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Introduction
Perhaps more than any other member of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse articulated a hope for a radically transfigured world. He imagined a world characterized by receptive, generous relationships rather than domination and violence. Yet Marcuse’s philosophy of liberation has been placed on trial within various critical circles. Michel Foucault’s rejection of the “repressive hypothesis” and his concomitant analysis of power as generative is typically interpreted as an indirect response to Marcuse’s tendency to treat the social order as a primarily repressive force vis-à-vis our instincts and desires.¹ Martin Jay has expressed concerns about the function of anamnesis in Marcuse’s utopian framework since memory for the latter is often directed toward some imaginary lost time, a time of plenitude and happiness.² Jay therefore worries that Marcuse’s vision of the future, because it retrieves and re-collects this previous state of happiness, might be too conciliatory and totalizing. In general, those who have been influenced by post-structuralism cast a suspicious eye on any position that affirms the possibility of organizing human desires and relationships

without some kind of coercion. Since there is no space outside of power, utopian projections seem, at best, naïve, and potentially dangerous.\(^3\)

Following Marcuse, we should remain committed to another kind of world, but without dismissing these concerns and objections. Taking Foucault’s critique into consideration, I suggest that we can re-read Marcuse in a way that does not confine him to the “repressive hypothesis.” In addition, we can interpret his notion of utopia in a less unifying way than does Jay, thereby endorsing something like a broken utopia, a commitment to a better future that is tethered to and punctuated by the memory (and irreconcilability) of trauma, suffering, and loss. In fact, Marcuse’s notion of a new sensibility resonates with recent conversations between theologians and radical democrats who share a desire to foster an ethos of vulnerability in opposition to the culture of neo-liberalism.

**Marcuse, Repression, and the Re-ordering of Desire**

According to Marcuse, the established order of things remains in place due to the affective control it has over individuals. The Establishment maintains its dominion, in part, by shaping and regulating human desires and instincts in accordance with the logic of capital. A free society would require a break from this paradigm, a departure from habits and practices defined by aggression, cruelty, and destruction. As Marcuse puts it, our voluntary servitude . . . can be broken only through a political practice which reaches the roots of containment and contentment in the infra-structure of man, a political practice of methodological disengagement from and refusal of the Establishment, aiming at a radical transvaluation of values. Such a practice involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism way become receptive to the potential forms of a nonaggressive, nonexploitative world.\(^4\)

Liberation from the present order involves cultivating a new sensibility, alternative ways of responding and relating to the world. The construction of a new world entails “men who could speak a different language, have

3. Dangerous because utopian longings have historically neglected the ways in which visions of a different world are constrained and tainted by the relationships and limitations that mark the current world. Utopian constructions therefore overlook the ways in which they rely on and reinforce power relationships. I deal with this issue below.

different gestures, follow different impulses; men and women who have developed an instinctual barrier against cruelty, brutality, and ugliness.”

For Marcuse, political change depends on the possibility of experiencing the world differently, of cultivating more receptive relationships with those who cohabit our lifeworlds. This receptivity requires greater sensitivity to the violence we (directly and indirectly) inflict on others, being more open and patient with forms of life that are strange and different, and being more capable of cultivating relationships marked by generosity and care rather than the will to dominate. This new sensibility would also influence the way we use and appropriate technological innovations. Although technology and science have been used for destruction and war, Marcuse argues that these productive forces can alternatively be released and re-channeled to fulfill fundamental needs and desires, to satisfy the demands of the life instincts (creation, preservation, and unity), and to build a world in which more people flourish and live together amicably.

Because this new sensibility would require a complete break from the current social order, Marcuse seems to invite Foucault’s critique of the tendency to imagine power as a primarily repressive mechanism with respect to our desires and instincts. As Joel Whitebook points out, “Foucault’s rejection of the repressive hypothesis is generally taken as a critique of Freud. The real target, however, is the left Freudian tradition, which received its paradigmatic articulation in the work of Herbert Marcuse.”

