

## AESTHETIC ISSUES IN HUMAN EMANCIPATION BETWEEN DEWEY AND MARCUSE

Roberta Dreon

[robdre@unive.it](mailto:robdre@unive.it)

ABSTRACT: *In his early essay on the affirmative character of culture, dating back to 1937, Marcuse states that the whole sphere of material production is generally regarded as being tainted by misery and injustice, and in principle alien to beauty, enjoyment and happiness. In the 1920s Dewey had made a similar point, noting that our understanding of work as a synonym for mere labour – something uninteresting and toilsome, which leaves no legitimate room for pleasure – is the result of a regressive habit, connected to an exclusive emphasis on profit. Setting out from different points of departure, both scholars assert the possibility to enjoy richer forms of life here and now – ones sensuously, emotively and imaginatively more satisfying. The present paper tries to distinguish the different meanings which Dewey and Marcuse attribute to the aesthetic aspects of our experiences, by stressing their common assumption that these aspects are one of the basic elements in our interactions with the surrounding world and that they play a decisive role in our lives. Political emancipation, as defined by Marx, does not cover the sum of human emancipation in all of its complexity, particularly because the more anthropologically oriented meaning of the term also includes the satisfaction of some aesthetic needs which must be taken into account in order to attain “thicker” forms of freedom. While for both Dewey and Marcuse at the beginning of the 20th century consumption remained the only recognized venue for pleasure, it must be acknowledged that political economy and marketing are now increasingly and pervasively exploiting the “aesthetic hunger” of individuals in contemporary post-industrial societies. Nonetheless, for both Dewey and Marcuse this circumstance neither means that we must pursue a purely negative form of culture and art nor that we have to look for completely rational agents, whose conduct exclusively stems from clear and distinct ideas and arguments, with no aesthetic or qualitative influence on their deliberations. The point is rather to suggest alternative ways of satisfying our aesthetic needs, but also of making subtler distinctions between different forms of consumption, pleasure and enjoyment.*

It is well known that historically there has been no fruitful theoretical exchange between the most outstanding figures of classical pragmatism, on the one side, and the Marxist tradition, on the other, including the exponents of its cultural heritage, that is the various voices of the Frankfurt school.<sup>1</sup> Marcuse himself wrote a review of Dewey's *Logic. A Theory of Inquiry* in 1940, widely reflecting the cultural prejudices of his own philosophical school with regard to the American one.<sup>2</sup>

Although I agree with Peirce and Dewey when they stress the basic role which our beliefs and habits of thinking and behaving play in the comprehension of our surroundings and in the configuration of our categories, I believe it is time to give up bad, routine habits of thought in favour of more intelligent or simply more open-minded ones and to try to see whether a discussion on these subjects can suggest new perspectives or help us find alternative solutions.

This premise helps me introduce my present topic: the role played by the aesthetic aspects or aesthetic dimension of our living with respect to a form of emancipation that is wholly human rather than exclusively political.

With no pretence to philological accuracy, I would argue

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<sup>1</sup> Of course I am referring here to the first generation of the Frankfurt school, while it is well known that “pragmatism and critical theory are now far less ignorant of, or hostile to, one another” (Deen, P. 2010. “Dialectical vs Experimental Method: Marcuse's Review of Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 46/2, p.243), primarily because of Jürgen Habermas' work. On Dewey and Marxism see Gavin, W.J. (ed.) 1988. *Context over Foundation: Dewey and Marx*, Dordrecht: Reidel and more recently the essay by John Ryder, *Naturalism pragmatist et Marxisme*, in Frega R. (ed.) 2015, *Le pragmatisme comme philosophie sociale et politique*, Lormont: BDL Editions, pp.157-202. On pragmatism and the Frankfurt School, see Jay, M. 1973. *Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, Boston and Toronto: Little Brown and Company and Joas, H. 1993. *Pragmatism and Social Theory*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> See Marcuse, H. 2010. “Review of John Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 46/2, translated by Deen, P., pp.258-265 and Deen, P. 2010. cit.

that the notorious distinction between political and human emancipation – traced by Marx in his famous essay on the Jewish question in 1844<sup>3</sup> – may be invoked here in support of the thesis that both for John Dewey and for Herbert Marcuse real human emancipation cannot be confined to equality before the law.

