Century Capitalism* (New York : Greenwood Press, 1990) 118.

⁵⁵ At the time of *Finance Capital*, Hilferding stressed that the crises of capitalism, including anti-democratizing tendencies, were produced by these monopolistic cartels. It was only after Hilferding became a leader of the SPD in Germany in 1918 that he abandoned his crisis theory (and with it, the belief that democracy was endangered by the consolidation of capital), and developed a theory of organized capitalism, which optimistically regarded the total cartelization of capital and its integration with the state as a progressive force, which could be socialized through the use of democratic political power.

progressive outcomes such as peace and democratic institutions, Marcuse did not see any progressive tendencies in capitalist stabilization. Another indication of Marcuse's generative misreading of reformist theory is Marcuse's use of Hilferding's 'organized capitalism' in both *Soviet Marxism* and *One-Dimensional Man*. According to Douglas Kellner in the introduction to the 2nd edition of *One-Dimensional Man*, "Marcuse *took over* the term 'organized capitalism' [...] to describe the administrative-bureaucratic apparatus which organizes, manages, and stabilizes capitalist society" (my emphasis).⁵⁶ While Hilferding's theory of 'organized capitalism' regarded the total cartelization of capital and its integration with the state as a progressive force, which could be socialized using "democratic political power,"⁵⁷ Marcuse stripped it of its optimistic and reformist implications. Instead, Marcuse used 'organized capitalism' as synonymous with monopoly capitalism, the latter just described the phenomenon "in Marxist terms."⁵⁸

Marcuse's understanding of the developments in capitalism map more closely onto Lenin's theory of state-monopoly capitalism. Against the reformists, Lenin argued that monopoly capitalism would not lead to the end of competition; instead, competition was elevated to the national level "between 'state capitalist trusts', with annexation and war as means employed in the competitive struggle."⁵⁹ From this, Lenin surmised that decay of the system arose necessarily from competition.

Certainly, monopoly under capitalism can never completely, and for a very long period of time, eliminate competition in the world market (and this, by the by, is one of the reasons why the theory of ultraimperialism is so absurd). Certainly, the possibility of reducing cost of production and increasing profits by introducing technical improvements operates in the direction of change. But the tendency to stagnation and decay, which is characteristic of monopoly, continues to operate, and in certain branches of industry, in certain countries, for certain periods of time, it gains the upper hand.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Douglas Kellner, "Introduction to the Second Edition," *One Dimensional Man*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002) xxv.

⁵⁷ Zoninsein, *Monopoly Capital Theory*, 119.

⁵⁸ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 5.

⁵⁹ Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism*, 21.

⁶⁰ Lenin, *Imperialism*, 103.

Hence, Lenin argued that capitalism in the age of imperialism, monopoly, and finance capital remained competitive, but competition was elevated to the international arena. This view was echoed by Marcuse, who observed a new form of competition which arose at end of the Second World War, as “the conflicting competitive interests among the Western nations were gradually integrated and superseded by the fundamental East-West conflict, and an intercontinental political economy took shape.”⁶¹ While he was sympathetic to the reformist view of stability, as he thought they correctly foresaw the rise of inter-imperialist cooperation, they could not anticipate the persistence of competition between the imperialists and the newly formed socialist bloc.

Despite his borrowings from Hilferding and Kautsky, Marcuse’s position more closely resembles that of the revolutionaries, especially later in life. By 1972, Marcuse’s understanding of capitalist stability drew closer to Luxemburg’s predictions in her *Junius Pamphlet*. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse maintained that a “Marxian analysis cannot seek comfort ‘in the long run,’” because in the long run,

the system will indeed collapse, but Marxian theory cannot prophesy which form of society (if any) will replace it. Within the framework of the objective conditions, the alternatives (fascism or socialism) depend on the intelligence and the will, the consciousness and the sensibility, of human beings. It depends on their still-existing freedom. The notion of a protracted period of barbarism as against the socialist alternative- barbarism based on the technical and scientific achievements of civilization-is central to Marxian theory. At present, the initiative and the power are with the counterrevolution, which may well culminate in such a barbarian civilization.⁶²

These antagonistic interpretations of stability led to contesting views on the state, as the reformists saw the stability of capitalism as indicative of the futility of revolution. The reformists’ reconciliatory approach to the German state to negotiate working class interests incited Lenin’s critique of reformism in *State and Revolution* in 1917. Lenin criticized the “superstitious reverence for the state” of the

⁶¹ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 34.

⁶² Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 29.

reformists.⁶³ While Hilferding already foresaw protectionism in international trade as evidence of state-capitalist collusion in *Finance Capital*, Hilferding assumed an underlying neutrality of the state. Hilferding subordinated imperialism to “the economic policy of finance capital”⁶⁴ and did not see imperialism as a necessary tendency of this new era. Rather, according to Murray Noonan, Hilferding thought that imperialism “could be overcome in the political realm, specifically through the advent of a social democratic majority in parliament.”⁶⁵ Marcuse explicitly rejected this line of thinking. He maintained that imperialism is not a ‘policy’ which “can be turned on and off”, contingent on the political whims of a given capitalist nation; rather, it “is rooted in the very structure of the [capitalist] system.”⁶⁶

Against Hilferding’s position, Lenin introduced the concept of state-monopoly capitalism, placing the state at the center of the capitalist mode of production. Lenin argued that whether democratic or not, “the state could neither arise nor maintain itself if it were possible to reconcile classes.”⁶⁷ The reformists failed to see a necessary relationship between the growth of monopoly capitalism and the development of the liberal state. “Imperialism,” Lenin wrote,

the era of the development of monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism – has demonstrated with particular force an extraordinary strengthening of the “state machine” and an unprecedented growth of its military apparatus in connection with the intensification of repressive measures against the proletariat both in the monarchical and in the freest, republican countries.⁶⁸

This strengthening of the state was imperative for the imperial expansion of the early 20th century, as “the whole world had been finally divided up among these “rivals in conquest.”⁶⁹ Reformism obscured an analysis of the state’s role in imperialism, especially at a time when these states “turned into military

⁶³ Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 9.

⁶⁴ Hilferding, *Finance Capital*, 366.

⁶⁵ Murray Noonan, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A History*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) 32.

⁶⁶ Marcuse, “On Changing the World: A Reply to Karl Miller” in *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 6*, ed. Douglas Kellner & Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge, 2014) 328.

⁶⁷ Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 9.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 12.

monsters which are exterminating millions of people in order to settle the issue as to whether England or Germany—this or that finance capital— is to rule the world.”⁷⁰ Marcuse shared Lenin’s view that the integration of the state and capitalism would lead to the permanent war economy and increased political repression. Marcuse was skeptical about the possibility of a peaceful co-existence, viewing the growth of the military industry as an integral component of the integration of global capital. Even a normalization of relations between the superpowers would excite contradictions elsewhere, i.e. in the periphery.

Ultimately, Marcuse maintained that the biggest outcome of the transition from competitive capitalism to state-monopoly capitalism is the stability of the capitalist system. This stability, he argued, was achieved in the eventual full development of monopolistic and state expansionist tendencies. These stabilizing tendencies had been noted by previous theorists, like Lenin, who explained the deradicalization of the working class in the imperialist countries using the theory of the ‘labour aristocracy’, which I examine in detail in the second chapter. Marcuse believed that “the Marxist theory of monopoly capitalism, or state monopoly capitalism, gets much closer to the real situation” compared to the “the theory of the labour aristocracy since it takes account of the fact that organized monopoly competition makes it possible to extract exceptional profits and surplus value, so that large-scale industry, monopolistically organized, can afford to pay higher real wages- not only for a short while, but over a long period.”⁷¹ Therefore, the early Marxist theory of monopoly capitalism was a valuable conceptual tool, better equipped than the theory of the labour aristocracy to explain the long-term stability and reformism in the metropolises.

However, he argued that Lenin’s state-monopoly capitalism could not explain the growing international stability taking place between the capitalist nations following the Second World War.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 118.

⁷¹ Marcuse, “Socialism in the Developed Countries,” 171.

This theoretical insufficiency was due to the fact that “monopoly capitalism has almost always been linked with the theory of classical imperialism, according to which the monopolies, despite their international inter-dependence, will sooner or later start fighting among themselves; recurrent quarrels and, in the end, wars between the imperialist powers will destroy the prosperity which has been built up.”⁷² Against this theory, Marcuse argued that state-monopoly capitalism leads to greater international cooperation between the imperialist powers and thus to the stability of international capital. Marcuse maintained that the inevitability of decay in the orthodox Marxist theory of imperialism was not reflective of the empirically observable strengthening of the capitalist system following the Second World War.

c) The rise of neo-imperialism

The classical theory of imperialism, which maintains that inter-imperialist rivalry will lead to the decay of the system, could not account for the actual historical changes which stabilized the capitalist orbit. Marcuse argued that this economic basis for stability “did emerge, very gradually and with many regressions and breaks, under the impact of two World Wars, atomic productivity, and the growth of Communist power.”⁷³ It is at this point in history, Marcuse argued, that the state-monopolistic tendencies associated with classical imperialism, reached the historical stage of their full development. The full development of state-monopoly capitalism, on Marcuse’s account, initiated a new phase of imperialism in the wake of the Second World War. In 1964, Marcuse presented “Socialism in the Developed Countries,” in which he suggested that “the classic form of imperialism no longer exists. Obviously, imperialism still does.”⁷⁴ Instead, Marcuse proposed that the mid-century ushered in a new stage of capitalism: *neo-imperialism*.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 34.

⁷⁴ Marcuse, “Socialism in the Developed Countries,” 175.

This was by no means a ground-breaking revelation on Marcuse's part. By the time of the Bandung Conference in 1955, Vijay Prashad notes that leaders like Indonesia's Sukarno expressed that imperialism persisted, despite formal decolonization: "When Sukarno argued that colonialism may have ended its formal phase, but that imperialism still lingered, he echoed the views of many of the Third World's leaders as well as its people, who suffered daily from 'underdevelopment.'"⁷⁵ By the early 1960s, this lingering imperialism was given a name: neocolonialism. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana (1960-66) coined the term in the preamble to the Organisation of African Unity charter in 1963, and subsequently developed the concept in his 1965 book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*. "The essence of neo-colonialism" in Nkrumah's words, "is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside."⁷⁶ Nkrumah used the example of Vietnam to distinguish between these two forms of imperialism: "in the case of South Vietnam the former imperial power was France, but neo-colonial control of the State has now gone to the United States."⁷⁷

Common to both classical and neo-imperialism is the fact that advanced capitalist states depend on capital export and super-exploitation to maintain a high rate of profit. However, Marcuse stressed that neo-imperialism was less straightforwardly competitive than its predecessor; rather, the defining feature of neo-imperialism is its political character. Neo-imperialism "is distinguished from classical imperialism of the preceding period by effective use of economic and technical conquests on the one hand, and by the political-strategic character of intervention on the other."⁷⁸ Marcuse considered the American Cold War policy of containment, epitomized by the Truman Doctrine, as

⁷⁵ Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, (New York: The New Press, 2007) 34.