Many passages in Marcuse’s corpus, taken out of context, might lead us to believe that he is a legitimate target of Foucault’s critique. Consider the following claim: “A universe of human relationships no longer mediated by the market, no longer based on competitive exploitation or terror, demands a sensitivity freed from the repressive satisfactions of the unfree societies.” The German thinker occasionally refers to the Establishment or contemporary society as a system of laws, taboos, and prohibitions that contain and subdue life instincts (which prevents humans from achieving pleasure, happiness, and intimacy). Liberation is therefore typically defined as the release of these instincts from repressive mechanisms. In

5. Ibid., p. 21.
6. To some extent, this marks a break from other members of the Frankfurt School tradition (including Adorno and Habermas) who assume a necessary link between technology and instrumental rationality. On this issue, see Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), pp. 330–32.
addition, Marcuse predicts that our rebellion against repression will “take root in the very nature, the biology of the individual.”9 By locating liberation in the biological needs and drives of the individual, Marcuse could be read as locating liberation outside the strictures and constraints that mark any social order. More generally, he could be interpreted as affirming a biological substratum that is exterior to language, power, and history. Whereas Freud argues that civilization and nature will always be in conflict (because order requires the sacrifice of happiness and the perpetual deferral of desire),10 Marcuse hopes for a future society in which the life instincts are freed from the shackles of civilization.

In volume one of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault offers a different way to think about the relationship between the social order and human desire; he refuses the notion that the relationship between power and desire is necessarily an antagonistic one. Most historians, according to Foucault, assume that since the Victorian era, Western culture has been characterized by the repression of sexuality. They imagine that repression, in general, “operates as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence.”11 (For Foucault, this notion of repression implies that liberation is necessarily anticipated as a general transgression of the status quo and an irruption of the radically new.) But according to Foucault, what is so remarkable about modern society is the abundant proliferation of discourses and ways of speaking about sex, sexuality, and sexual desire. Although Foucault admits that bourgeois social arrangements impose a “restrictive economy” on sexual desire, this quality is ancillary to the generative function of power. Foucault therefore draws attention to “the multiplication of discourses in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it [sex], and so more and more, a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail.”12 For Foucault, cultural discourses and practices are constitutive of sexual desire and identity. Rather than simply repress desire, power enables and compels bodily desires to enter the realm of intelligible speech and discourse. It is therefore futile and/or

9. Ibid., p. 5.
12. Ibid., p. 18.
naïve to search for some authentic, liberated sexual identity outside of the domain of power. Such a space does not exist.

Many contemporary authors have drawn from Foucault’s understanding of power, especially Judith Butler. For the purpose of this essay, what is important about Butler’s appropriation is her claim that resistance/agency is enabled by the very structures of power that our critical energies are directed against. As Butler puts it: “Power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.”¹³ To be a subject means that one is always already subjected to powers that condition and make possible that subject’s agency. Unlike Marcuse, resistance for Butler does not involve a release from the norms and constraints that make up the social order. Rather, resistance occurs through the subversive re-enactment of norms. Agency, for Butler, is possible not because we can inhabit some space that is devoid of norms and conventions but because we can always perform and embody those norms in “inappropriate” ways.

Foucault and Butler are not simply concerned with the epistemic advantages of this generative model of power. The generative model is better understood as a response to the ethical/political dangers and limitations involved with the repressive model. As mentioned above, the assumption that power is essentially opposed to the satisfaction of desire and the development of subjectivity is often accompanied by a commitment to some emancipated position outside of power. Repressive notions of power often inspire utopian fantasies of a world not tainted by power. These fantasies often appeal to some unifying foundation that is supposedly outside of language and convention—nature, biology, human essence, and so forth. This yearning for utopia, or this no-place, is dangerous because utopian visions often dissimulate the fact that they are constrained, enabled, and determined by the very powers against which they define themselves. In addition, because utopian projects (Marxism for instance) tend to assume a unified conception of humanity, human needs, and human happiness, they downplay the ways in which “the human” is a contested/contestable category. More generally, authors like Foucault and Butler remain committed to the inescapability of violence, coercion, and exclusion within our social worlds. According to this view, the systematic organization of bodies and desires necessarily requires the imposition of norms and