Of course this is not to deny that other factors are structurally crucial for the development of a good form of shared living. It is almost trivial to say that access to survival resources together with both negative and positive forms of freedom are necessary preconditions. However, the above-mentioned philosophers, although from different perspectives, share the assumption that a form of democratic, non-repressive society must take into account the concrete man, as opposed to the abstract citizen, with his biological and existential needs to be satisfied and his desire to enjoy life, i.e. to achieve a sensuously, emotionally and imaginatively richer form of living. This also means considering the basically social structure of human living, including both aggressive and sympathetic aspects, in order to shape a new kind of non-repressive society (Marcuse) or a democracy understood as “a life of free and enriching communion” (Dewey).<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is my contention that according to both authors the aesthetic aspects of our typically human form of life play a central role in the configuration of our societies and have deep political implications.

The outstanding role played by the aesthetic in configuring our forms of life is evident first of all for both Marcuse and Dewey in its negative aspects, in both political and economic terms. In *Freedom and Culture* Dewey points out that the emotions and imagination are much more powerful than information and reason as a

means of shaping public sentiment and opinion. He shows just how deep totalitarian control can go by affecting feelings, desires and emotions.<sup>5</sup> Totalitarian regimes are able to exploit the human need to belong to a community, the human desire to escape responsibility, as well as our impulse towards submission and our desire to find satisfaction in shared creative activities.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Marcuse's “Political Preface” to *Eros and Civilization* emphasizes a typical feature of present-day affluent societies: the fact that authorities have almost no need to coercively control citizens, because they are now able to satisfy human erotic and aggressive drives both by means of the market, by transforming goods into libidinal objects, and by means of cultural industries, by producing creative sublimations of human instincts.<sup>7</sup>

However, for both authors these circumstances do not mean that we have to deny human needs, desires and emotions because they let us be controlled by external forces. This is a rather peculiar stance if compared to the long philosophical tradition going from Plato to Adorno.

With particular reference to Marcuse, it must be said that this attitude strongly characterizes his thought in contrast to the positions of the other members of the Frankfurt School, hence reinforcing my hypothesis that a fertile comparison can be traced between Dewey and Marcuse from the point of view of the correlations between aesthetics and politics. By contrast, Adorno's prejudices against any form of aesthetic enjoyment, seen as a means of supporting and reinforcing the *status quo*, are well known.<sup>8</sup> In opposition to this negative philosophical attitude, both Dewey and Marcuse – at least in his middle period – stress the structural role of

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<sup>3</sup> Marx, K. 1978. *Zur Judenfrage*, in Marx, K. - Engels, F. 1978, *Werke Band I*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, pp.347-377.

<sup>4</sup> Dewey, J. 1984. *The Public and Its Problems*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 2: 1925-1927*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, p.350. Dewey is here explicitly recalling Walt Whitman.

<sup>5</sup> Dewey, J. 1988. *Freedom and Culture*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 13: 1938-1939*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, p.70.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, pp.88-89.

<sup>7</sup> Marcuse, H. 1966. *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston: Beacon.

<sup>8</sup> See the section entitled “Artistic enjoyment” in Adorno, T.W. 1984. *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

human sensitive and sensuous needs and search for alternative, non-regressive forms of human satisfaction through the model of a non-repressive society or a democratic way of life, capable of taking into account the fact that man is not just a political animal but also a “consuming” one in search of enjoyment and an enhancement of life.<sup>9</sup>

But this close connection between aesthetics and politics can be grasped even through a merely exterior observation of the two philosophers' production. The essays and books from Marcuse's so-called middle and late period (from 1932 to 1978)<sup>10</sup>, while having a strong political focus, always devote a chapter or paragraph to a discussion of the “aesthetic dimension”, or of a “new sensibility”. Dewey, in turn, devoted an important chapter of his *Experience and Nature* and a whole book to the aesthetic aspects of our experience and to reflections on the arts; and these texts were written precisely in the two decades when he published his most important political works, that is the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, with regard to this point, it is worth stressing the fact that these were the years immediately preceding and following the Great Depression, that is the first major crisis of a highly industrialized society, combined with the emergence of financial capitalism.

This factor leads me to point out a first similarity between the two philosophers: the methodological starting point they share. Both start from the material conditions of existence or – with reference to Dewey's more anthropologically oriented stance – from the material culture they belong to. The intellectual

dispositions they critically consider – on the one hand the so-called affirmative character of culture, on the other the traditionally modern form of individualism – are considered to be deeply connected to the technological and economic (industrial) means of producing resources and to the financial and political ways of managing them. In either case, this does not amount to the sort of determinism which follows as the ultimate result of a certain stiff Marxist tradition; that is, it does not imply the thesis that our cultural superstructures are caused by and can be reduced to material conditions. Rather, it means that we have to take into account the peculiar qualities – not only the natural qualities, but also the social or economic ones – of the environment which we belong to and which we contribute to configure from within, even through our ideas about the way of interacting with these conditions, of managing them, of coping with them, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