⁷⁶ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, (New York: International Publishers, 1966) ix.

⁷⁷ Ibid, x.

⁷⁸ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 80.

characteristic of the distinctly *political* character of neo-imperialism, compared to its predecessor. The maintenance of the global capitalist market is undoubtably an economic requirement. But, for Marcuse the defense of the market had to be achieved through political mobilization against national liberation movements.

The key difference is that in this new era, imperialism no longer functions to open up new markets but instead to defend them against the socialist bloc and anticolonial national liberation movements. Neo-imperialism “is different from its predecessors: more is at stake than immediate and particular economic requirements.”⁷⁹ Like state-monopoly capitalism, Marcuse thought neo-imperialism is defined by the priority on total capital accumulation at the expense of particular capitalists. In this sense, neo-imperialist aggression was waged on behalf of all the capitalist states, with a priority to maintain the global capitalist market long-term; “the requirements of the global fight against communism supersede those of profitable investments.”⁸⁰ Unlike classical imperialism, neo-imperialism was a centralized effort by the capitalist class, transcending national borders, to secure imperialist access to foreign markets. National capitals are no longer in competition with one another but collude on a grand global scale. Imperialism during the Cold War was defined by cooperation between the monopoly capitalist states on an unprecedented scale.

A crucial factor which precipitated the transition from classical to neo-imperialism, on Marcuse's account, was the formation of a capitalist bloc united against the Soviet Union. Neo-imperialism is characterized by cooperation between the capitalist states which wage imperialist wars in the interest of total, international capital, rather than national capital. Rather than rivals, the imperialist nations allied against the Soviet threat. Marcuse's major critique of the official policy of the CPSU is that it “consistently denies that the international integration of capitalism into one camp

⁷⁹ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 13-14.

⁸⁰ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 80.

against the common enemy can ‘neutralize’ these contradictions.”⁸¹ The rise of the Soviet Union did not ignite conflict between the imperialist nations, but instead solidified their alliance against the socialist threat. Marcuse’s critique of the Soviet Union largely coheres with both Trotskyist and anarchist critiques of Stalinist

A final inter-imperialist war, which would end in the fall of capitalism, never arrived. Rather, Marcuse argued that “the struggle for markets assumes, at the late imperialistic stage, the form of the subjugation of the weaker by the stronger capitalist powers, culminating in the supremacy of American imperialism.”⁸² The restructuring of the capitalist orbit placed America at the center, as the main defender of total capital, ushering in a period of post-war stability. However, the CPSU, Marcuse observed, refused to acknowledge the success “of the American monopolists to establish an American ‘world trust.’”⁸³ Instead, Soviet theorists insisted that “the competitive conflicts within the capitalist orbit sharpen in spite of all integration; the ‘subjugated’ nations balk and strive for reconquering their former position in the world market; Western Germany and Japan re-emerge as the most dangerous competitors.”⁸⁴ Instead of recognizing the integration of the imperialist nations, the official theorists of the CPSU stressed the weakness of the capitalist system, approaching a “final breakdown.”⁸⁵

Marcuse argued that this analysis obscured Soviet embeddedness in the global capitalist economy on two levels: first, the existence of a socialist state forced the capitalist orbit to overcome its internal contradictions to unite against the Soviet Union, and second, the Soviet Union was itself economically dependent on its military industrial production. In the first sense, the CPSU mistook the “transformation of the Western world” for being “not extraneous but rather internal to the dynamic

⁸¹ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 60.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 61.

of the capitalist system, and the same forces that make for war make for progress in productivity and for ‘temporary stabilization.’”⁸⁶ Under the illusion that these transformations were internal to the capitalist orbit, Soviet policy failed to recognize its own role in instigating these changes:

if and when there is a ‘common enemy’ outside the capitalist world, whose growing power and expansion requires the maintenance of a ‘permanent’ war or preparedness economy in which the imperialist powers unite, while at the same time technological progress enables capitalism to maintain this economy without noticeably reducing the standard of living (perhaps even increasing it!), then a situation prevails where the very growth of the Soviet orbit *seems to sustain the unity and stability of the ‘imperialist’ orbit* (my emphasis).⁸⁷

Thus, while Soviet policy operated on the assumption that did not contribute to the strengthening of the capitalist orbit and that it was the only force working against the stabilization of the system, Marcuse claimed the opposite was true. The Soviet Union prompted a hierarchical reconfiguration of the capitalist system, with the U.S. and its expanding war economy at the helm. As a result, Marcuse maintained that the Soviet Union could not destabilize the capitalist orbit, as it was actively contributing to its stability. The Soviet Union could not hope for a break in the stability of the capitalist orbit “without fundamentally altering its policy [...]. Such a change in policy—aiming at the dissolution of the ‘war economy’ on which the capitalist stabilization is held to rest—presupposes that the Soviet state has attained a level of competitive strength which enables it to ‘relax’ its intransigent and aggressive strategy.”⁸⁸ Therefore, the Soviet state would need to establish new means for economic growth, to break its dependence on its war economy, if it hoped to reactivate the class struggle in the imperial core.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 34.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 76.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 76-7.

d) Vietnam as case study

Marcuse thought that the American war in Vietnam was the most obvious example of neo-imperialism, because the US did not have a direct economic stake in the Vietnamese economy. American interests were not motivated by a desire to annex the land or create a formal colony; rather, Marcuse believed that the Vietnam war represented a new form of imperialism, organized around politically containing national liberation movements in the Third World. Marcuse believed that the “Cuban achievement” i.e. their successful revolution, “has put the rulers on guard: as far as they are concerned, it will not be allowed to happen again anywhere else.”⁸⁹ As such, Marcuse did “not believe the classical concept of imperialism is applicable to Vietnam viewed as an isolated phenomenon.”⁹⁰

In a 1967 teach-in at UCLA, Marcuse sought to answer the question: “Why is the war in Vietnam and the general policy of direct or indirect intervention in foreign lands justified in terms of the “national interest?”⁹¹ He pointed out that official definitions of national interest rely on a circular logic, as it uses the threat of ‘communism’ as a basis for intervention, but “we usually define whatever we fight as ‘Communism.’”⁹² He then asks who the US is really fighting?

We are fighting a specific form of Communism in backward areas. We are waging war against wars of liberation initiated by indigenous revolutionary movements. These movements attempt to institute radical agrarian reforms in order to abolish the exploitative domination of the traditional ruling classes; they attempt to eliminate the power of foreign capital; and, of course, they attack the native governments dependent upon that power.⁹³

Neo-imperialism depends on indirect rule by a comprador ruling class which aims to secure the imperialists’ access to their lucrative markets. The comprador class is tasked with subduing the indigenous proletariat and peasantry, preventing any fight for land reform or higher wages. While not

⁸⁹ Marcuse, “On Changing the World: A Reply to Karl Miller,” 329.

⁹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, “The Inner Logic of American Policy in Vietnam,” *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 3*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005) 39.

⁹¹ Ibid, 38.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

unique to neo-imperialism, indirect rule via comprador elites became the normal mode of political and economic control over formally decolonized neo-colonies. The goal of the comprador elites “is to sustain or reinstate the very interests which kept the backward countries in conditions of backwardness and dependence.”⁹⁴

Marcuse argued that neo-imperialist wars of aggression typically begin “where indigenous ruling groups are not doing the job of liquidating popular liberation movements.”⁹⁵ Indigenous national liberation movements, whether communist or not, threaten capital, as their victory “would lead to the expropriation of foreign investment and to the abolition of the corrupt and oppressive semi-feudal regimes” which facilitate the exploitation of the peasants and workers.⁹⁶ As such, the imperialist nations are compelled to contain these movements, for fear that revolutionary fervor would spread to other nations, further compressing the global market. Marcuse considered the spectacularly violent suppression of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam by the American military as a warning to other national liberation movements. For Marcuse, it is “essential to consider Vietnam within the global context in the familiar ‘domino’ terms: The defeat of the United States would indeed be the signal for activating liberation movements in other colonial areas, much closer to home, and perhaps even at home.”⁹⁷ “The American mission,” as the advance guard of the imperialist nations, “has become one of protecting reactionary regimes and refusing to accept any progressive historical changes.”⁹⁸ *Counterrevolution and Revolt* opens with this idea:

The Western world has reached a new stage of development: now, the defense of the capitalist system requires the organization of counterrevolution at home and abroad. In its extreme manifestations, it practices the horrors of the Nazi regime. Wholesale massacres in Indochina, Indonesia, the Congo, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Sudan are unleashed against everything which

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 13-14.

⁹⁶ Marcuse, “The Inner Logic of American Policy in Vietnam,” 39.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 40.

is called 'communist' or which is in revolt against governments subservient to the imperialist countries.⁹⁹

In this sense, neo-imperialist war was a political means to an economic end, the end being total access to the world market. For Marcuse, the Vietnam war could only be understood through the lens of neo-imperialism.

However, Marcuse thought there were two other reasons for imperialist wars, other than containment of national liberation movements. The American military industry "is an integral, stimulating factor of the U.S. economy."¹⁰⁰ Therefore, imperialist war was an end in itself – a protracted war could secure the economy from stagnation and unemployment, even if the explicit aims of the war were not achieved. The gigantic American military industry generates massive profits, which further incorporates the working class into the maintenance of imperialist order. "This is something that has been operative since the collapse of the New Deal in the mid-1930s. The American economy may not require a war establishment, but any conversion at this point would necessitate sweeping economic and political change."¹⁰¹ Therefore, the military industry provides economic gains to both the monopoly capitalists and the working class (although the latter to a far lesser degree). Marcuse explained the post-war affluence of the American working class as a consequence of the military industry's constant production. On an ideological level, Marcuse thought that to stabilize domestic class conflict, "the affluent society is in need of an Enemy, against whom its people can be kept in a state of constant psychosocial mobilization."¹⁰² This was such an important part of the imperialist strategy that "world communism" as the Enemy "would have to be invented if he did not exist - the Enemy whose strength justified the 'defense economy' and the mobilization of the people

⁹⁹ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Marcuse, "The Inner Logic of American Policy in Vietnam," 39.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

in the national interest.”¹⁰³

Although Marcuse believed that stability was a defining feature of the neo-imperialist/state-monopoly capitalist era, he insisted that stability could not be maintained indefinitely. The stability within the imperialist nations comes at the expense of international instability.

The restabilization of capitalism and neoimperialism, which began after the Second World War, has not yet come to an end-in spite of Indochina, in spite of inflation, the international monetary crisis, and rising unemployment in the United States. The system is still capable of "managing," by virtue of its economic and military power, the aggravating conflicts within and outside its dominion).¹⁰⁴

Marcuse believed that while imperialist exploitation was a necessary condition for the stability of capitalism in the metropolises, it necessarily led to global instability. This instability did emerge from the national liberation movements – he considered the fall of capitalism conditional on “the growth of anticapitalist forces in the Third World” because in ousting the collaborator government, collectivising industries and resources, these forces “reduce the reservoir of exploitation.”¹⁰⁵

Although he flirted with Kautsky and Hilferding’s ideas like the general cartel and ultra-imperialism, Marcuse ultimately did not believe that capitalism could contain its contradictions and enter a period of protracted stability. In this sense, Marcuse retained the classical Leninist view that capitalism would eventually collapse as it could not contain its contradictions indefinitely. Decisively, however, *this collapse would not come from inter-imperialist rivalry*. The Second World War was the last time the imperialist states warred directly against one another for any significant amount of time. The idea that inter-imperialist rivalry would eventually precipitate the ultimate crisis of capitalism was falsified by the historical situation. This theoretical limitation in the Leninist theory of imperialism is what Marcuse hoped to resolve with his theory of neo-imperialism.