constraints (or the deployment of disciplinary mechanisms). Furthermore, some authors maintain that the coherence of any social order entails the removal/dismissal of those bodies or elements that threaten to unravel that coherence.\textsuperscript{14} By treating power as a generative mechanism/field that we depend on for our survival, authors like Foucault and Butler seem to deny the possibility of a free, non-coercive society, the kind of world that Marcuse endorses. In addition, they might suggest that the yearning for this kind of society blinds us to the violence involved in the very imagination and projection of a liberated society, a process enabled by imposing a universal definition of “the human” and human happiness.

Is Marcuse’s thought confined to the repressive hypothesis? If we take Foucault and Butler seriously, do we have to jettison the concept of utopia? In order to respond to these questions, we must return to Marcuse’s understanding of the relationship between civilization and eros. Although he frequently refers to the institutions and practices of advanced capitalist societies as repressive, he also acknowledges that power forms and orders human desires and instincts. Although he alludes to a “biological foundation” for liberation (because happiness is connected to the satisfaction of basic human drives and desires), he is very aware that biology and history are inseparable. According to Marcuse:

Prior to all ethical behavior in accordance with specific social standards, prior to all ideological expression, morality is a disposition of the organism, perhaps rooted in the erotic drive to counter aggressiveness, to create and preserve ever greater unities of life. We would have then, this side of all “values,” an instinctual foundation for solidarity among human beings—a solidarity which has been effectively repressed in line with the requirements of class society but which now appears as a precondition for liberation.\textsuperscript{15}

Although this passage suggests that human nature has been “repressed by class society” and that human nature exists apart from language and ideology, Marcuse also contends that human nature is culturally malleable. For Marcuse, our desires and instincts are always constituted and ordered within specific historical contexts. Borrowing from Freud’s notion of

\textsuperscript{14} Butler would take this claim further and argue that structures of intelligibility (which enable subjects to be recognized) require various foreclosures and forms of abjection. See Butler, \textit{Excitable Speech}, pp. 136–41.

\textsuperscript{15} Marcuse, \textit{An Essay on Liberation}, p. 10.
introjection, Marcuse claims that the established norms of a society are incorporated by individuals; these internalized norms work to structure and determine how we “receive and react to certain stimuli and ignore and repel others.”\(^\text{16}\) So even though Marcuse seems to be committed to something like natural drives and instincts, he claims that these elements are always mediated, shaped, and directed by the social world. Similar to Foucault and Butler, Marcuse suggests that the social order is generative (as well as repressive). As he puts it: “In this way, a society constantly re-creates, this side of consciousness and ideology, patterns of behavior and aspiration as part of the ‘nature’ of its people.”\(^\text{17}\) Nature, for Marcuse, always becomes second nature insofar as social arrangements form desires and instincts into patterned behaviors and interactions. Yet these entrenched patterns appear to us as “natural” because they tend to conceal the contingent, historical quality of their emergence and existence.

Marcuse’s Marxist-inspired commitment to the contingency of capitalist arrangements helps explain his well-known departure from Freud in *Eros and Civilization*. As Whitebook points out, Marcuse attempts to historicize key Freudian categories, especially the reality principle.\(^\text{18}\) For Freud, the reality principle signifies the recognition that human survival requires the perpetual deferral of pleasure. As the pleasure-seeking individual encounters the external environment, “the individual comes to the traumatic realization that full and painless gratification of his needs is impossible.”\(^\text{19}\) While Marcuse agrees that any society requires some level of renunciation, he introduces the notion of the performance principle to mark “the prevailing historical form of the reality principle.”\(^\text{20}\) This category enables Marcuse to supplement Freud’s insistence that humans will always be unsatisfied with an analysis of the current conditions that prevent human flourishing—class inequality, domination, unsatisfying labor, the unequal distribution of technological advancements, waste, and so forth. The performance principle similarly registers the particular ways in which the capitalist order organizes desire to promote competition, aggression, and destruction. At the same time, advanced capitalist societies, according to Marcuse, harbor the potential to drastically reduce poverty, hunger, and