A second element of convergence, a rather conspicuous one, is that both Dewey and Marcuse – albeit in a completely independent manner from one another, of course – presuppose a broad conception of the aesthetic as an aspect of human experience or of human life as such, whose manifestations in properly artistic activities and products represent one aspect of the phenomenon, without assimilating it completely. This point, in my opinion, is closely related to a third factor, which plays a relevant role in both the philosophies we are considering, that is the rooting of the aesthetic dimension in the biological, naturalistic aspects of our humanity. I believe that this kind of anthropological attitude towards the aesthetic is connected, on the one hand, to the deep influence which Schiller and his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* exercised on Marcuse,<sup>13</sup> who originally reinterpreted them by means

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, J. 1984. *The Public and Its Problems*, cit., p.321.

<sup>10</sup> See Reitz, C. 2000. *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities. A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse*, Albany NY: State University of New York Press, who distinguishes three different periods in Marcuse's philosophical production (p.11).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dewey, J. 1988. *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 1:1925*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press and Dewey, J. 1989. *Art as Experience*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 10: 1934*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

<sup>12</sup> See Ryder, J. (cit.) on materialism.

<sup>13</sup> Schiller, F. 1992. *Über die ästhetischen Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, in Schiller, F. 1992, *Theoretischen Schriften*, Volume 8 of *Friedrich Schiller. Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bände*, Frankfurt a.M.: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, pp.556-676. English

of Freudian categories; and, on the other hand, to Dewey's non-dogmatic reading of Darwin's writings, which was originally connected to William James' generally naturalistic and continuistic attitude.

Nonetheless, these important, if partial, convergences should not prevent us from noting some great differences with regard to the ultimate results of Marcuse's and Dewey's respective enquiries, which have a lot to do with their conception of the arts and their idea of high and mass culture. Another particularly serious point of divergence is represented by Marcuse's final negative and consciously transcendent stance with respect to the specific conditions we live in and Dewey's idea of changing things from the inside, but also to his genuinely pluralistic stance, based on the idea of seeing not just what is wrong in our lives, but also what works differently and might have unexpected, fruitful consequences.

The first aspect to be considered, in my opinion, are the convergences between Marcuse's criticism of so-called affirmative culture and Dewey's interpretation of the old individualist paradigm. Both these kinds of criticisms focus on aesthetic, emotive and imaginative factors that are deeply entrenched in society we live in, considered from the point of view of its economic and political configurations.

Secondly, it is necessary to examine the anthropological meanings of the aesthetic aspects of our interactions with the natural and naturally social world, which in both cases do not coincide with artistic practices, objects or events. In both authors aesthetics appears to have political implications, as it concerns the very social conditions we share as human livings.

Finally, I will conclude by pointing out some divergences between the two philosophers, which remain important even if we can appreciate some

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translation: Schiller, F. 1994. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, Bristol: Thoemmes.

affinities on this topic, at least in a certain phase of their philosophical production.

### 1. Critical convergences

As a point of departure, I would suggest focusing on the common ground that may be found between Dewey's critical attitude towards the traditional modern version of individualism and Marcuse's criticism of so-called affirmative culture, which finds a complementary development in his analysis of the pros and cons of hedonism.<sup>14</sup>

In 1929 Dewey argued that the material culture we live in deeply influences the kind of men we are and the beliefs we hold.<sup>15</sup> That is to say that technologically advanced means of industrial production and the kind of financial management exclusively oriented towards private profit are not merely exterior factors in respect to our identities; they are not marginal aspects we should entrust to economists and financial managers, in order to preserve a genuinely individual space of spiritual freedom and a distinctly cultural dimension. This is precisely the heritage of the old individualism, based on the prejudice that the individual is first of all an isolated and independent entity, whose happiness is to be pursued in an exclusively spiritual sphere, legitimating – on the earthly side – a laissez-faire economy of unrestrained private wealth accumulation.

From this point of view, Dewey's contention is that the new forms of association produced by the new means of

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<sup>14</sup> See Marcuse, H. 1965. *Über den affirmativen Charakter der Kultur*, in *Kultur und Gesellschaft I*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, pp.56-109. English translation: Marcuse, H. 1968. *The Affirmative Character of Culture*, in *Negations. Essays in Critical Theory*, Boston: Beacon, pp.65-98. Cf. also Marcuse, H. 1965. *Zur Kritik des Hedonismus*, in *Kultur und Gesellschaft I*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, pp.128-168. English translation: Marcuse, H. 1968. *On Hedonism*, in *Negations. Essays in Critical Theory*, Boston: Beacon, pp.119-150.