¹⁰³ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 84-5.

¹⁰⁴ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 8.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

In light of all of these historical changes to the system, Marcuse urged Marxists to retheorize imperialism. Those who continue to rely on a theory that was rooted in the conditions of the First World War would not be able to explain American imperialism during the Cold War. Marcuse thought that “The dialectical concepts” like imperialism, “comprehend reality in the process of change, and it is this process which constitutes the definition of the concept itself. Thus, the transformation of classical imperialism into neoimperialism redefines the classical concept while demonstrating how the new forms derive from the preceding ones.”¹⁰⁶ As a dialectical theorist, Marcuse did not reject outright the classical theory of imperialism. Instead, he advanced the concept of imperialism in light of the alliance between the imperialist states after the Second World War, which could not be captured in the classical concept.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 37-8.

Chapter 2: Marcuse's Labour Aristocracy

In the preceding section, I presented a reconstruction of Marcuse's historical analysis of the development of neo-imperialism and its internal correlate, state-monopoly capitalism. The overarching tendency of this development is stability between the imperial nations. This section turns from the external developments in the imperialist world system to the internal developments in the monopoly capitalist states. These changes include the rise of consumer society, a Keynesian welfare state, a permanent war economy, automation and 'unproductive labour' in the imperial core. For Marcuse, the most important consequence of these internal developments was the stabilization of class conflict in the metropole.

Marcuse is well-known for his contributions to a Marxist critique of consumer society, and for his pessimism concerning the possibilities of an advanced industrial proletarian revolution. The goal of this section is to revise the standard interpretation of his work. Marxist scholars, including Ellen Meiksins-Wood and Raymond Geuss criticize Marcuse's analysis of consumerism for his focus on the ideological delusion, or false consciousness, of the proletariat. Indeed, Marcuse himself anticipated and challenged this interpretation of his work:

We know very well the social mechanisms of manipulation, indoctrination, repression which are responsible for this lack of a mass basis, for the integration of the majority of the oppositional forces into the established social system. But I must emphasize again that this is not merely an ideological integration; that it is not merely a social integration; that it takes place precisely on the strong and rich basis which enables the society to develop and satisfy material and cultural needs better than before.¹⁰⁷

In this section, I present a materialist interpretation of the integration of the proletariat in Marcuse's work. I argue that Marcuse's interpretation of the proletariat *can only be accurately understood* with

¹⁰⁷ Herbert Marcuse, "Liberation from the Affluent Society," *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 3*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005) 77.

reference to his theory of neo-imperialism, as the structural changes in the global capitalist system are the primary cause of the metropolitan proletariat's deradicalization.

First, I reconstruct Marcuse's own conceptual history of the labour aristocracy in his early work, arguing that Marcuse's understanding of the proletariat functions as an expansion of Lenin's labour aristocracy theory. Second, I will present the main economic mechanisms which enrich the metropole at the expense of the periphery. Here, I will show how overaccumulation creates the circumstances incentivising class collaboration in the core. Third, I explain two of the political outcomes of the embourgeoisement of the metropolitan proletariat: the fall of the Marxist-Leninist parties and the rise of national chauvinism. Finally, I deal with criticism of Marcuse's understanding of the proletariat.

a) History of the 'labour aristocracy'

Marcuse was far from the first political theorist to consider the changing nature of the proletariat in the metropole. Marxist theorists since Lenin, who drew on brief remarks by Engels, have referred to the development of a labour aristocracy to explain the growing alliance between the metropolitan proletariat and bourgeoisie against the proletariat and peasantry of the periphery. This section considers Marcuse's critique of Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy, which sought to explain "the reformist tendencies among the proletariat in terms of the rise of a small 'labor aristocracy,' 'corrupted' by high wages paid out of monopolistic surplus profits, with a vested interest in the established system."¹⁰⁸ Although Marcuse's argument adheres somewhat to Lenin's definition, Marcuse thought that the concept was too minimal to explain the scale of reformism, especially in light of the decreasing immiseration of the metropolitan working classes since the early 20th century.

¹⁰⁸ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 29.

Lenin was the first to present a theory of the labour aristocracy, but use of the term predates him. Eric Hobsbawm traced the origins of the phrase to the mid 19th century “to describe certain distinctive upper strata of the working class, better paid, better treated and generally regarded as more ‘respectable’ and politically moderate than the mass of the proletariat.”¹⁰⁹ Notably, the historical origin of the labour aristocracy is associated with the age of imperialism, and is situated in the imperial metropole. By 1858, Friedrich Engels identified the formation of an aristocracy of labour in England, then the core of the imperialist system. Engels recounted this observation in a letter to Marx in October of that year:

The English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy, and a bourgeois proletariat as well as a bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world this is, of course, to a certain extent justifiable.¹¹⁰

Engels flagged the causal link between imperialist exploitation and the embourgeoisement of the proletariat in the metropole.¹¹¹ Marcuse contended that Engels’s observations on the diminishing revolutionary potential of the English proletariat culminated in *Origin of the Family*, published in 1884. According to Marcuse, Engels realized that it was not merely the labour aristocracy that allied with the bourgeoisie. Rather, “as long as the proletariat is not yet ripe for its self-liberation, so long will the majority of the proletariat see in the established social order the only possible one and will constitute politically the ‘tail of the capitalist class, its extreme left wing.’”¹¹² Marcuse took this as Engels’s recognition that the proletariat’s revolutionary consciousness was contingent on its immiseration and constant crisis, and that “in periods of stability and prosperity the proletariat itself is bound to come

¹⁰⁹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour*, (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), 321.

¹¹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 344.

¹¹¹ Further research is required to evaluate the interchangeability of the concepts ‘bourgeois proletariat’ and ‘labour aristocracy’.

¹¹² Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 23.

under the sway of ‘capitalist ideas,’ and its immediate (economic) interests supersede its real (historical) interest.”¹¹³

The collapse of the Second International in 1916, initiated by the SPD’s support for the First World War, was a direct consequence of the changing nature of the proletariat in imperialist era. For Marcuse, theorists of imperialism, from the revisionist to the revolutionary,

attempted to bring Marxist theory into line with the continued vitality of the established society and especially with the rising standard of living for the working classes in the advanced industrial countries—facts which seemed strikingly to contradict the Marxian notion of the impending final crisis of capitalism and of the impoverishment of the proletariat.¹¹⁴

For Marcuse, the main obstacle for Marxist theorists at the turn of the century was the increasing living standard of the proletariat in advanced industrial societies. Following Engels, Marcuse argued that “only a virtually constant crisis could keep the class struggle acute and the proletariat class-conscious against the capitalist system, as its ‘absolute negation.’”¹¹⁵ However, if capital could meet the immediate needs of the proletariat, preventing internal crises by rising the living standard of the working class, this would threaten the revolutionary nature of the proletariat.

According to Timothy Kerswell, “a tension can be observed in Marxism where early Marxists began to produce theory and analysis at a time when the labour aristocracy played a decisive (and non-revolutionary) role in the labour movement.”¹¹⁶ The eventual split between reformist and revolutionary wings of the Second International was by and large based on whether to resist imperialism, or to support it, due to its allegedly progressive tendencies and potential benefits for the metropolitan working class. While the reformists in the SPD like Kautsky sided with the German capitalists to improve the quality of life of the German proletariat, the revolutionaries denounced this

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 28.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 23.

¹¹⁶ Timothy Kerswell, “A Conceptual History of the Labour Aristocracy: A Critical Review” *Socialism and Democracy* 33, no. 1, (2019): 70.

betrayal of the proletariat, and held steadfastly to internationalism. But, Marcuse argued that the revolutionaries misunderstood this betrayal: even before the war, “it became clear [...] that the Social Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy were more than ‘traitors’ – rather that their policy reflected pretty exactly the economic and social condition of the majority of the organized working classes in the advanced industrial countries.”¹¹⁷ In Marcuse’s view, the theories of Hilferding and Kautsky failed to “draw the full conclusions concerning the changing class situation of the proletariat.”¹¹⁸ The end of the classical period of capitalism, initiated by the development of monopoly capitalism and imperialism changed the material conditions, and therefore subjective interests of the proletariat. The reformist deviation of the European labour parties was not a betrayal but a necessary consequence of these changes. Marcuse argued that “the nationalist attitude of the Social Democratic parties in 1914—at that time the unchallenged Marxist organization of labor—was only [the] most conspicuous manifestation” of the stabilization of capitalism in the state-monopoly era, which proved its power again in the “Central European revolutions from 1918 to 1923, where the majority of organized labor defeated the Communist assault in alliance with the bourgeoisie and the army.”¹¹⁹ Marcuse maintained that the reformism of Kautsky and Hilferding was not reflective of any personal failure or betrayal but was rather indicative of the material changes in the proletariat, initiated by imperialism.

On Marcuse’s account, Lenin’s adaptation of Marxism most clearly “developed under the impact of the sustained strength of capitalism at the ‘imperialist stage’”¹²⁰ and was the only one to attempt a retheorization of the revolutionary subject in light of these changes. Marcuse thought that Lenin went beyond Marx because he foresaw

¹¹⁷ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 30-1.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 33.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 35.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 40.

the viability of advanced capitalism (unexpected from the traditional Marxist point of view) and, consequently, the continued strength of reformism among the proletariat in the advanced capitalist countries called almost inevitably for a shift in Marxist emphasis to the backward countries, which were predominantly agricultural and where the weakness of the capitalist sector seemed to offer better chances for a revolution.¹²¹

Lenin amended the Marxist conception of the revolutionary subject in light of the advanced capitalist proletariat's reformist, nationalist and reactionary tendencies. Marcuse's analysis regards Lenin's adaptation as threefold: he introduced the vanguard party, included the peasantry as an ally of the proletariat, and developed a theory of the labour aristocracy.

For Marcuse, Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy allowed him to explain some of the failures of the European labour movement. In Marcuse's words, "Lenin explained the reformist tendencies among the proletariat in terms of the rise of a small 'labor aristocracy,' 'corrupted' by high wages paid out of monopolistic surplus profits, with a vested interest in the established system."¹²² In *Imperialism*, Lenin described the labour aristocracy as "philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook," and it acts as "principal prop of the Second International."¹²³ For Lenin, the labour aristocracy includes those at the top of the trade union hierarchy or the leadership of the social democratic parties (like the SPD's Kautsky and Hilferding).