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., p. 11.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{18}\) Whitebook, “Michel Foucault,” p. 63.
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid., p. 35.
alienation (if productive forces are redirected and used differently). Like Foucault, Marcuse underscores the historical, constructed quality of our desires, relationships, and disappointments as well as the historical nature of the arrangements that shape and regulate these facets. By historicizing the conditions that prevent people from satisfying basic needs and desires, Marcuse suggests that these conditions can be changed and perhaps even eliminated. By highlighting the ways in which the reality principle—an ineluctable mode of shaping and constraining desire—assumes different socio-historical forms, he gestures toward the possibility of reshaping and reordering human desires and instincts. He similarly opens up the possibility of fabricating a less repressive reality principle and a less coercive social order.

A skeptical reader might respond by pointing out that even if Marcuse acknowledges that our desires are shaped and constructed, a liberated society for him would still have an “instinctual foundation” that exists “prior to all ideological expression.” If the future society is characterized by the free expression and play of desire, this is because we possess a primordial drive to create and preserve life, a drive that antecedes language, ideology, and law. Think, for instance, of Marcuse’s call to reactivate a “pre-genital polymorphous eroticism,” a term that alludes to the possibility of treating the entire body as a site of pleasure. Here Marcuse seems to be appealing to an original eroticism that exists prior to the confinement of erotic energy and pleasure to the sexual organs and the logic of reproduction. How should we read these troubling allusions to a pre-linguistic biological foundation? I suggest that we read this as a productive tension in Marcuse’s thought. On the one hand, Marcuse claims that human subjects are socially constructed “all the way down.” On the other hand, he suggests that human desire is excessive; it cannot be fully encapsulated by the social mechanisms that constrain, shape, and regulate desire according to the demands of the reality/performance principle. I would like to propose that we have no way of embodying/experiencing this excess, this polymorphous energy, apart from language, norms, and constraints. Yet because desire is excessive and pliable, because it proliferates in unpredictable ways and constantly seeks unexpected objects, human desire might be ordered and organized in radically new ways.

21. See Whitebook, “Michel Foucault,” p. 64.
23. On this point, see Whitebook, “Michel Foucault,” p. 64. Marcuse uses the term “non-repressive sublimation” to signify the reordering of the life instincts for the preserv-
Memory, Hope, and the Tragic Sense

If Marcuse appears to smuggle in a biological foundation for his vision of liberation, he concomitantly tends to link liberation to the retrieval of some “lost time,” a time marked by happiness and plenitude. Marcuse’s vision of a liberated society, in other words, is motivated by the remembrance of this former happiness, a state that exists prior to repression, the imposition of taboos, and so forth. According to Marcuse, “The memory of gratification is at the origin of all thinking, and the impulse to recapture past gratification is the hidden driving power behind the process of thought.” As Martin Jay points out, Marcuse departs here from Freud’s emphasis on the repression of traumatic events and, instead, “stresses the repression of pleasurable activities that society could not willingly tolerate.” What does memory have to do with the struggle for a better future? What is the relationship between remembrance of suffering and the image of happiness? How does the present order secure itself through the regulation of memory? What is the relationship between this regulation of memory and the ordering of desire?

To begin to respond to these questions, we should turn briefly to Walter Benjamin’s influential essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin makes two important points about the relationship between memory, resistance, and utopia. For one, Benjamin claims that “our image of happiness is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us.” For Benjamin, our vision of a better future, our image of a more satisfying existence, is determined in part by experiences that have already occurred. But what Benjamin draws our attention to are the missed opportunities in past encounters and events. Benjamin ultimately suggests that the image of happiness is inspired by the fissures and gaps in history; it is motivated by the remembrance of unfulfilled desires and aspirations as well as an acknowledgment that past events, conditions, and relationships could have been otherwise. But if

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28. Ibid., p. 254.
our future happiness is intertwined with a happiness that could have been, it is also motivated by the sufferings and disappointments that prevented happiness in the past. In fact, Benjamin claims that the efforts of groups struggling against injustice and inequality should be “nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.”