<sup>15</sup> Dewey, J. 1988. *Individualism Old and New*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 5: 1929-1930*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, pp.41-123.

production, while generally characterized by depersonalization, superficial forms of coexistence and mere consumerist satisfaction, can play a positive role in making the limits of old individualism clear: its elitist vocation, its dualism between mind and body and its responsibility in bestowing supremacy on the intellectual realm to the detriment of the satisfying of human material needs. From this point of view, we will see that these new forms of association play a role that is similar to that performed by hedonistic issues in Marcuse's criticism of affirmative culture.

A very important point for the present argument is the fact that according to Dewey in order to develop new forms of individualized and associated living we need a different sensibility that does not wholly correspond to deliberative reason. It is not enough to change the explicit reasons for our behaviour: we need to get to the emotional or qualitative basis of our habits and beliefs, we need to meet the human need not simply for an alleged crystal-clear conscience, but also for a fuller and more satisfying life with others and with the environmental conditions we live in.

This peculiar connection between materialism and the claim to a more integral form of human realization, capable of taking into account our aesthetic needs, can also be found in Marcuse's essay on the affirmative character of culture, dating back to 1937. His point of departure is amazingly similar to the pragmatist attitude: Marcuse criticizes the separation of what is useful and necessary from what is beautiful and enjoyable introduced by the ancient Greeks, and which implies a depreciation of human sensibility – so that the dualistic opposition between body and soul appears to have strong political implications, as is often stressed in Dewey's work. On the one hand, this separation of the useful from the beautiful and enjoyable is seen by Marcuse in his 1937 essay as the beginning of a process leading to the legitimation of what he calls “bourgeois praxis”, that is the typical middle-class pursuit of one's own profit at the expense of other members of society.

On the other hand, this separation is understood as confining happiness to the spiritual realm of culture, as basically entailing the need to transcend the empirical conditions of life. A purely interior kind of freedom is used to justify social and economic inequalities. The arts themselves contribute to this kind of situation, by being perceived as the only sphere for beauty, the only one in which spiritual enjoyment is permitted, while remaining essentially irrelevant to the conditions of material life.<sup>16</sup>

From this point of view, Marcuse acknowledges hedonism's claim to meet human sensible needs as a progressive one, struggling against the socially regressive idea of confining happiness to an alleged purely interior dimension.<sup>17</sup> Aside from this perspective, even the boom in mass consumption reflects people's claim to lead a happier and sensuously richer life; at the same time it exposes the elitist character of affirmative culture together with its complicity in the unequal distribution of resources.<sup>18</sup>

It is possible to argue, therefore, that a significant convergence between Dewey and Marcuse would appear to emerge with respect to their understanding of

<sup>16</sup> On this point it must be noted that Marcuse offers a different interpretation of Schiller's *Briefen* (cit.) in his essay on the affirmative character of culture compared to other texts of his. Even if the subject cannot be dealt with in this paper for evident reasons of length and opportunity, in my opinion Marcuse's understanding of Schiller's philosophical work played a crucial role in the development of his thought; in particular we find a similar oscillation in Schiller and in Marcuse between the idea of an emancipation from alienation through art, leading to human fulfilment, and the idea of art and beauty as opposed to empirical reality.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Marcuse's essay on hedonism.

<sup>18</sup> It must be noted that this position was not always coherently sustained by Marcuse, who reached more regressive positions in his later essay *The Aesthetic Dimension*, dating back to 1978 (Marcuse, H. 1978. *The Aesthetic Dimension. towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Boston: Beacon). For a wide-ranging and sharp interpretation of Marcuse's theoretical tensions or even ambiguities see Reitz, C. (cit.), who convincingly describes these aspects of Marcuse's thought as the transition from an idea of art as something that goes against alienation to a conception of art as deliberate alienation or a moving away from material conditions of life in late-capitalist societies.

life conditions in highly industrialized societies, although the two philosophers reached these conclusions by completely independent paths. According to both, in societies of this kind human lives seem to be divided into separate realms, one devoted to work exclusively for profit, and another devoted to culture and the arts, where – as already noted – enjoyment is perceived as legitimate but also as basically irrelevant to the conditions of material life.<sup>19</sup> To complete the picture and update it to the present day, we should add a third component, that is the ever-expanding realm of consumption, in which enjoyment is allowed and indeed encouraged, but of course not primarily for the sake of human happiness. While both Dewey and Marcuse were able to detect this trend when it was first emerging, it must be acknowledged that now political economy and marketing are increasingly and pervasively exploiting the “esthetic hunger”<sup>20</sup> of individuals in contemporary post-industrial societies.

## 2. Understanding the aesthetic

But what about the meaning of “aesthetic” for these authors?