Crucially, this stratum is bought off by super profits generated through imperialist exploitation of the working classes in other countries. Lenin believed that the imperial bourgeoisie could extract higher levels of surplus value from the working classes in the periphery, "over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their "own" country"¹²⁴ (hence the use of the 'super' prefix). In his "Letter to the Workers of Europe and America," Lenin argued that super-exploitation is "the economic factor that enables the imperialist bourgeoisie to obtain super-profits, part of which

¹²¹ Ibid, 29.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Lenin, *Imperialism*, 8.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

is used to bribe the top section of the proletariat and convert it into a reformist, opportunist petty bourgeoisie that fears revolution.”¹²⁵ Unlike his former comrades Kautsky and Hilferding, Lenin located the cause of the reformism of the proletariat to the imperialist exploitation of the peripheral countries.

Marcuse was critical of Lenin’s labour aristocracy in *Soviet Marxism*; in his view, a main feature of Leninism was the “underestimation of the economic and political potentialities of capitalism, and of the change in the position of the proletariat.”¹²⁶ As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Marcuse admired the reformists for their attempts to theorize the persisting stability of capitalism, while the revolutionaries remained committed to the immanence of decay. Lenin’s adaptation of Marxism, especially in his retheorization of the peasantry and his theory of the vanguard party tries to deal with the “changes within the proletariat, in the degree of class consciousness, in the size and weight of the ‘labor aristocracy,’ etc., but these changes do not destroy the identity of the [working] class as the sole carrier of the revolution.”¹²⁷ Although Marcuse does not deny the practical successes of the Bolshevik revolution, he claimed that Leninism would not produce a viable revolutionary strategy in the advanced capitalist countries because it retained the position of the advanced capitalist proletariat as the subject of revolution, when in reality the American and European proletariat repeatedly chose reformism and chauvinism.

From Marcuse’s own experience living through the First World War and German Revolution in Berlin, it was “clear that the ‘collaborationist’ part of the proletariat was quantitatively and qualitatively different from a small upper stratum that had been corrupted by monopoly capital” even

¹²⁵ V. I. Lenin, “Letter to the Workers of Europe and America,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 28, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 433.

¹²⁶ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 30.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 27.

prior to the First World War.¹²⁸ The marginal size of the labour aristocracy in Lenin's theory "intended to save Marxian orthodoxy from the reformist onslaught, but they soon became part of a conception that no longer assumed the historical coincidence between the proletariat and progress which the notion of the "labor aristocracy" still retained."¹²⁹ The labour aristocracy allowed Lenin to situate the reformist attitudes of most of the proletariat onto the most obvious offenders, with the main goal of remaining consistent with Marxist theory.

Marcuse's argument in *Soviet Marxism* demonstrates the quantitative and qualitative limitations of Lenin's labour aristocracy. "Lenin's retention of the classical notion of the revolutionary proletariat, sustained with the help of the theory of the labor aristocracy and the avant garde, revealed its inadequacy from the beginning."¹³⁰ He thought that the unilateral turn towards reformism in Europe after the failed revolutions in Germany and Hungary was proof of this: ironically, "[t]he 'revolutionary class' assumes the features of democratic reformism."¹³¹ Marcuse's main contention with Lenin's labour aristocracy was that it was too restrictive to account for the changes in the entire proletariat in advanced industrial societies.

By 1964, he reneged on his belief that the concept should be abandoned altogether. Instead, Marcuse maintained that "the theory of the labour aristocracy, if it is to remain useful, must be re-formulated to deal with advanced capitalism."¹³² Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy as set forth in *Imperialism*, "can no longer cope with a situation in which it is not just a small fragment of the working class which has been integrated but, as in the United States today, its vast majority."¹³³ Marcuse continued:

¹²⁸ Ibid, 30.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 32.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 30.

¹³¹ Ibid, 71.

¹³² Marcuse, "Socialism in the Developed Countries," 174-175.

¹³³ Ibid, 174.

This is no longer a matter of differences between the big fish, the union bureaucracy, and the rank and file, though these differences are still there in much the same form; today, changes in the system of work and rising standards of living have transformed the majority of the organized working class into a labour aristocracy, whereas in Lenin's day this was still no more than a small minority.¹³⁴

In the above passage, Marcuse argues that there has been a quantitative increase in the size of the labour aristocracy, producing a qualitative change in the revolutionary potential of the organized working class, which Marcuse considered to be the majority of the working classes in the metropole. As such, there is a real case to be made that Marcuse employs an expanded version of Lenin's labour aristocracy thesis. In the pages that follow, I will reconstruct Marcuse's version of the labour aristocracy thesis.

b) The expansion of the labour aristocracy

Marcuse's analysis of the proletariat broke from the orthodox Marxist understanding that the advanced industrial proletariat is the revolutionary subject of the capitalist system. Even Lenin's labour aristocracy, by Marcuse's lights, was too modest to account for the extent to which class struggle was attenuated, while nationalist and chauvinist sentiment abounded in the imperial core. For Marcuse, the proletarian revolution in the imperial core was "thwarted by the integration of the [...] laboring class into the system of advanced capitalism."¹³⁵ In his "End of Utopia" lecture presented in June, 1967 in Berlin, Marcuse claimed that "The working class no longer represents the negation of existing needs."¹³⁶ This, he thought, "is one of the most serious facts with which we have to deal."¹³⁷ He considered the integration of the working classes to be the most significant change from the era of Marx and Engels, and called on his contemporaries to interpret the historical shifts that led to this structural change in the metropolitan working class.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 14.

¹³⁶ Herbert Marcuse, "End of Utopia," in *Five Lectures*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 70.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Marcuse first diagnosed the integration of the metropolitan working class in *One-Dimensional Man*, generally regarded as his most pessimistic text for this reason. In this work, Marcuse claims that the proletariat has lost the negativity which Marx had ascribed to it, because the working class at the centre of the capitalist world system was no longer impoverished to the same degree as it was in the 18th and 19th centuries. He wrote:

The proletarian of the previous stages of capitalism was indeed the beast of burden, by the labor of his body procuring the necessities and luxuries of life while living in filth and poverty. Thus he was the living denial of his society. In contrast, the organized worker in the advanced areas of the technological society lives this denial less conspicuously.¹³⁸

Marcuse maintained that the working class in the metropole remains dominated because it is separated from control over the means of production.¹³⁹ According to him, “to exist as an instrument, as a thing” is the objective, “pure form of servitude [...] And this mode of existence is not abrogated if the thing is animated and chooses its material and intellectual food, if it does not feel its being-a-thing, if it is a pretty, clean, mobile thing.”¹⁴⁰ However, Marcuse contested the idea that the proletariat’s improved material conditions had no effect on its relationship to capital. Rather, he maintained that impoverishment was integral to Marx’s understanding of the proletariat in his own time. In a footnote in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse insisted on

“the inner connection between the Marxian concepts of exploitation and impoverishment in spite of later redefinitions, in which impoverishment either becomes a cultural aspect, or relative to such an extent that it applies also to the suburban home with automobile, television, etc. ‘Impoverishment’ connotes the absolute need and necessity of subverting intolerable conditions of existence, and such absolute need appears in the beginnings of all revolution against the basic social institutions.”¹⁴¹

Marcuse was deeply critical of theorists who sought to preserve the revolutionary status of the industrial proletariat by redefining ‘poverty’ to accommodate the rising wages of the working classes.

¹³⁸ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 28.

¹³⁹ Notably, this is not an orthodox Marxist definition of exploitation. For Marx, exploitation is determined by surplus-value extraction.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 36.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 28n7.

Marcuse articulated several different economic mechanisms that enrich the metropolitan proletariat. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse wrote:

“The integration of the largest part of the working class into the capitalist society is not a surface phenomenon; it has its roots in the infrastructure itself, in the political economy of monopoly capitalism: benefits accorded to the metropolitan working class thanks to surplus profits, neo-colonial exploitation, the military budget, and gigantic government subventions.”¹⁴²

In other words, one of the main mechanisms enriching the metropolitan proletariat *at the expense of the peripheral proletariat* is the extraction of super-profits from the periphery. This explanation largely tracks Lenin’s understanding. For Marcuse, as for Lenin, imperialism arose as a necessary development in the capitalist mode of production, as advanced industrial “society has long since passed the stage where it could grow on its own resources, its own market, and on normal trade with other areas.”¹⁴³ According to Lenin, the foundation of imperialism is the export of capital, just as the export of goods was the defining feature of classical capitalism.¹⁴⁴ Capital export is the basis of imperial exploitation. In general, capital export is a process of investing in and transferring manufacturing operations to the periphery to take advantage of labour and land rendered cheaper by political means. As previously discussed, the neo-imperial powers secure super-profits politically by instituting a comprador elite, which can extract a greater surplus by preventing land and labour reforms by violent crackdowns on its people. By virtue of the limits of growth within each national capitalist market, the imperial powers seize weaker capitalist or semi-feudal markets in the periphery for profitable investment. For Marcuse, capital export produces super-profits that enrich the imperial core, while transforming “large parts of the Third World into dependencies.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 6.

¹⁴³ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 80.

¹⁴⁴ Lenin, *Imperialism*, 63.

¹⁴⁵ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 80.

Marcuse made this link even more explicitly in a supplementary epilogue to the second edition of *Reason and Revolution* (1954), where he explained that “The ‘supra-profits’ (sic) of the monopolistic period could serve as an explanation for the rise in real wages---at the expense of ‘supra-exploited’ (sic) groups and regions, and at the cost of recurrent war-preparation and wars.”¹⁴⁶ While Marcuse is unclear on the exact mechanism of value transfer from the periphery to the core, the result is a rise in purchasing power for the metropolitan proletariat, whether in the form of rising wages or cheaper commodities imported from the periphery.

Marcuse continued to refer to this problem over the coming years, borrowing the term “the affluent society” (popularized by John Kenneth Galbraith’s 1958 book *The Affluent Society*) to refer to the improved objective conditions for the worker in American society.¹⁴⁷ While Galbraith’s term refers to the Fordist class compromise and does not cite imperialism as the source of affluence, Marcuse’s iteration explicitly connects the affluence of the metropole to the exploitation of the periphery. In his talk “Liberation from the Affluent Society” presented at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in London in July of 1967, Marcuse once again questioned the revolutionary subject of orthodox Marxist theory, the metropolitan proletariat. He asked his audience:

why do we need liberation from such a society if [...] the price for all goods delivered, the price for this comfortable servitude, for all these achievements, is exacted from people far away from the metropolis and far away from its affluence? If the affluent society itself hardly notices what it is doing, how it is spreading terror and enslavement, how it is fighting liberation in all corners of the globe?¹⁴⁸

Marcuse called into question why beneficiaries of the affluent society, including the working class within, should have any qualms regarding the exploitation of the periphery if its own affluence is

¹⁴⁶ Herbert Marcuse, “Supplementary Epilogue Written in 1954 to *Reason and Revolution*,” in *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 6*, ed. Douglas Kellner & Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge, 2014), 96.

¹⁴⁷ Herbert Marcuse, “Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Societies,” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, (London: Mayfly Books, 2009), 187.