The dissonance, anger, and frustration that mark political struggle wane when that struggle is no longer inspired by the cries of oppressed ancestors.

In addition to making the connection between the image of happiness and the memory of disappointment, Benjamin’s essay also exposes the ruses of progressive accounts of history. These accounts, according to Benjamin, construct a linear relationship between past and present and they tend to integrate the dissonant qualities of history (suffering, trauma, struggle) into a coherent, homogenous narrative. Thus Benjamin warns us that the image of the past is always in danger of becoming a “tool of the ruling class,” always susceptible to being assimilated into triumphant narratives. The ideology of progress, Benjamin suggests, redeems past and present suffering in a cheap, facile manner; it functions as a secular theology. As a unifying trope, progress deflects our attention from the bodies, conditions, and events that cannot be assimilated into neat, forward-marching narratives. Our investment in “progress” therefore vitiates our ability to remember the tragic dimensions of the past and renders us less attuned to the suffering caused by current formations of power.

Marcuse’s critical interventions seem to be guided more by the “image of liberated grandchildren” than by the “image of enslaved ancestors.” According to Jay, this liberated future is enabled by the recollection of pleasures and satisfactions that have been repressed by civilized society rather than the memory of suffering and tragedy. It is important, however, to consider the critical thrust of this recollection of happiness. According to Marcuse, advanced capitalist society reinforces itself by training individuals to reject alternatives to capitalism as unrealistic or impossible. As capitalism becomes second nature to us, we assume that our bodies are confined to being subjects/objects of unsatisfying labor. The capitalist order, Marcuse tells us, operates in part by deferring happiness, by making us think that happiness is something we can only attain temporarily, if at all. Work and pleasure might occasionally coincide, but we typically treat them as incompatible. Therefore, interactions and activities that give us

29. Ibid., p. 260.
30. Ibid., p. 255.
pleasure, but that are inconsistent with the performance principle and the logic of productivity, cannot be taken too seriously.

Marcuse suggests that the very structure of temporality contributes to this deferral of happiness. Pleasure is always evanescent, and satisfaction is always accompanied by disappointment and loss because of the fleeting quality of the present. According to Marcuse, “The flux of time is society’s most natural ally in maintaining law and order, conformity, and the institutions that relegate freedom to a perpetual utopia; the flux of time helps men to forget what was and what can be: it makes them oblivious to the better past and the better future.”

Because the flux of time contributes to forgetfulness, memory can function as “a vehicle of liberation” insofar as it retrieves images of happiness that might be out of joint with the suffering and toil of everyday life. The recollection of events that remind us that things could be otherwise inspires hope for a different kind of future. Although Marcuse occasionally alludes to a prehistoric state devoid of repression, pain, and disappointment, this recollection of happiness can alternatively be read in a more historical manner. Recollection might be directed toward temporal events or missed opportunities within history that betoken a better, more fulfilling future.

But a utopian vision that is only guided by the memory of happiness and plenitude becomes subject to Benjamin’s critique. In the same way that the trope of progress renders history coherent by downplaying or resolving the tragic quality of history, Marcuse’s emphasis on the recollection of happiness and pleasure threatens to relegate the tragic to the margins at best. Yet even a liberated society will need room for mourning. Any association of human bodies needs to find ways to deal with death, conflict, and disappointment.

For Marcuse, the efforts to construct a world in which the life instincts supplant the inclination toward death and destruction always run up against an immovable limitation: human finitude. Inhabitants of a liberated world will still face what Heidegger calls the impossible possibility. Each individual must come to terms with his/her future absence/erasure, an event that cannot be fully anticipated. Similarly, members of a free society would continue to be affected by the loss of others. Although we cannot avoid death, Marcuse insists that we make a distinction between those who die “too early” of disease or hunger and those who die “naturally.” As he

32. Ibid., p. 232.
puts it: “Not those who die, but those who die before they must and want to die in agony and pain, are the great indictment against civilization.”