It must be recognized that they do not share exactly the same view of the aesthetic aspects of our life; nonetheless, some interesting similarities can be usefully summed up in order to then develop a more

detailed analysis of Dewey's and Marcuse's views on the subject.

The first thing to say is that clearly both philosophers do not confine the aesthetic dimension to the arts – neither to art products nor to artistic production and reception. The arts are envisaged as possible intensifications, enhancements or deepenings of some aesthetic traits of our experiences, on the grounds of their basic continuity with experience. Alternatively, the arts are understood as possible sublimations of erotic or life instincts, but they are not seen to cover the whole range of meanings of the aesthetic.

A second common aspect is constituted by a kind of naturalistic stance, oriented towards the biological roots of the aesthetic, with a focus, on the one hand, on human organic dependence on a natural and naturally social environment, and, on the other, on human instinctual nature. In both cases this view does not amount to a kind of reductionism making higher forms of human behaviour causally dependent upon physical structures, and dissolving the former into the latter. Rather, in both Dewey and Marcuse a kind of anthropologically oriented stance can be found which has to do with the dynamic, historical and even social configurations of our structurally dependent human nature, of our ultimately being living creatures. In this sense my contention will be that for both authors the aesthetic is ultimately connected to a tendency to enhance life.

A third correlated aspect regards their common, if independent, struggle against the dualism between body and mind, body and soul, sensibility and rationality, which is linked to an aspiration to more integral – as opposed to one-sided – forms of life and satisfying consummatory experiences. Let us begin with Dewey.

I would argue that the word 'aesthetic' for Dewey is first of all understood as an adjective or as an adverb characterizing our immediate interactions with our environment as being favourable or harmful for us,

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<sup>19</sup> There is also another point of convergence to be noted here, that is Dewey's and Marcuse's idea of work. Although there are some ambiguities in Marcuse's writing on this subject, in this paper as well as in the later essay on liberation the German philosophers deeply criticize the one-sided conception of work as exclusively oriented towards profit, while confining spiritual enjoyment to the realm of culture and of the arts. On this subject see also Marcuse's essay “Über die philosophischen Grundlagen des wirtschaftswissenschaftlichen Begriff der Arbeit”, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*, 69, pp.257-292. (English translation: *On the Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Labour in Economics*, in Marcuse, H. 2005: *Heideggerian Marxism*, edited by Wolin, R. and Abromeit, J., Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, pp.122-150).

<sup>20</sup> This formula can be found in Dewey, J. 1989. *Art as Experience*, cit., p.12.

comfortable and welcoming or dangerous and disturbing. In *Experience and Nature* Dewey says that there is no doubt that things surrounding us, whole situations and other men and women are first of all perceived as sweet, gentle and charming, or as bitter, painful, disgusting. They make us enjoy or suffer, expand or feel oppressed. There is nothing mysterious in this phenomenon, because it is simply based on the human structural dependence on a natural and naturally social environment at all life levels. We are not primarily abstract minds, disembodied consciousnesses, completely autonomous subjects; we are not at all monadic entities, but rather living organisms, characterized by an outstanding high level of vulnerability to life conditions. For this reason the world around us affects us immediately before we can distance ourselves from these qualitative, affective or aesthetic meanings, before we can reflect and analyse the situations we experience from within and the various factors we interact with in view of other possible interactions. This is, of course, the beginning of inquiry, which is to say the method of intelligence, but it must be acknowledged that it is based on an aesthetic background.<sup>21</sup> We could speak of sensibility here: this is the reason for Dewey's recovery of the word "esthetic" based on its ancient Greek root – a use essentially shared by William James. However, in this case speaking of sensibility does not imply that the word "esthetic" primary refers to allegedly given sense data, but rather that it entails sensitive, affective, sensuous qualities.

We might formally sum up this meaning of the aesthetic aspects of our experience as a function of the structural dependence of human life upon the world. Or we could radicalize this thesis by suggesting that the source of

aesthetic meanings lies in human biological dependence, vulnerability or exposition to the environment and to other human beings, so that it is here that we find the core of Dewey's cultural naturalism. The biological truism *Art as Experience* reminds us is that life itself cannot take place in an abstract vacuum, but requires resources, energies and possibilities in the dynamic environment it belongs to and which it contributes to changing from within. Hence we enjoy or suffer our life conditions, because man is a peculiarly dependent kind of organism, whose answers to the environment are not previously fixed, but remain open, uncertain and plastic (or flexible), as well as structurally dependent on the actions of other men and women.

The consequence of this last point is that our acknowledgement and perception of others are based on our aesthetic, qualitative experience of the environment we depend on, and therefore affect the very configuration of social groups at a basic level.