¹⁴⁸ Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,” 80.

conditional on this exploitation. The need for liberation is largely absent in the metropolitan working classes “by virtue of the actual satisfaction of needs.”¹⁴⁹ As such, the industrial proletariat, the revolutionary subject of Marxist theory, no longer needs revolution because it has achieved a relative state of affluence at the expense of the working class outside the affluent society.

This is not to say that superexploitation is solely responsible for the improved living conditions of workers in the core. On the contrary, Marcuse frequently argued for a causal relationship between growing technological efficiency and the improved living conditions of the metropolitan proletariat. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse argued that the increasing productivity of labour due to improvements in the machinery of the productive apparatus, “the ever-more-complete mechanization of labor in advanced capitalism, while sustaining exploitation, modifies the attitude and the status of the exploited.”¹⁵⁰ This claim reveals Marcuse’s humanist reading of Marx. Marcuse argued that a central component of Marx’s understanding of proletarian exploitation is “the purchase and use of this physical energy, under subhuman conditions, for the private appropriation of surplus-value.”¹⁵¹ This aspect of exploitation, on Marcuse’s account, is mediated by the historical developments in the mode of production, which increasingly relied on labour power to *manage* the various machines which had replaced labour power. For Marcuse, “the transformation of physical energy into technical and mental skills” altered the form of exploitation for blue collar workers.¹⁵⁴ As hard manual labour was transferred to the periphery, where the capitalist class could get away with a greater degree of absolute surplus-value extraction, physical toil was no longer characteristic of organized labour in the metropole. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse described the transformation of labour as such:

“The new technological work-world thus enforces a weakening of the negative position of the working class: the latter no longer appears to be the living contradiction to the established society. This trend is strengthened by the effect of the technological organization of

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 81.

¹⁵⁰ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 27.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 26-27.

production on the other side of the fence: on management and direction. Domination is transfigured into administration.”¹⁵²

This transformation of labour from physical to mental obfuscates exploitation. Whereas exploitation was deeply, corporally felt by the industrial working classes prior to the advent of widespread automation, this new working class has a different relationship with domination. “Hatred and frustration are deprived of their specific target, and the technological veil conceals the reproduction of inequality and enslavement.”¹⁵³

In this sense, Marcuse thought that the blue-collar factory worker in the metropole had more in common with the white-collar desk jockey than with the factory worker in the periphery: “this kind of masterly enslavement [of the manual labourer] is not essentially different from that of the typist, the bank teller, the high-pressure salesman or saleswoman, and the television announcer.”¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, he recognized that “[t]he ‘unproductive’ intelligentsia enjoys a greater freedom of movement than the productive laborer. And yet, the separation from control over the means of production defines the common objective condition of the wage and salary earners: the condition of exploitation—they reproduce capital.”¹⁵⁸ While he maintained that blue- and white-collar workers are still, as workers, exploited by capitalism, many of the ills of exploitation in previous forms of capitalism are mitigated by the relative improvement in working conditions (less strenuous work), and rise in real wages, both of which are facilitated by increased productivity induced by technological innovation, and enabled by the export of capital to the periphery.

Although Marcuse did not sufficiently demonstrate the exact economic cause of metropolitan working-class affluence, Marcuse seems to argue that in the age of neo-imperialism, there is a

¹⁵² Ibid, 35.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 28.

wholesale class compromise taking place. Marcuse thought this compromise was necessitated by the prospect of crisis, whether at the hands of a class-conscious proletariat or at the invisible hands of the market. In the following section, I discuss how Marcuse thought crises of overaccumulation encourage the metropolitan bourgeoisie to share the spoils of imperialism with the metropolitan proletariat.

c) Overaccumulation and consumer Society

While capital export saved classical capitalism from implosion in expanding the boundaries for profitable investment, monopoly capital requires continuous and increasing infusions of surplus value to maintain a stable growth rate. Following the work of John A. Hobson, Paul Sweezy and Paul A. Baran, Marcuse believed that capitalism inherently tends towards overaccumulation, and overaccumulation leads to crisis. In *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse notes that capital “requires that the surplus value be converted anew into capital. If the capitalist were to consume his surplus value instead of reinvesting it in the process of production, the latter would cease to yield him any profit, and the incentive of commodity production would vanish.”¹⁵⁵ In the wake of the depression of the 1930s, it seemed apparent to economists Paul A. Baran, Paul Sweezy, and John Maynard Keynes that the domestic economies of the core required a material basis for mass consumption to prevent future crises of overaccumulation.

Some theorists relate the market’s requirement for consumption with imperialism, both of which are based in capitalism’s tendency towards overaccumulation. According to Brewer, Hobson was:

committed to a theory of under-consumption in which excess saving leads to a chronic lack of demand. The idea that foreign investment can provide an outlet for surplus saving is a natural extension of this under-consumptionist theory. If no other solution were possible,

¹⁵⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941), 310.

imperialism would presumably be in the interest of all classes (in the imperialist country), in order to stave off depression and unemployment.¹⁵⁶

Hobson's work influenced both Marxists and Liberals alike. His main idea that persisted through the 20th century was that a lack of consumption leads to overaccumulation of capital (with no profitable market to reinvest it in), which leads to depression. This argument, known as the 'underconsumptionist thesis' reached its most widespread acceptance in political economy in the 1930s after the Great Depression, with Keynes, a strong adherent to Hobson's work.

The necessity of consumption and investment for capital was integrated in Marxist political economy after the Second World War, in large part due to the work of Sweezy and Baran, coauthors of *Monopoly Capital* (1966). In this seminal work, they claimed: "The question for monopoly capitalism is not whether to stimulate demand. It must, on pain of death."¹⁵⁷ According to Brewer, underconsumptionists, both Marxists (Sweezy and Baran) and Liberals (Keynes) alike, believe that "capitalist economies suffer from a chronic lack of demand because of the restricted purchasing power of the workers."¹⁵⁸ But, while Keynes believed that monopoly capitalism could achieve stability and peace, Sweezy and Baran maintained that stability and peace were irreconcilable with capitalism, and monopoly capitalism could achieve a surplus temporarily, and only at the expense of even greater exploitation and overproduction. It is apparent these competing interpretations of monopoly capitalism mirror the earliest disagreements between the reformists and the revolutionaries in the Second International.

¹⁵⁶ Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism*, 74.

¹⁵⁷ Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran. *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), 111.

¹⁵⁸ Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism*, 137.

Sweezy and Baran were a major influence on Marcuse's work,¹⁵⁹ most evident in Marcuse's understanding of monopoly capitalism. Marcuse maintained that monopoly capitalism emerged out of competitive capitalism due to capitalism's own internal contradictions, and its distinguishing features were persistent overproduction and state intervention in the market. Prior to the development of state-monopoly capitalism, "The market regulated for better or worse the operation and output of a labor apparatus not yet dependent upon uninterrupted mass consumption."¹⁶⁰ However, as the market began to increasingly rely on consumption, the state intervenes in the labour apparatus more directly. This was especially apparent following the depression of the 1930s; the New Deal was introduced to, among other things, encourage investment and personal consumption. Keynes famously advised Franklin D. Roosevelt on the New Deal, and after the 1937 recession, Keynes "urged FDR adopt a wide range of policies to combat the new recession: nationalizing utilities and railroads, increasing spending on public works programs in order to generate employment, and reaching an accommodation with business to stimulate private investment."¹⁶¹ Marcuse believed that Keynesian economics was the driving theoretical force behind state policy in the era of state-monopoly capitalism, which began in the 1930s and ended in the early 1970s.

Marcuse emphasized overproduction as a necessary problem of monopoly capitalism. Overproduction is the logical outcome of "the requirement that capital be utilized."¹⁶² This requirement

that there be production for production's sake, leads, even under ideal conditions, to inevitable disproportions between the two spheres of production, that of production goods and that of consumption goods, resulting in constant overproduction. The profitable investment of

¹⁵⁹ Baran and Marcuse knew each other since the early 1930s, worked together in the OSS, and Marcuse published a letter in MR celebrating the work of the late Baran following his untimely death in 1965. He also cites *Monopoly Capitalism* in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*.

¹⁶⁰ Marcuse, *Negations*, xviii.

¹⁶¹ Jason Scott Smith, *A Concise History of the New Deal*, (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 135.

¹⁶² Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 311.

capital becomes increasingly difficult. The struggle for new markets plants the seed of constant international warfare.¹⁶³

Marcuse explained the expansion of the service sector and the mass consumer market as monopoly capitalism's solution to delay the "saturation of the investment and commodity market."¹⁶⁴

One of these new markets is advertising. Advertising, as product differentiation, has two functions. First, it works on a superstructural level to encourage conspicuous consumption. Second, the advertising industry is a useful venue for the reabsorption of capital: "Advertising, public relations, indoctrination, planned obsolescence are no longer unproductive overhead costs but rather elements of basic production costs. In order to be effective, such production of socially necessary waste requires continuous rationalization – the relentless utilization of advanced techniques and science."¹⁶⁵ Marcuse expanded the definition of socially necessary labour to include advertising because "The creation of adequate surplus value necessitates [...] enlarged investments in waste and profitable services (publicity, entertainment, organized travel)" which only delays the eventual saturation of the market.¹⁶⁶

From Marcuse's understanding of overaccumulation, one can surmise that a rise in real wages for the proletariat in the metropole *is in the interests of the bourgeoisie*. First, if the stability of the global capitalist economy depends both on mass consumption and new avenues for profitable investment to stave off a falling rate of profit, the consumer economy in the metropole becomes a necessary safeguard against crises of overaccumulation. In Marcuse's words, it is "necessary in the sense that without it, the established mode of production could not be sustained. Neither problems of psychology nor of aesthetics are at stake, but the material base of domination."¹⁶⁷ Second, the advent of mass consumption diminishes the appearance of classes if, as Marcuse believed, "white- and blue-

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 20.

¹⁶⁵ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 52.

¹⁶⁶ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 20.

¹⁶⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 250.

collar workers can spend their holidays in the same places as their bosses, they can dress as well and can afford gadgets and luxury goods which used to be within the reach of the ruling class alone.”¹⁶⁸ Although the rise in real wages and newfound access to mass consumer goods does not negate the exploitation of the working class in the metropole, “class contradictions, though not transcended, have thus been masked.”¹⁶⁹ The stability afforded by consumer society provides a massive incentive for the capitalist class to share a cut of the spoils of imperialism, i.e. super-profits, with the metropolitan proletariat.

Marcuse thought that imperialism and consumer society were integrally bound to one another – for this reason Marcuse characterized consumer society as the “internal counterpart to neoimperialism.”¹⁷⁰ The improved material conditions (increased purchasing power) of the working classes in the metropole are prerequisite for the persistence of the capitalist system, which in the era of monopoly capitalism relies on mass consumption to maintain the rate of profit. The embourgeoisement of the metropolitan proletariat produces two major political effects, to which Marcuse dedicated the majority of his oeuvre. First, the trade unions and Marxist-Leninist parties that represent the interests of the organized working class are oriented towards reform rather than revolution. Second, the metropolitan working class chauvinistically supports imperialist wars abroad.

d) Reformism and the labour aristocracy

In his “33 Theses” written in 1947, Marcuse presented a pessimistic overview of the state of revolutionary organizing in the imperial core:

Outside the Soviet camp there is no workers’ movement ‘capable of revolution.’ The social democrats have become more rather than less bourgeois. The Trotskyist groups are divided and helpless. The communist parties are not willing (today), and thus also not capable of

¹⁶⁸ Marcuse, “Socialism in the Developed Countries,” 172.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 23.

revolution, but they are the only anti-capitalist class organization of the proletariat and thus the only possible basis for revolution (today).¹⁷¹

By the mid 1960s, Marcuse's diagnosis of the situation was even more dire.