Even though death is inescapable, he suggests that we take seriously the ways in which death is mediated and produced by historical conditions and social arrangements. With alternative organizations of resources, productive forces, and desire, certain kinds of losses might be minimized or avoided. Nonetheless even in a society where more people flourish and live well, the memory of suffering will remain. Marcuse insists: “But even the ultimate advent of freedom cannot redeem those who died in pain. It is the remembrance of them, and the accumulated guilt of mankind against its victims, that darken the prospect of a civilization without repression.”

Marcuse’s utopian vision, as this passage indicates, is therefore tragic. Like Benjamin, his hope for a liberated society is tempered by an awareness that past suffering cannot be made resolved. In his discussion of the critical dimension of art, Marcuse contends that while artworks intimate a life of freedom and happiness, they also preserve “the memory of the goals that failed.” By refusing to make sense of suffering, artworks remind us that our hopes and aspirations are always beset and constrained by losses, failures, tensions, and memories that cannot be easily assimilated into utopian projects.

Marcuse suggests that the possibility of a better future relies on our ability to remember suffering and our capacity to remember that things could be otherwise. The present order of things secures itself by suppressing disruptive memories of suffering and happiness, memories that might embolden us to struggle for an alternative world. As Marcuse insists, “Forgetting past suffering and past joy alleviates life under a repressive reality principle.” By reading Marcuse’s juxtaposition of happiness and suffering as the affirmation of a tragic utopia, we can make a connection to the discussion of a new sensibility and the reordering of desire. Without a sense of tragedy, we become less attuned to the violence that marks any social order (even a potentially less repressive social order). We develop an insensitivity to the traumas of the past and present, denying those features and qualities within our lifeworlds that do not fit into coherent, progressive

33. Ibid., p. 235.
34. Ibid., p. 237.
36. Ibid., p. 73.
narratives. Without a tragic sensibility, we also fail to acknowledge that our best efforts to enhance and change the world will be accompanied by failure, blindness, exclusion, and coercion. Meanwhile without an image of a better future, we remain complacent with a capitalist society that dissimulates its contingency by consigning alternatives to the realm of the impossible. In the final section, I examine how this tragic hope is being articulated and practiced by radical democrats and Christian theologians.\(^{37}\)

**Post-Liberal Practices and the Politicization of Sensibility**

Traces of Marcuse’s new sensibility are visible in recent discussions between radical democrats and Christian theologians who share a proclivity to think beyond the limitations and blindnesses of political liberalism. That liberalism is often understood as a response to modern plurality; because the modern world contains multiple, competing visions of the good life, political liberalism offers a procedure for compromise by demarcating the public sphere as a space regulated by the principles of fairness, tolerance, and respect, principles acceptable to all reasonable beings.\(^{38}\) Those practices, ideas, and aspirations that prove to be incompatible with these basic principles are therefore relegated to the private sphere. Sheldon Wolin has put forth powerful and widely influential critiques of this political liberalism. According to Wolin, liberalism’s insistence on consensus and public reason works to domesticate and exclude more radical visions of political life.\(^{39}\) This tradition, to put it succinctly, removes dissent from the public sphere. In addition, because political liberalism urges citizens to bracket their particular traditions and histories when entering the public


38. Many of these points are outlines in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993). I acknowledge that Rawls’s ideas are much more nuanced than many of his detractors suggest. For the sake of this article, I am interested in general themes and motifs in Rawlsian liberalism that have raised concerns and questions for democratic theorists and theologians.

sphere, Wolin contends that liberalism divorces justice from memory, especially the memory of injury and loss, and it therefore depoliticizes memory and mourning. Indebted to Wolin’s critique, many proponents of radical democracy have indicted, in different ways, liberalism’s tendency to avoid, mitigate, and displace the tragic quality of politics. This displacement of conflict and discord prevents more promising conceptions of politics, struggle, and “being-with-others” from becoming viable alternatives to liberalism.