A second meaning regards the use of the word aesthetic to characterize peculiarly integrated experiences, that is those interactions which come to their consummation and do not amount to mere routine, but can be perceived as significant for our lives, as capable of enhancing our energies and enriching our existence. A good equilibrium is acquired and life can flourish not at the expense of other environmental factors and other living organisms, but in expansive and enhancing ways.

We should point out that these kinds of "consummatory experiences" prefigure non-competitive forms of enjoyment, in contrast to the classical economic interpretation of the pleasure pursued by consumers in terms of individual utility.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> On this point, we might recall that James and Peirce also stressed the structural role of the aesthetic, qualitative or affective aspects on human cognition, choices and behaviours. However, I believe that Dewey more clearly connected these aspects to our dependence – as living beings – on the environment, by interpreting them in a way consistent with his own staunchly cultural-naturalistic perspective.

<sup>22</sup> See Kanheman, D.-Wakker, P.P.-Sarin, R. 1997, "Back to Bentham? Explorations of Experienced Utility", *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 112/2, pp.375-406 and Read, D. 2004, "Utility Theory from Jeremy Bentham to Daniel Kanheman", Working Paper LSEOR 04-64: The London School of Economics and Political Science.

Unfortunately these kinds of experiences supporting the flourishing of shared, satisfying forms of life are no longer to be found in many areas of advanced industrial society: we tend to take the lack of aesthetic qualities and enjoyment in work for granted, and to regard the lack of pleasure in science, morality or politics as a mark of seriousness and rigour. Moreover, we forget that things can work differently. These habits of thought and behaviours are so entrenched that they have become part of our identities and we need more intelligent kinds of habits to call them into question.<sup>23</sup>

Dewey understands the arts as continuous with these qualities of human experiences, as their deliberate development and enhancement. But the point is that our contemporary societies have confined the arts to museums, and their enjoyment to narrow dimensions of our life, whose compartmentalization is the consequence of modes of productions based on an extremely high level of labour division and on the reduction of work itself to mere labour, toil, and lack of enjoyment. This leads us to our contemporary scenario, where – according to Dewey – the fruition of fine arts often proves regressive, confirming this sterile separation both on the existential level and on the social one, and where most people have to satisfy their “esthetic hunger” by means of the market, in most cases through dissipative rather than life-enhancing aesthetic experiences.

Nowadays Dewey's forecast should probably be extended to the bursting of the world art bubble – that is of the alleged independence of art – by the financial market and the deliberate exploitation of our sensibility and need for a more integrated and joyful life by sharp marketing strategies.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Dewey, J. 1988. *Human Nature and Conduct*, in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Volume 14: 1922*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

<sup>24</sup> See Cometti, J.-P. 2012. *Art et facteurs d'art. Ontologies Friables*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de

Dewey believed that philosophy must address the question of the unsuccessful functions that the arts very often play in our lives nowadays. His crucial point is that, if “democracy is ultimately a quality of social living”,<sup>25</sup> we have to consider how humans actually are – and might be – aesthetically nurtured, by distinguishing in each case those conditions which contribute to a shared sense of enjoyed life and community from those that satisfy strictly private needs and in the long run foster a drying up of individual, social and environmental energies. A full democracy cannot dismiss these kinds of issues, which play an important role in shaping our way of life and even the background of our moral and political judgements.

Let us now come to Marcuse. I will focus on his middle period production, because in my opinion it is there that the German philosopher presents his most original ideas on aesthetic issues in relation to human emancipation and the notion of art. In particular, I will consider ch. 9 of *Eros and Civilization*, entitled “The aesthetic dimension”, together with the 1969 book *An Essay on Liberation*,<sup>26</sup> where two chapters are devoted to the subject of the possible biological basis of materialism and to that of a new sensibility. Despite its title, Marcuse's later essay *The Aesthetic Dimension*, from 1978, reverts to a much more conservative idea of art and culture, partially under the influence, I suppose, of Adorno's hegemonic position in the intellectual discussion of those years.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Green, M.J. 2008. *Pragmatism and Social Hope. Deepening Democracy in Global Contexts*, New York: Columbia University Press, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> Marcuse, H. 1969. *An Essay on Liberation*, Boston: Beacon.

<sup>27</sup> Marcuse opened the 1978 essay on the aesthetic dimension by acknowledging his debt to Adorno's aesthetic theory and concluded it with a quotation from Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer; English translation: Cumming J. 1997, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London-New York: Verso).