Marcuse hoped to retheorize the revolutionary subject in light of these objective changes in the organized working class. He argued that those who "maintain that, just as before, industrial labor and mainly blue-collar labor provides the base for the revolution" offer an "insufficient and un-Marxist answer" to those like himself who asked whether the traditional working class maintained its revolutionary position in the era of neo-imperialism.¹⁷² Marcuse often defended his revision of orthodox Marxist theory by appealing to Marx himself. "If we know anything of Marx," Marcuse contested,

we ought to know that he believes that it must be social existence which determines consciousness. And the answer must therefore be sought in the social existence, in the objective conditions of the working class today, and only in a secondary way in their consciousness. Or, to put it in a shorter form, if indeed the consciousness of the working classes has changed, it is because the objective conditions of the working classes have changed.¹⁷³

Ironically, Marcuse critiqued the orthodox Marxist position for being un-Marxist. To continue to see the traditional working class in advanced industrial society as the revolutionary subject of capitalism was, on Marcuse account, to favour a static conception of the proletariat over a materialist approach that seeks to understand why working-class mass movements have failed to develop in the mid-century.

Marcuse's critique of the organized working class was not met without resistance. Fellow Marxist-humanist Raya Dunayevskaya critiqued *One-Dimensional Man* for underplaying the militancy of

¹⁷¹ Herbert Marcuse, "33 Theses," in *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 1*, ed. Douglas Kellner, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 218.

¹⁷² Marcuse, "Movement in a New Era of Repression," 144.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 145.

American trade unions, which she attributed to Marcuse's poor research and overuse of bourgeois sociological studies.¹⁷⁴ However, it is my understanding that Marcuse's analysis was not directed towards evaluating the degrees of success of reforms achieved by organized labour, but rather at asserting that class struggle *only* "proceeds in the well-known classical forms of an economic contest on trade union terms."¹⁷⁵ The problem, for Marcuse, was that the working class in the core could only mobilize for immediate reforms, and had abandoned the goal of revolution *tout court*. The same was true for the Social Democratic parties, who had already abandoned revolutionary aspirations by the 1920s.

By the mid-century, Marcuse thought that even the Marxist-Leninist parties in the imperial core shared the same fate as the Social Democratic parties and trade unions. Marcuse's critique of the orthodox Marxist-Leninist theory of revolution has been oversimplified – he is interpreted as anti-communist by his detractors¹⁷⁶ and praised as 'anti-authoritarian' by some of his adherents.¹⁷⁷ Marcuse's concern with the Marxist-Leninist parties in the metropole was solely a practical one. For Marcuse, a revolutionary movement must cultivate the consciousness of the masses, and this was

the traditional role of the Marxist-Leninist party to prepare the ground for this development. The stabilizing and integrating power of advanced capitalism, and the requirements of 'peaceful coexistence,' forced this party to 'parliamentarize' itself, to integrate itself into the bourgeois-democratic process, and to concentrate on economic demands, thereby inhibiting rather than promoting the growth of a radical political consciousness.¹⁷⁸

Marcuse was not critical of the basic organizational structure of the vanguard party, rather it was the fact that the party no longer carried out its main function: developing the political consciousness of the masses. The integration of both the working class and its supposed vanguard was a serious

¹⁷⁴ Raya Dunayevskaya, "Reason and Revolution versus Conformism and Technology," *The Activist* (1964): 32-33.

¹⁷⁵ Marcuse, "The Movement in a New Era of Repression," 144.

¹⁷⁶ Eric Scheper, "Herbert Marcuse: The Ideologue as Paid Agent of U.S. Imperialism," *Literature & Ideology*, No. 6, 1970.

¹⁷⁷ Javier Sethness-Castro, *Eros and Revolution: The Critical Philosophy of Herbert Marcuse*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 351.

¹⁷⁸ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 54.

problem for Marcuse. The parliamentary strategy of the Marxist-Leninist parties in the imperial core “testifies to the “passivity” of the industrial working classes, to the degree of their integration - it testifies to the facts which the official theory so vehemently denies.”¹⁷⁹ If the vanguard party aimed for reform rather than revolution, as Marcuse thought, then a new revolutionary strategy must develop based on a historical materialist analysis of the changes highlighted in the last two sections. Marcuse’s critique was essentially of actually existing Marxist-Leninist parties.

In the late summer of 1968, Marcuse clarified his position on the Communist parties in an interview with the French journal *Express*, in which the interviewer accused Marcuse of upholding the kind of infantile ‘leftism’ that Lenin critiqued in “*Left-Wing*” *Communism*.¹⁸⁰ Marcuse rejected this association, stating: “Today’s left is far from the reaction of a *petite bourgeoisie* to a revolutionary party, as in Lenin’s day. It is the reaction of a revolutionary minority to the established party which the Communist party has become, which is no longer the party of Lenin, but a social democratic party.”¹⁸¹ Later that year, Marcuse gave a talk “On the New Left” responding to similar accusations leveled at the student movements of the New Left. Marcuse defended the New Left and the student movements against the Old Left’s invocation of “Lenin’s famous pamphlet.”¹⁸² To conflate the New Left as a whole with the infantile radicals that Lenin denounced, Marcuse suggested, “is a historical forgery. Lenin struck out against radicals who confronted a strong revolutionary mass party. Such a revolutionary mass party does not exist today.”¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ V.I. Lenin, “*Left-Wing*” *Communism, an Infantile Disorder: a Popular Essay in Marxian Strategy and Tactics*, (New York: International Publishers, 1940).

¹⁸¹ Herbert Marcuse, “Marcuse Defines his New Left Line,” in *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 3*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005), 103.

¹⁸² Herbert Marcuse, “On the New Left,” in *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 3*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005), 127.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

The integration of the traditional organizations of the working class – the trade unions and parties, both social democratic and communist – was the result of class compromise between the metropolitan bourgeoisie and proletariat. Marcuse saw this continue into the late 1970s in ‘Eurocommunism’ a trend within Western European communist parties seeking independence from the CPSU. In March 1978, Marcuse noted: “the ‘historic compromise’, the alliance with bourgeois forces, the rejection of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the strategy of Eurocommunism has roots in the very structure of late capitalism.”¹⁸⁴ The emergence of Eurocommunism “implies, on the part of capital,

the need to contain the class struggle within economic forms, to obtain and maintain the collaboration of the working class by dividing it into a privileged population in the advanced capitalist countries, and an underprivileged population both in these countries and abroad. Within the global system, the multi-national corporations keep the competitive conflicts from becoming explosive.¹⁸⁵

In this passage, Marcuse explicitly claims that the organized working class in the metropole collaborates with the imperialists to better its conditions at the expense of internationalism. Reformism of the metropolitan proletariat is but one political outcome of imperialism. Perhaps an even more pernicious outcome is imperial chauvinism.

The American working class’s response to the Vietnam war, especially upon the return of Lt. William Calley, perpetrator of the My Lai massacre, was characteristic of this imperial chauvinism. Marcuse published his op-ed “Reflections on Calley” in the *New York Times*, in which he chronicled Calley’s idolization by the American people. “The obscene haste with which a large part of the American people rushed to the support of a man convicted of multiple premeditated murder[s] of men, women and children, the obscene pride with which they even identified themselves with him is

¹⁸⁴ Herbert Marcuse, “The Reification of the Proletariat,” *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 6*, ed. Douglas Kellner & Clayton Pierce (New York: Routledge, 2014), 394.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

one of those rare historical events which reveal a hidden truth.”¹⁸⁶ Marcuse sought to explain why the American working classes would rally around Calley, going so far as to compare his trial to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Marcuse thought that the rise in real wages afforded to the metropolitan working class was supplemented by a national chauvinist ideology. In the American context, the Vietnam war demonstrated that “the affluent society is in need of an Enemy, against whom its people can be kept in a state of constant psychosocial mobilization.”¹⁸⁷ Fundamentally, despite its immediate material wellbeing, the working class in the metropole remained exploited and dominated by capital. For this reason, Marcuse thought that the Enemy was necessary to ensure the inner cohesion of the imperial core. The Enemy was a crucial ideological tool of the imperialists as the Enemy “must be there, and who must be created if he does not exist.”¹⁸⁸ The Enemy is not merely the enemy of any one imperialist state. The Enemy is common to the metropole as a whole: “the common Enemy of all capitalism, communism promoted the organization of a common interest superseding the intercapitalist differences and conflicts.”¹⁸⁹ The Enemy therefore unifies the metropolitan classes against the Enemy just as it unifies the imperialist states.

For Marcuse, the Enemy is superstructural, secondary to the requirements of the capitalist mode of production. The cohesion of the whole metropole is “on very material grounds” – at the same time, “mobilization against the enemy works as a mighty stimulus of production and employment, thus sustaining the high standard of living.”¹⁹⁰ The enemy is the ideological justification for the permanent war economy. The concept of the Enemy works to dehumanize those working

¹⁸⁶ Herbert Marcuse, “Reflections on Calley,” in *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 3*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005), 51.

¹⁸⁷ Marcuse, “The Inner Logic of American Policy in Vietnam,” 39.

¹⁸⁸ Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,” 80.

¹⁸⁹ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 85.

¹⁹⁰ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 23-4.

against the collective interests of the imperial core, targeting all communist and anticolonial movements. Everything the Enemy does “is evil; what he says- propaganda. This a priori linguistic defamation hits first the Enemy abroad: the defense of his own land, his own hut, his own naked life is a crime, the supreme crime which deserves the supreme punishment.”¹⁹¹

The idea of the ‘Enemy’ in Marcuse’s work is somewhat inconsistent. In the above passages, the Enemy is straightforwardly ideological. However, while the invocation of the Enemy serves to rationalize the imperialist wars and permanent war economy, Marcuse argued that it is not simply a narrative employed by the powers that be. The Enemy, in the form of the national liberation movements, does materially threaten the peace and stability of the imperial core: “it is simply correct that this society can have peace only by preparing for war or even by waging war. It is simply correct that it can mitigate or temporarily resolve conflicts only by expanding and creating conflicts somewhere else.”¹⁹² National chauvinism is instilled to some extent by the ruling class, but it also reflective of the immediate interests of the organized working class in the core. Marcuse thought that together, the Enemy and economic stability are sufficient to contain the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. As he wrote in *Essay on Liberation*, “The development of a radical political consciousness among the masses is conceivable only if and when the economic stability *and* the social cohesion of the system begin to weaken (my emphasis).”¹⁹³

e) Responding to misinterpretations of Marcuse’s work

Marcuse was one of the first Marxists to theorize the development of consumer society.¹⁹⁴ His critics, however, often portray his critique of consumer society as myopically focused on the ideological

¹⁹¹ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 75.