Because political liberals treat the competing claims and goals of religious traditions as a major source of discord, liberalism consigns religion and religious plurality to the private realm. Some theologians contend that this neat public/private distinction marginalizes and depoliticizes the practices and virtues associated with the church. It similarly reinforces the assumption that ecclesial practices are necessarily compatible with the basic principles of liberalism. As Stanley Hauerwas suggests, this assumption fails to take seriously the dissonant character of theological virtues like pacifism; it ignores the ways in which peace-making practices inspired by the Cross challenge the violence of the nation-state. Whereas some would argue that a commitment to Christian pacifism signifies a sectarian withdrawal from politics, Hauerwas suggests that this fidelity to peace reconfigures our very understanding of politics when it demonstrates that “politics begins with such a disavowal [of violence], for only then are we forced genuinely to listen to the other, thus beginning conversations necessary for discovering goods in common.”

Like Wolin, Hauerwas contends that liberalism diminishes our understanding of political existence, a tendency exemplified in the refusal to consider pacifism a political practice.

The overlapping concerns and aspirations between theologians and radical democrats finds a beautiful expression in Christianity, Democracy,

40. On this issue, see ibid., p. 538.
41. For a trenchant account of how contemporary political theory eliminates dissonance, tension, and conflict from the realm of politics, see Bonnie Honig, Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993). For her specific critique of Rawlsian liberalism, see especially pp. 126–61.
and the Radical Ordinary, a text co-authored by democratic theorist and activist Romand Coles and theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Although there are myriad differences between the two authors (Coles is an atheist and Hauerwas believes in Christ’s resurrection), they share a commitment to cultivating what Marcuse treats as a different sensibility vis-à-vis those who cohabit our lifeworlds and communities. The authors’ insistence on the cultivation of receptive, vulnerable dispositions is a response to liberalism’s denial of the death and violence that it produces. As the authors insist: “We think the liberal avoidance of the kind of politics we advocate has everything to do with the general tendency of much political theory (and practice) to avoid (if not to deny) the reality of death. Empire, global capitalism, and many forms of cosmopolitanism name systems of power that frequently proliferate death in the name of a life that would be free of it.”

Because liberal theory and practice tend to avoid death, citizens often divorce politics from the awareness of everyday suffering. Because political existence is relegated to voting during election cycles, we tend to dissociate politics from the cultivation of everyday relationships with others, relationships that require attunement, care, patience, and sensitivity. If another world is possible, this possibility depends on our capacity to foster and embody modes of receptivity; it depends on developing new ways to relate and respond to strangers, “threatening” others, and communities whose grievances remain unrecognized; it requires us to open up to and be opened by those dimensions of our lifeworlds that are opaque, dissonant, and unsettling.

Similar to Marcuse, Coles and Hauerwas argue that a more desirable politics must be guided by both counter-memory and hope. Whereas the current political ethos of speed and efficiency “assumes that we don’t have the time to take the time to listen to one another or to remember the dead,” these authors endorse an ethos of slow time that renders us more attuned to the presence of the past, more open to voices, bodies, and practices dismissed as obsolete or irrelevant to the present. Memory is not only directed toward those who died unjustly. Memory, for Coles and Hauerwas, should also be directed toward historical struggles and practices.

45. Ibid., p. 4.
that have resisted pernicious configurations of power, thereby inspiring a tragic hope that things might be different:

Memories. It is by collecting and retelling stories of radical ordinary political initiatives that have “done a new thing” and have resisted the politics of death that we inspire, nourish, and inform a dense and wild imagination, and an intransigent hope. Peace-making, light-bringing, and joy are always springing forth everywhere—in spite of the disasters. We must retrain ourselves to witness and give ourselves to those more hopeful modes of coexistence to which we are indebted beyond our wildest imaginations.  