In the books just quoted, Marcuse's conception of the aesthetic in relation to human life is clearly connected to his interpretation of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and to his reading of Freud's theory of basic human instincts from a political and anthropological perspective. Freud's thesis about the repression of aggressive and sexual impulses as the ultimate cause of psychological diseases is reinterpreted by positing historical and political forms of repression of instinctive human needs – representing the heritage of our own species – as what makes the establishment of civilization possible. The key point is that according to Marcuse's writing from this period it is possible to envisage other kinds of civilization that are not oppressive, and to direct human erotic impulses in such a way as to ensure more satisfying human relations, happier forms of life, sensibly and sensuously richer experiences.

From this point of view, what are aesthetic are first of all the needs connected to our senses, understood as sources of desire rather than simply as organs of perception. For sure, Marcuse saw in this Freudian category a new version of Schiller's *Stofftrieb*, that is the human attitude to find immediate satisfaction to our sensory and sensuous needs, to reproduce life, which has been historically submitted by human *Formtrieb*, understood as the attempt to impose a controlled order, a kind of pure rationality, characterized by its sharp separation from sensibility.

In present-day society these sensible needs for “earthly gratification”<sup>28</sup> tend to be translated almost exclusively into sexual forms. Marcuse points out that they are rather erotic instincts, that is impulses directed towards the enhancement and flourishing of life, which can find fulfilment in gratifying human relations – from erotic love to parental affection, from friendship to solidarity<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Reitz, C. cit., p.180.

<sup>29</sup> There is a further problem here, in my opinion, that can only be briefly mentioned in this paper. It deals with Marcuse's ambiguity about the relationships among

– together with the expansion of a sensuous and sensitive form of rationality.

This means that for the German philosopher human erotic and aggressive instincts are not inevitably antisocial, as argued by Freud. On the contrary, they must be acknowledged as constitutive parts of our humanity and developed in pro-social directions – such as in friendship, love and solidarity – in such a way as to promote the establishment of non-repressive, happy societies.

But we should add a further sphere of meaning of the aesthetic in our life. Marcuse originally developed Schiller's idea of the aesthetic state as an intermediate one, capable of acting as a mediator between sensibility and reason by making reason sensuous and sensibility fruitful, as opposed to merely dissipative. From this point of view, he speaks about a new sensibility and a new aesthetic ethos, capable of contributing to new forms of society and of satisfying the human need to live a more integrated life – a sensuously and imaginatively richer one, not condemned to fear and submission, but based on gratifying relations with other men and women, on living in a respected and nurtured environment, even on working with pleasure. Sensibility must be nurtured by the imagination and by the capacity to take other people's roles, thereby shaping an ethos capable of adequately fulfilling the basic human needs, instead of neglecting or repressing them.

Marcuse was explicitly proposing a utopia, whereby art, instead of being structurally separated as a fictive realm, becomes a technical activity whose purpose is to configure a new, non-repressive form of civilization, and

these different forms of life enhancing human relations: are they to be regarded as expansions or non-regressive sublimations of a primary sexual impulse (as it would be possible to argue from a Freudian perspective) or are they simply different kinds of relations among humans, that cannot be derived from an alleged primarily only sexual drive, because they contribute to human life reinforcement and flourishing in a plurality of ways? In my opinion in his *Essay On Liberation* Marcuse seems to support this second thesis.

the art product itself is not apart from reality but rather takes the form of a free and happy society, a good and beautiful one.

### 3. Divergences on method (and why they matter)

The late Marcuse abandoned this utopian view, returning to a more conservative conception of art. In *The Aesthetic Dimension* he reverted to the idea of art as an autonomous sphere and to an approval of the distinction between fine arts and high culture, on the one hand, and popular arts and culture on the other. Deeply disappointed by the contemporary development of affluent societies, he believed that the transcendent character of art<sup>30</sup> had to be consciously used as a means to negate the current conditions of civilization. "Art as art", he argued, that is art as structurally separated and even alienated from life and reality, must be intentionally pursued for its capacity to express an extreme refusal of present conditions, while every apparent democratization of culture must be rejected because it implies a confirmation of these conditions – because it definitely acts in collusion with them.

To sum this up in a formula, Marcuse thought that art could not positively contribute to human emancipation, but had to play a merely negative, if still capital, role. What are the causes of this turnabout?<sup>31</sup> I have already

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<sup>30</sup> In my opinion, this emphasis on the supposedly transcendent character of art and beauty is related to Marcuse's reading of Schiller's *Letters*, where Schiller himself insists on the necessity to find a criterion for judging empirical forms of beauty from an extra-empirical perspective. See also Schiller's *Kallias, or on the Beautiful*. (Schiller, F. 1992. *Kallias oder über die Schönheit. Briefe an Gottfried Körner*, in Schiller, F. 1992, *Theoretischen Schriften*, Volume 8 of *Friedrich Schiller. Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bände*, Frankfurt a.M.: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, pp.276-329).