¹⁹² Marcuse, “The Movement in a New Era of Repression,” 143.

¹⁹³ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 54.

¹⁹⁴ Douglas Kellner, “Critical Theory, Commodities and the Consumer Society,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 1, no. 3 (1983): 66-83.

indoctrination of the proletariat. For instance, Ellen Meiksins-Wood described Marcuse's philosophy as "predicated on the absorption of the masses by the hegemony of consumer capitalism" which assumed "the autonomy of politics and ideology" from the mode of production.¹⁹⁵ Meiksins-Wood mistakenly suggests that consumerism, in Marcuse's use, is separate from the mode of production. For Marcuse, consumption is not a mere cultural or ideological compulsion. Rather, Marcuse saw consumer society as a necessary development that was facilitated by, and which is needed to reproduce, the late capitalist mode of production. These false needs that arise in the advanced industrial societies are not ideological in the sense that they are maniacally decided by the monopoly capitalists or their advertising managers in their boardroom. Rather, Marcuse thought the manufacturing of needs in the metropole is just the tip of the iceberg of the imperialist world system. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse clearly articulated the place of needs within the system:

The centrifugal forces which appear in the emergence of transcending needs operate behind the back of the capitalist managers, and they are generated by the mode of production itself. The growing productivity of labor, accompanied by a declining use of human labor power employed in the production of commodities, necessitates the internal expansion of the market, the counterpart to external imperialism.¹⁹⁶

The false needs produced by consumer society, and consumer society itself are dependent on the requirements of the capitalist mode of production. The ideological component of consumer society is secondary to and anchored by the capitalist mode of production in the imperialist era.

Accordingly, Marcuse believed that the terms consumer society or consumerism are misleading, emphasizing the agency of the consumer, and seeming to put the consumer at the reins of the market. For this reason, in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse clarified that the term "'Consumer society' is a misnomer of the first order, for rarely has a society so systematically been organized in

¹⁹⁵ Ellen Meiksins-Wood, "A Chronology of the New Left and its Successors, or: Who's Old-Fashioned Now?" *Socialist Register* 31, (1995): 33.

¹⁹⁶ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 18-19.

the interests which control production. The consumer society is the form in which monopoly state capitalism reproduces itself at its most advanced stage.”¹⁹⁷ On his account, consumer society is not dictated by the needs of the consumer, nor is consumerism exclusively an ideological mechanism to render the consumers complacent with their exploitation. In this sense, Marcuse believed that the term consumer society was misleading, insisting that it is not consumer desire that controls production. Rather, state-monopoly capitalism mediates both supply and consumer demand, as the expanded productive apparatus requires demand for profit, and has the state stimulate demand on its behalf.

Another important critic of Marcuse, and of the Frankfurt School in general, is Raymond Geuss, whose *Idea of a Critical Theory* suggests that Marcuse’s critique of ‘false needs’ is elitist. Geuss writes:

Often the situations of 'ideological delusion' Marcuse describes seem to be [...] ones in which they lead shallow or uninteresting lives, or have a low level of aspirations. If the agents sincerely report themselves to be satisfied with their lives, and if we have no behavioral evidence for hidden frustration, by what standard can we adjudge these lives 'poor' or 'shallow,' and the agents in need of 'enlightenment?'¹⁹⁸

If, as Marcuse argues, these changes in the working class are determined by the changes in the capitalist mode of production, then we cannot interpret the non-revolutionary consciousness of the working class as ideological delusion. Rather, Marcuse believed that the metropolitan working class was acting in line with its immediate interests. In “Socialism in the Developed Countries,” Marcuse asked: “Does it make sense to go on speaking of alienation and reification when people really feel and find themselves in this society – in their motor-cars, in their TV sets, their gadgets, their newspapers, their politicians and so on and so forth?”¹⁹⁹ While he certainly refers to the alienation of the proletariat in

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 23-4.

¹⁹⁸ Raymond Geuss, *Idea of a Critical Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 82.

¹⁹⁹ Marcuse, “Socialism in the Developed Countries,” 172.

the metropole in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse recognized that their consciousness is not entirely false as metropolitan workers do benefit from the capitalist mode of production when imperialist exploitation increases their real wages. False consciousness, in the age of imperialism, loses its explanatory power, as it is not wholly false for the metropolitan working class, “For unless he belongs to the ruthlessly suppressed minorities” in the core, “the individual also benefits from this richness. Capital now produces, for the majority of the population in the metropolises, not so much material privation as steered satisfaction of material needs.”²⁰⁰ Thus, Geuss’s argument misses the extent to which Marcuse recognized the material basis for the satisfaction of working people.

While Marcuse is rightly known for his critique of the affluent society, few have paid attention to the relationship between the affluent society and the Third World in his work. In his own words, “without putting the affluent society in the framework of the Third World it is not understandable.”²⁰¹ Yet, it is understandable that few make this connection in Marcuse’s work given that he focused primarily on the United States, and almost exclusively on the advanced industrial societies. I do not claim that Marcuse had anything substantial to say about the economic or psychological effects of imperialism in the periphery, as this was not his goal. Rather, Marcuse focused on the advanced industrial societies because the struggle for liberation was already underway outside its borders. For this reason, Marcuse urged young activists in his teach-ins that

emphasis must be on the advanced industrial societies, not forgetting to do whatever we can and in whatever way we can to support, theoretically and practically, the struggle for liberation in the neo-colonial countries which, if again they are not the final force of liberation, at least contribute their share – and it is a considerable share – to the potential weakening and disintegration of the imperialist world system.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 14.

²⁰¹ Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,” 86.

²⁰² Ibid.

Marcuse rejected the idea that revolutionary struggle is futile in the imperial core, a belief upheld by some Maoists (Third Worldists). He believed that imperialism would fall only with the reactivation of class war in the metropolises, and thus urged Marxists to continue to pay attention to avenues for class struggle therein.

Marcuse thought that Marxist theory could not move forward without reckoning with the material changes in proletarian existence in the advanced industrial societies. The transition from free market capitalism to state-monopoly capitalism brought with it the consumer society, entailing the affluence for the working class in the form of a Keynesian welfare state and a rise in real wages. Not only this, but the kind of labour performed in the metropolises changed during this transition, shifting from physical labour to intellectual labour. These changes, on Marcuse's account, make up the improved living conditions of the metropolitan working class, which stabilizes class conflict in the imperial metropole. Marcuse first acknowledged the urgency of this problem as early as the 1950s. Arguably, it is the motivation at the heart of *Soviet Marxism*, in which he continually warned Soviet policymakers for their undialectical and ahistorical understanding of Marxist-Leninist theory. "If the capitalist potential should, for a long time to come, prove stronger than the revolutionary potential, if not even the First World War and its effect on the economy could break the hold of reformism over the 'mature proletariat,' then the historical agent of the revolution had changed not only in a geographical but also in a social sense."²⁰³ As such, Marcuse urged Soviet policymakers²⁰⁴ and Marxists

²⁰³ Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 45-6.

²⁰⁴ Marcuse points to the CPSU's "socialism in one country" policy as an example of its continuing reliance on an outdated understanding of the proletariat in the imperialist countries at the expense of the proletariat and peasantry in the former colonies. The background of this policy was the instability of socialism after the isolation of the Bolshevik Revolution after the failure of the German Revolution, the intercontinental reintegration of capitalism and the containment of revolutionary potential to the agrarian and semi-industrial states in the colonized world. Initially a Leninist policy, Marcuse's critique focuses on Stalin's retheorization of the policy in 1938 "Letter to Ivanov", which failed to capture the dialectical relationship between the internal struggle for socialism in the Soviet Union and the external struggle for socialism in the capitalist countries. For Marcuse, the policy of 'socialism in one country' "reestablishes the essential links between the construction of Soviet society and the capitalist development," and thus promotes co-existence with the capitalist orbit at the expense of international socialist struggle (Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 95).

more broadly to redefine international revolutionary strategy, and to “look toward the developing revolutionary movement in the colonial and semicolonial countries as more than a mere ‘reserve’ for the revolutionary army” in the imperial metropole.²⁰⁵

Marcuse’s efforts were directed towards dispelling the belief that the metropolitan proletariat operated in the same way as it had in the mid-19th century, during the period of classical capitalism before the advent of the age of imperialism. Marcuse believed that many of his contemporaries (like Ernest Mandel)²⁰⁶ made this mistake: “It is easy to brush aside the argument of the tendential integration of the working class into advanced capitalist society by stating that this change only refers to the sphere of consumption and thus does not affect the 'structural definition' of the proletariat.”²⁰⁷ Marcuse intended to retheorize the proletariat considering the structural changes introduced by imperialism.

While it may seem unintuitive that a theorist of imperialism would limit their analysis to the imperial core, Marcuse acknowledged that his focus on the imperial core arose from his intimate knowledge of that society.²⁰⁸ Despite this, Marcuse clearly regarded capitalism as a world system: “the masses in the neo-colonial world who are already engaged in struggle against this society [...] can perhaps now be considered the new proletariat and as such they are today a real danger for the world system of capitalism.”²⁰⁹ For Marcuse, it was not that revolutionary potential had vanished from the globe, but that it changed its geographic and social position in the age of imperialism, from the core to the periphery.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 45-6.

²⁰⁶ Marcuse cites Ernest Mandel, “Workers and Permanent Revolution,” in *The Revival of American Socialism*, George Fisher, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 170.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Marcuse, “Marcuse Defines his New Left Line,” 101.

²⁰⁹ Herbert Marcuse, “Problem of Violence and Radical Opposition,” in *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 3*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005), 39.

Concluding remarks:

This thesis has attempted to reconstruct Marcuse's work to place emphasis on imperialism, as it is largely missing from critical appraisal of his work since his death. Perhaps the centrality of imperialism in Marcuse's mature work has gone unnoticed because of his association with the Frankfurt School, which is not generally regarded as having made any major or lasting contribution to the study of imperialism. Marcel Stoetzler claims that the first generation of the Frankfurt School did not advocate an "anti-imperialist" theory, because they viewed imperialism as inseparable from the capitalist mode of production. Stoetzler contends that Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Marcuse refrained from identifying with an explicitly anti-imperialist politics because they "clearly saw a danger that the concept becomes a kind of fetish, i.e. an obstacle to rather than an instrument of critique"¹⁹ but, they "did not reject the concept of 'imperialism' nor critiques of it."²⁰ Although Stoetzler argues that there is a generalizable tendency among Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno, he concedes that Marcuse's work on imperialism, especially after the Second World War, is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from his colleagues. Taking Stoetzler's remark seriously, I have demonstrated that Marcuse's work after the war, especially in the years between *Soviet Marxism* (1958) and *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972), was explicitly anti-imperialist, and cannot be wholly understood without reckoning with his work on imperialism.

