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Rational in its Irrationality: A Critique of the All Lives Matter Movement and One-Dimensional Society

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The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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In his book *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse grapples with the possibility of revolution in a time of stasis, with protest in a world that rejects criticism. More than fifty years after its release, his arguments still haunt us today. Marcuse addresses the end of social critique within consumer capitalism. Even though his book was written with the 20th century in mind, I argue that his ideas are still applicable to race relations today, where whiteness is synonymous with privilege and the ability to feel comfortable in a world that “others” experience as uncomfortable. The ideas in *One-Dimensional Man* will be used to uncover and critique contradictions in the All Lives Matter rhetoric as a response to Black Lives Matter. First, I explain the relevance of critical theory. Second, I summarize the main arguments in *One-Dimensional Man*, and explain how it builds on Orthodox Marxism. Next, I discuss the origins of #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. From here, I apply *One-Dimensional Man* to #AllLivesMatter rhetoric. Finally, I discuss the importance of white allies in the struggle for racial justice.

MARCUSE AND CRITICAL THEORY

This analysis will use the critical theory of Herbert Marcuse’s book *One-Dimensional Man* to critique an array of contradictions found in All Lives Matter rhetoric. Critical theory is a relevant analytic method for several reasons. First, critical theory uses value judgments to weigh a society against its alternatives. In his introduction, Marcuse (1964) says that critical social theory must operate under two value judgments: first, “that human life is worth living, or rather can be and ought to be made worth living,” and second, “that specific possibilities exist for the amelioration of human

life” (xli). Instead of making the claim that all lives matter, Marcuse recognizes that while all lives *should* be valued equally, society does not treat all lives the same. Additionally, he believes there are steps society can take to improve the condition of human lives. The inequalities in our society today are not unsolvable, but can be addressed through critique and praxis. Secondly, critical theory abstracts from reality. To Marcuse, modern society is dominated by ideologies that affirm capitalism, while ignoring and rationalizing social problems (Marcuse 1964: xl). However, critical theory recognizes this fact, and makes a conscious effort to consider alternatives (Marcuse 1964: xli). In this paper, I will argue that white Americans are either largely unaware of or chose to ignore the racism in the United States. Privileged, white realities must recognize their own privilege in order to reveal inequalities and the possibilities for change. According to Marcuse, “all liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude” (Marcuse 1964: 9). In this case, liberation is possible only after white people are conscious of their privilege, and are willing to be good allies and fight for justice. Finally, critical theory asserts that the “recognition of facts is critique of facts” (Marcuse 1964: 121). After the hidden contradictions of our reality are revealed, we are left with truths about the world that demand critique. In the case of race relations, once #AllLivesMatter rhetoric and other color-blind ideologies are stripped away, we see that American society discriminates against black lives, and a refusal to acknowledge and critique this fact disregards the experience of Black Americans.

Critical Theory diverges from orthodox Marxism in an attempt to explain the proletariat’s failure as a revolutionary force. Marx’s critique of capitalism focuses on the antagonism between opposites: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie

control every aspect of production (Marx 1844: 36), and workers become commodities themselves, because the capitalists' need for their labor depends on the demands of the market (Marx 1844: 21). The capitalist pays the worker minimally for their labor time, and the worker has no choice but to accept. If a worker refuses a job offer, there is a practically an unlimited supply of unemployed workers to take their place (Marx 1844: 21). When a capitalist accumulates wealth, they may or may not choose to share that wealth with their workers by increasing their wages. However, when the capitalist loses wealth, the workers always suffer (Marx 1844: 22). The proletariat only has value to capitalists as workers; they are not regarded as human beings with unique needs and aspirations (Marx 1844: 29). Domination not only exists in the relationship between the owner and the worker, but between the product and the worker as well, where a commodity is merely the physical manifestation of labor (Marx 1844: 69). The more the worker produces, the more they lose themselves in the commodities they create. This is the process of alienation: the worker puts time and energy into products, yet has no control over how that work is preformed, or what becomes of the product once it is finished. Thus, the proletariat's labor becomes external to them—they put time and energy into the product yet have no control over the productive process (Marx 1844: 70).

ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN

While Marcuse keeps the traditional construct of class at the center of his analysis in *One-Dimensional Man*, he recognizes that the economy has changed considerably since the 19th century, when Marx described economic conditions. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse outlines four ways that the working class has developed under advanced industrial capitalism. First, developments in technology make labor less strenuous

(Marcuse 1964: 26). Even though workers are still exploited, improvements in working conditions make the proletariat less aware of the violence against them (Marcuse 1964: 27-29). Second, developments in technology have also led to a decrease in blue-collar workers. Automation in production means that fewer blue-collar bodies are required to run factories, so more white-collar workers are employed in the service sector, and as middle-managers (Marcuse 1964: 30). The third change involves the social integration of the lower classes into upper class society. However, there is dispute among Marxists as to whether this integration is real or only imagined in the worker consciousness. A rising standard of living may cause workers to feel that their status has risen, especially compared to the standard of life endured by working class peoples in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite working class improvements, upper class elites enjoy a radically different quality of life. Real or imagined, the higher quality of life enjoyed by the working class supports pro-capitalist ideologies, and once workers internalize these ideas, they are unaware of their exploitation (Marcuse 1964: 32). Finally, because of the improved conditions of the working class, workers no longer appear to be the contradiction of the upper class (Marcuse 1964: 35). In earlier stages of capitalism, the proletariat lived a destitute existence, while the bourgeois exercised obvious domination over their worker's lives. Today, the proletariat's conditions have improved, while the bourgeois are assimilated into corporate bureaucracy. Few workplaces have a few managers in power, but instead have a large chain of command. It becomes hard for a worker to blame their oppression on their direct manager, because he is part of a larger hierarchy and gives orders in accordance with the will of his own superiors (Marcuse 1964: 36). From this change, class conflict seems outdated and less relevant. However,

this assessment negates the fact that exploitation and alienation exist even under “improved” economic conditions. For Marcuse, servitude is not determined by the harshness of your condition, but by the fact that you are the instrument of another (Marcuse 1964: 36). While exploitation of the working class still exists, it now appears in various forms. Even with these developments, workers are still the key to revolution. However, there are now more advanced ideological measures that keep them from reaching their revolutionary potential. Marcuse sets out to explain the ideological changes that arose to validate this new economy and maintain the resulting power disparities. Ultimately, for Marcuse, capitalism’s longevity is the result of bourgeois success in justifying capitalism, rather than the proletariat’s inadequacy as revolutionary force.

The overall increase in the standard of living across social classes during the twentieth century led most to a comfortable position, and *One-Dimensional Man* captures the conformity and complacency characteristic of the 1950s and early 1960s (Marcuse 1964: 26). While improved working conditions and new developments in technology took to the forefront of American public consciousness, painting a positive image of our nation in the minds of individuals across social classes, the elites of American society committed acts of terror and exploitation behind closed doors. Abroad, the American military used nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and waged a war against communism that took innocent lives in Korea and Vietnam. On the home front, the free market maintained its domination over the lives of the working class. Yet the destruction abroad was justified through its promise to protect America from the threat of imperialism and communism, and exploitation in the states was regarded as a necessary byproduct of the free market. Marcuse believes that modern society exercises totalitarian control over

the minds of the masses, through manipulative justifications for shameful parts of society (Marcuse 1964: 4). As our country becomes “richer, bigger, and better,” it simultaneously conceals the destructive aspects of society (Marcuse 1964: xxxix).