Memory can be a “vehicle of liberation” against entrenched forms of amnesia insofar as it attaches us to the pain and disappointment of others and keeps alive moments of collective struggle.

Coles and Hauerwas point to several examples of practices that have resisted the politics of death. One example is Ella Baker’s participation in and contribution to SNCC, the Civil Rights organization that challenged the racist policies and arrangements associated with the Jim Crow South. Because many elements of the Civil Rights movement have been co-opted into progressive narratives, these authors attempt to “blast” the image of Baker/SNCC from what Benjamin calls the continuum of history. What is crucial for these authors is the connection between Baker’s life-long devotion to participatory democracy (which included ongoing attempts to organize and mobilize communities that had been disempowered) and the early church practices that shaped her sensibilities.

Another example is L’Arche, an organization of communities, founded by Jean Vanier, that builds relationships with and between people with physical and mental disabilities. Those who work and live with the disabled, according to these authors, must develop habits of gentleness and patience, habits that interrupt our desire to fix things quickly, to handle and resolve situations, and to control the course and direction of history/time. L’Arche urges us to think about the alternative possibilities opened up through politicizing gentleness. Because politics is usually reduced to conflict and competition, “gentleness is usually the last thing most of us would associate with the rough-and-tumble world of politics.”  

46. Ibid., p. 8.
47. Ibid., p. 195.
virtues required to bring about a radically different mode of coexistence—listening, humility, vulnerability, and a general willingness to confront the wounded quality of our social worlds. Individuals have to be “taught how to be gentle.”48 Performing gentleness and patience requires individuals to place their bodies in communion with those who, like the disabled, challenge deeply entrenched assumptions about human reason, freedom, and agency. Our sensibilities and receptive capacities have to be cultivated and ordered within an ensemble of social practices that promise a break from liberalism’s disavowed violence.

Marcuse’s ideas can be used to expose the limitations and problems within the democratic and ecclesial practices delineated by Coles and Hauerwas. While they are right, in my view, to argue that a more radical politics involves cultivating more peaceful habits and ways of relating to others—a new sensibility—one cannot avoid asking whether they minimize the connection, or lack thereof, between local efforts like L’Arche and global struggles that appear more conventionally political. While Marcuse insists on the relationship between the local and the global, it is not always clear how, for instance, L’Arche’s politics of gentleness undermines aggressive foreign policies.

We might want to also think about the limits to a politics of vulnerability, a political vision, shared by Marcuse and Coles and Hauerwas, that privileges sensitivity and gentleness. Does not politics always require an element of conflict, competition, and coercion? Coles and Hauerwas do not deny the importance of working within the formal political structures of liberalism. Yet they rightly point out that too often politics is reduced to state politics, thereby relegating organizations like L’Arche to the marginal space of “small politics.”49 They also claim that too much of an investment in state politics undermines the capacity to imagine and generate alternative visions of political life. Marcuse also acknowledges the necessity of working within established governmental structures when he says: “By virtue of its commitment (however limited in practice) to civil rights and liberties, bourgeois democracy provides the most favorable ground for the development and organization of dissent.”50 At the same time, he asserts that “[t]he semi-democratic process works of necessity against radical change because it produces and sustains a popular majority whose opinion

48. Ibid., p. 203.
49. Ibid., p. 9.
is generated by the dominant interests in the status quo.”\textsuperscript{51} While Marcuse thinks that it would be “fatal” to get rid of certain laws and liberties associated with liberal institutions, he also anticipates that political struggles “will come into increasing conflict”\textsuperscript{52} with these institutions.

Any utopian projection that refuses to become a disguised version of progressive optimism or an ethereal image of happiness and unity must traverse and incorporate a sense of the tragic quality of existence. Hope and promise, no matter how radical, cannot escape the indelible human realities of death, suffering, and discord. Possibility and failure will forever be joined at the hip. This, however, should not discourage us from cultivating practices and habits that promise less destructive ways of relating to and being with one another.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 65.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.