Marcuse's theoretical interest in imperialism and the early 20th century debates sets him apart from his colleagues in the Frankfurt School. In *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Perry Anderson (1976) notes that of the first generation of Western Marxists, only Marcuse and Antonio Gramsci had practical political experience of the First World War. This sets Marcuse apart from both Adorno and Horkheimer. Further, Caroline Ashcroft claims that the failed German Revolution (1918-1919) was

²¹⁰ Marcel Stoetzler, "Critical Theory and the Critique of Anti-Imperialism" in *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory* (SAGE, 2018), 1473.

the most significant event in Marcuse's political development.²¹¹ At twenty years old, Marcuse was already disillusioned with the SPD's pro-war reformist stance and joined the USPD's soldier council in the winter of 1918. Although it is not the task of this work to ask why Marcuse diverges from his colleagues, this difference is worth acknowledging, since Marcuse is often primarily studied within the Frankfurt School context.

In the first section, I have shown that Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism* dealt with the rise of inter-imperialist collaboration during the Cold War, something considered impossible by orthodox Marxists in the first decades of the 20th century. For Marcuse, the rise of the Soviet Union did not mean the impending collapse of the capitalist world; rather, it strengthened the capitalist bloc against the socialist world. In turn, the idea that inter-imperialist rivalry would inevitably lead to capitalism's collapse was indefensible in light of the rise of NATO. Marcuse's views on the stabilization of inter-imperialist rivalry synthesized the views of Kautsky and Hilferding on one hand and Lenin and Luxemburg on the other. While Marcuse rejected Kautsky and Hilferding's hypothesis that ultra-imperialism or organized capitalism could produce peace and gradually shift to socialism on its own accord, he thought that they foresaw the eventual stability between the imperial rivals in a way that Lenin overlooked. Despite his concerns with the idea of the general crisis, Marcuse thought that Lenin's understanding of state-monopoly capitalism also provided a basis to think about the stabilization of capitalism in the imperialist era. Those who have commented on Marcuse's pessimism regarding the stabilization of capitalism have failed to incorporate Marcuse's understanding of inter-imperialist cooperation into their analysis.

In the second section, I demonstrated that Marcuse's critique of the metropolitan working class is only intelligible in light of his understanding of imperialism, as the super-exploitation of the

²¹¹ Caroline Ashcroft, "From the German Revolution to the New Left: Revolution and Dissent in Arendt and Marcuse," *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 3 (2022): 835–58.

Third World subsidizes life for workers in the ‘affluent society.’ Among Marxists, Marcuse is most known (and criticized) for the notion that the advanced industrial proletariat is no longer the revolutionary subject of capitalism. However, there is far more to Marcuse’s notion of consumer society than what many of his interlocutors claim. Marcuse’s work expands Lenin’s theory of the labour aristocracy, claiming that the entire working class in the metropole represents a labour aristocracy as they benefit from imperialist exploitation of the peripheral nations. By situating Marcuse’s critique of the metropolitan working class in the framework of the labour aristocracy, we can make sense of other elements of his critique, like his critique of the Marxist-Leninist party structure in the metropole. Marcuse was not a critic of the vanguard party because he rejected so-called authoritarianism as Sethness-Castro claims²¹², but because the Marxist-Leninist parties are not occupied with raising the class consciousness of the masses, nor do they have an immiserated working class to organize. While many critiques charge him with idealism for his focus on consumer society, this section shows that Marcuse understood consumer society as a development that rests on the overaccumulation of capital in the monopoly era. As such, Marcuse hoped to explain the deradicalization of the metropolitan proletariat on materialist grounds rather than as a purely false class consciousness type account.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate Marcuse’s Leninist underpinnings which have been ignored by most of his readers, perhaps due to anti-communism in academia. More plausibly, Marcuse’s intellectual eclecticism (his Heideggerian academic origins, his deference to Freudian categories, his aesthetic theorizing, etc.) obscured his affinity for Lenin. While he was certainly not an orthodox Marxist, Marcuse saw himself as offering a faithful interpretation of Marxist principles, against a dogmatic adherence to ossified concepts. Marcuse often criticized the undialectical

²¹² Sethness-Castro, *Eros and Revolution*, 8.

thought of the New Left, which refused to update its analysis to its historical context for the sake of an abstract intellectual purity. This was one of the principal weaknesses of the New Left, which on Marcuse's account, relied on "the distortion and falsification of Marxian theory through its ritualization. Clearly, the concepts used to analyze 19th and early 20th century capitalism cannot simply be applied to its present stage: being historical concepts, they carry in themselves historical indices, and the structure they analyze is a historical structure."²¹³ For Marcuse, a faithful application of Marxist theory was certainly not one that tried to apply his analysis of the material conditions of the 19th century to the context of the late 1960s.

Marcuse praised dialectical materialism for its dynamism, as "dialectical concepts comprehend reality in the process of change, and it is this process which constitutes the definition of the concept itself. Thus, the transformation of classical imperialism into neoimperialism redefines the classical concept while demonstrating how the new forms derive from the preceding ones."²¹⁴ Marcuse thought that a truly Marxist theory of imperialism is not a rewording of Lenin's *Imperialism*. Rather, the dogmatic attachment to the canonical works of Marxist theory enlarged the gulf between theory and practice. While his critique of Marxist dogmatism coalesced around the New Left, he made similar remarks as early as 1941 in *Reason and Revolution*. Citing Lenin as a guide, Marcuse wrote that "Lenin shows how a poverty of dialectical thinking may lead to grave political errors."²¹⁵ Successful anti-imperialist practice on this account relies on a re-examination of imperialism in light of the historical situation. This thesis has attempted to show that for all his criticism of Lenin, Marcuse attempted to theorize the origins of neo-imperialism using the same method, albeit in different historical circumstances.

²¹³ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 33.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 38.

²¹⁵ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 401.

There are two intended audiences of this work. The most obvious are contemporary Marcuseans, who I argue must consider his theory of imperialism to understand his work holistically. While Marcuse is known for his critique of the working classes in advanced industrial societies, this thesis has attempted to show that this aspect of his work cannot be understood outside of his theory of imperialism. This reconstruction was anticipated by those like Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce,²¹⁶ both of whom readily acknowledge the influences of anti-imperialist struggles on Marcuse's work. It is also necessitated by the whitewashing of Marcuse's thought by his critics and admirers. While his association with the New Left and critique of the Old Left implies a break with Leninism, this work has attempted to nuance his relationship with the Bolshevik revolutionary.

Marcuse's analysis of neo-imperialism is not ground-breaking in itself. His understanding of neo-imperialism largely tracks more notable contributions like Kwame Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism*, Paul Sweezy and Paul A. Baran's *Monopoly Capitalism*, and Harry Magdoff's *Age of Imperialism*. While Marcuse's theory of imperialism may not be the most important contribution to theories of imperialism of the middle of the 20th century, this thesis has attempted to show how his work bridges the gap between the works of the mid-century and the earliest Marxist theorists of imperialism. Marcuse's contribution lies in how he demonstrated the continuity of state-monopoly capitalism, the permanent war economy, while showing the discontinuities like the transformation of inter-imperialist rivalry into cooperation.

On the other hand, Marcuse's work was particularly innovative in his critique and reiteration of Lenin's labour aristocracy thesis. While this aspect of his work was fiercely criticized by Marxist theorists as revisionist, the idea that the metropolitan working classes as a whole formed a global

²¹⁶ Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce, "Introduction," *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 6*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1-68.

labour aristocracy gained more legitimacy (although it is still contested) in the years following Marcuse's first iteration of the idea in *Soviet Marxism*. Since Marcuse, theorists of imperialism (like Samir Amin, Arghiri Emmanuel, J. Sakai, and more recently, David Roediger and Zak Cope) rely on an expansive view of the labour aristocracy. Although Emmanuel (1962) is often considered to be the first to enlarge the concept of the labour aristocracy on a global level, already by 1958, Marcuse foresaw the need to enlarge the concept in his critique of Leninism.²¹⁷ Certainly, any final vindication of a labour aristocracy theory must do the work of validating it empirically. Marcuse does not do this. Further research is required to verify whether the super exploitation of the periphery directly corresponds to the enrichment of the metropolitan proletariat, and their subsequent chauvinism.²¹⁸ One area for due skepticism towards reviving a Marcusean understanding of imperialism is his imprecise use of economic categories. Marcuse does not treat profit and surplus value with any precise definition, while higher levels of exploitation, and higher levels of surplus-value production are treated as if they implied one another.

Furthermore, Marcuse's critique of chauvinistic and revisionist metropolitan communist parties – as an outcome of Khrushchev's 'peaceful co-existence' – arrived long before better known critiques of Eurocommunism, such as that of Mandel²¹⁹ or Enver Hoxha.²²⁰ While Marcuse's support for the student movements in the imperial core continues to be met with suspicion of anti-communism, this thesis has attempted to clarify the reasons why Marcuse lost faith in the communist parties in the Global North. His support for the student movements was not unwavering, nor was it

²¹⁷ Arghiri Emmanuel & Charles Bettelheim, "Échange inégal et politique de développement, Problèmes de planification," No. 2, (Sorbonne: Centre d'Étude de Planification Socialiste, 1962).

²¹⁸ This approach has gained prominence in the last decade, represented by works like Zak Cope's *Wealth of Some Nations* (2019), Jason Hickel et al. "Imperialist appropriation in the world economy: Drain from the global South through unequal exchange, 1990–2015," in *Global Environmental Change* 73, (March 2022): 1-13., and John Smith's *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century* (2016) have begun this process.

²¹⁹ Ernest Mandel, *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism: The Bitter Fruits of 'Socialism in One Country'*, (New York: NLB, 1978).

²²⁰ Enver Hoxha, *Eurocommunism is Anti-Communism*, (Toronto: Norman Bethune Institute, 1980).

a product of an abstract anti-authoritarianism. Rather, it emerged organically from his critique of organized labour in the imperial core.

Admittedly, Marcuse's theory of imperialism is not as systematic, rigorous, or wide-reaching as, for example, Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, which traces the transnational division of labour and the historical development of capitalism across the globe.²²¹ However, world-systems theory appeared in the mid-1970s, in the last five years of Marcuse's life, and thus his analysis of imperialism was undoubtedly incomplete by virtue of the few Marxist theories of imperialism that had been adapted to fit the Cold War. Nevertheless, Marcuse's theory offers an analysis of how imperialism operates at the heart of the world-system, and the way it shapes institutional development and individual behavior. For this reason, Marcuse's theory of imperialism is an important addition to the Marxist tradition, as Alex Sutton notes that within this tradition, there is a "neglect of the specific relationships between states and the everyday 'minutiae' of capitalism. Rather, these accounts have generally focused more on 'top-down' systemic theories of imperialism."²²² Marcuse's theory of imperialism is perhaps overlooked because he largely focused on everyday neuroses of individuals living in the imperial core, especially in his two most famous works, *One-Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization*. While Marcuse can plausibly be accused of being imprecise or non-systematic, his greatest strength was his ability to relate the cultural, psychological effects of imperialism in the core, on its supposed beneficiaries. Theorists concerned with imperialism should thus remember Marcuse for his contributions on the total consequences of imperialism at the heart of the system.

²²¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century*. New York: Academic, 1974.

²²² Alex Sutton, "Marxism and Imperialism" in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1320.

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