Critical Theory was one of the first analyses to explain capitalism’s development from a society that centered on production to a society that centered on consumption. Traditionally, Marxism describes an economy dominated by the production of goods. As technological developments made the productive process more efficient, the economy also became concerned with marketing and consumption to sell a surplus of goods. Coupled with the changes in working conditions outlined earlier, Critical Theory takes the power relationship between the bourgeois and the proletariat one step further, and suggests that consumption reifies individuals as well (Kellner 1989). Marcuse argues that the more efficient advanced capitalism becomes, the more totalitarian it becomes as well. Here, totalitarian not only refers to a physically violent government, but a government that uses vested interests to control thoughts and needs (Marcuse 1964: 5). Mass production and marketing in modern capitalism encourage individuals to consume, because they convince the public that all problems can be solved through an unending supply of products. Tupperware, microwaves, and new cars all serve the purpose of simplifying everyday life, and their convenient accessibility is evidence of a modern and efficient society (Marcuse 1964: 11). Reification, the objectification of human lives, in both production and consumption lead to mass conformity. When the market promises jobs, a higher standard of living, and products to meet every need (real or imagined), it becomes harder for individuals to reject a society and an economy where everyone has access to similar products and a similar lifestyle (Marcuse 1964: 12). In advanced

industrial society, commodities, not capital, are the basic unit of capitalism (Kellner 1989). This shift from a focus on production to consumption follows the new hegemony of capitalist ideology: the justifications for the capitalist productive process that were once centered on factories and workers entered the larger public. This public shows their support and trust of the system through consumption of goods and unending praise of the free market. The rising standard of living is a by-product of capitalistic production, and increased productivity leads to a surplus of commodities. These excess commodities are consumed because capitalist marketing convinces us that these products are essential to a happy, satisfied life (Marcuse 1964: 53). Needs that go beyond the biological minimums have always been “preconditioned” by larger society (Marcuse 1964: 7). Humans have always required food, water, and shelter, but the forms that these needs take, and any needs beyond these essentials, are a product of the cultural and historical context of any given society. False needs are the marketed desires imposed on the consumer, and they often serve the special interests of the capitalists and politicians of dominant society. The fulfillment of these false needs may provide instant gratification, but they simultaneously perpetuate toil and misery (Marcuse 1964: 7). A luxury car, for example, may initially appear as a trendy way to accomplish everyday tasks, a symbol of both status and style. However, its condition will eventually deteriorate, and its design will eventually become obsolete in comparison to the ever-expanding market of cars. However, temporary happiness the individual gains in conformity convinces them that these false needs are their true needs, while the individual remains blissfully unaware of their exploitation and reification (Marcuse 1964: 7). Individuals have the right to decide their needs for themselves, yet the current economic and political climate only make room for needs that

perpetuate their existence (Marcuse 1964: 8). This loss of the “inner dimension” marks the end of the individual’s ability to think critically about society (Marcuse 1964: 13).

Marcuse argues that advanced industrial society is filled with contradictions: individuals are forced to sell their labor in the free market, democracy is run by lobbyists and special interests, and peace is achieved through the creation of nuclear weapons. And yet, these contradictions remain hidden because the ruling elite has convinced the public that capitalism is their best and only option (Marcuse 1964: 52). Previously opposing groups come together to fight for the same cause. Marcuse gives the example of labor unions and corporations lobbying together for military weapons contracts (Marcuse 1964: 22). Both proletariat and bourgeoisie are united against the threat of communism (Marcuse 1964: 23). This bond between previously antagonistic groups brings about higher efficiency and a higher standard of living (Marcuse 1964: 24). Automation of the productive process is another contradiction. While automation has the potential to end strenuous and reifying labor, current labor unions oppose it, because there is no alternative source of income or livelihood (Marcuse 1964: 40). Modern society marks a new era of efficiency guided by technological and social advances that increase productivity and lift all social classes to a higher standard of living (Marcuse 1964: 25). And yet, these rational developments are implemented irrationally. While technological advances could lead to full automation, freeing millions from the burden of physical labor, technology is instead used to improve working conditions at the bare minimum. Despite the higher standard of living enjoyed by all social classes, individuals are still bound to the class hierarchy, which convinces individuals that their material differences

are the result of personal character, not of a system that requires dominant and subservient classes (Marcuse 1964: 19).