<sup>31</sup> It is to be said that, as noted by Charles Reitz (cit.), this position is not new in the thought of Marcuse, who began his philosophical carrier by sharing a conservative vision of the Fine Arts, which he later criticized in his essays on the affirmative character of culture and on hedonism. Besides, it must be observed that even during its so-called middle period Marcuse's philosophy was characterized by some tensions with regard to these aspects.

referred to Adorno's influence, which is explicitly recognized in this last essay through an acknowledgement, as well as various quotations and references. But of course there is more to it.

With regard to Marcuse's theoretical perspective, one problem is constituted by the fact that the German philosopher makes the negative quality of art – its being apart, distinguished and transcendent from reality – an essential one, as though in every society in every part of the world and in every age artistic practices and productions were perceived as a realm separate from the life of the community they have developed from and which they belong to.

Dewey, on the contrary, denounced the museum conception of the arts as being the result of historical, political and even of economic conditions. He strongly struggled to avoid the current opposition between art and labour, art and scientific inquiry, art and morality or politics, trying to rescue aesthetic qualities and artistic possibilities within our present society. From this point of view, we might say that Dewey more successfully reinterpreted Hegel's teaching about the so-called *Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst*, that is art belonging – now, not always – to our own human past. In the past the arts were an integral part of human life, deeply contributing to establishing and nurturing values, standards of judgements, institutions and so on. But even now there are forms of art we immediately identify with – we do not need any form of mediation to undergo the influence of advertising images, just as young people immediately identify with pop music. The problem is that neither aesthetics nor the philosophy of art seem to consider these phenomena a matter of analysis: they prefer leaving them in the hands of sociology.

But of course the greatest cause for Marcuse's turnabout was probably the overwhelming capacity of the economical system to spread everywhere, reaching every dimension of human life, the aesthetic one included, and of exploiting our deepest needs for its own profit.

This is an enormous problem, which cannot be neglected even from a Deweyan perspective. The ability of marketing to update the pattern of the *homo oeconomicus* by turning it into that of the *homo sentimental* is as astonishing as its skill to creatively exploit the wide range of possibilities opened by this change for its own sake.<sup>32</sup>

I have no solution to offer myself: I can only suggest that Dewey's deeply pluralistic stance towards our material culture can prove more fruitful than Marcuse's great refusal, which ultimately remains based on a dualistic approach opposing oppressive contemporary societies and utopian ones. But are existing societies really so rigidly and pervasively defined? Are their boundaries so clearly determined and their practices systematically oriented towards a single, repressive goal? Are our ways of life completely modelled after the same standard, are our patterns and habits of behaviour and thought always the same? Or is it not the case that they very often conflict with one another and are called into question?<sup>33</sup>

This strong opposition to an allegedly repressive civilization prevents us from finding different possibilities within this society and constitutes an obstacle for any attempt at transformative action. Dewey's pragmatist attitude instead tends to draw subtler distinctions within our material culture. In particular, I believe his attitude encourages us to distinguish between different habits of consumption, because alternative possibilities may be concealed behind new conditions of production and experience. We have some standards for discriminating between good and bad experiences, that is between inclusive and expansive ones or exclusive and regressive ones. For sure, these are not transcendental principles, but provisional and limited ones; sometimes they can be

rather vague, at other times they are overt, but here and now we can – and must – perceive different colours or at least different nuances.

Furthermore, a general Deweyan attitude remains open to the possibility of appreciating the means we use to achieve our ends.<sup>34</sup> If – as is often the case – we focus exclusively on our ends, and treat our means as 'mere' means, we must understand the reasons for this and find alternative solutions, other ways of responding and acting. We must rely on the "method of intelligence", while knowing that it is limited and provides no solutions or guarantees that can be valid in all circumstances.

This is probably not enough – for sure, it is not much. But it is something important, if we share Dewey's idea that democracy has (also) to do with the felt quality of our lives.

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<sup>32</sup> See Illouz, E., 2007. *Cold Intimacies. The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Cambridge-Malden: Polity Press and Metelmann, J.-Beyes, T. (ed.), *Die Macht der Gefühle: Emotionen in Management, Organisation und Kultur*, Berlin: Berlin U.P.

<sup>33</sup> See the *Introduction* to Judith Green's book (cit.) on the alleged 'clashes of civilization'.

<sup>34</sup> See Mead, G.H. 1926. "The Nature of Aesthetic Experience", *International Journal of Ethics*, 36/4, pp.382-393 and Hickman, L.A. 1990. *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

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