The question becomes: how can a society built on such contradictions appear stable and even prosperous? How is it that society has failed to collapse under the weight of its own absurdities? Marcuse argues that these contradictions are largely hidden through what he calls “technological rationality”: the combination of technology and bureaucracy that justifies our current state and distracts us with false needs and enemies (Marcuse 1964: xlvii). Modern society melds political and corporate interests, and both act as an instrument of the other (Marcuse 1964: 5). Politicians with business backgrounds can encourage deregulation and free enterprise, while the government uses corporations to sustain the structure of society. Technological rationality represents the removal of value judgments from scientific endeavors, and values positivism as the height of reason (Marcuse 1964: 160). The structure of science--its quantification of the natural world and rigorous scientific method--separate it from ethics, and gives it the appearance of objectivity (Marcuse 1964: 150). However, the ruling elite use developments in science to carry out their own agendas (Marcuse 1964: 149). What society at large has failed to realize is that scientific advancements are a double-edged sword: on the one hand they improve lives and increase efficiency, but on the other they use the guise of objectivity to rationalize their use as instruments of oppression and destruction (Marcuse 1964: 149). What we face today is a more advanced stage of alienation that distances individuals not only from their labor, but from their reality as well. It is this distance from reality that allows the violence and exploitation carried out by capitalism to continue.

Rationalization in the public sphere eventually conquers the mind. The “happy consciousness” is the belief that reality is rational and that capitalism fulfills our needs; it is technological rationality manifested in social behavior (Marcuse 1964: 82). The happy consciousness leads to the end of guilt because *everything* is rationalized. Every act of violence is justified until it no longer looks like violence, and crimes against humanity become a “rational enterprise” (Marcuse 1964: 55, 85). The happy consciousness claims moral superiority, a perfect rationalization for violence that sees terror as a necessary means to a peaceful end (Marcuse 1964: 82). For example, the nuclear holocaust in Hiroshima and Nagasaki that killed thousands of innocent lives and plagued the environment for decades is justified through its “peaceful” outcome that ended World War II. How can the American public feel guilty about the production of nuclear weapons that have the potential to annihilate millions, when their purpose is to protect the free market world from the threat of communism? How can we feel guilty about the millions of Americans still living in poverty, when their living conditions are much higher than the impoverished of the third world? When guilt is eliminated, individuals no longer have to question or criticize their reality, and the result is ignorant happiness for the sake of comfort.

Marcuse believes that a new form of communication developed to reinforce technological rationality and the contradictions it conceals, which he calls one-dimensional thought and language. It combines manipulative political language with the hypnotic power of capitalistic marketing. One-dimensional thought and language conceals contradictions for the sake of unity:

“In exhibiting its contradictions as the token of its truth, this universe of discourse closes itself against any other discourse which is not on its own terms. And, by its capacity to assimilate all other terms to its own, it offers the prospect of combining the greatest possible tolerance with the greatest possible unity”

(Marcuse 1964: 94).

Instead of offering an accurate representation of reality, one-dimensional communication describes social problems with language that ignores the historical developments that led to our current state, effectively erasing the problem in the public consciousness (Marcuse 1964: 101). This “language of total administration” focuses on unity, while it ignores conflict and contradiction (Marcuse 1964: 88). In the dominant discourse, all Americans are united in the fight against communism, yet capitalism divides and destroys us in our own country. This language conjures powerful and compelling images, but never bothers to expand on the concepts it presents (Marcuse 1964: 98). Critique is lost because in one dimension, alternatives are never considered. One-dimensional language describes reality with “self-validating hypotheses”: terms like “democracy” and “freedom” that make us feel good, but whose definitions do not have to be reconciled with fact or reality (Marcuse 1964: 16). The War on Drugs illustrates this point. For many Americans, the War on Drugs represents an effort to improve public health and safety of inner city neighborhoods. However, in reality, the War on Drugs was a racist crusade, meant to further incarcerate poor Americans, specifically men of color. The war on drugs never tried to fix the causes of violent drug trade (poverty, underfunded public schools, racism in hiring practices, etc.). Instead, its only goal was to incarcerate those who were labeled dangerous. In fact, the War of Drugs could be more accurately renamed the “War on

Impoverished Neighborhoods of Color,” or the “War to Acquire Laborers for the Prison Industrial Complex.” However, the truth about this political strategy is concealed through its positive title and marketing. When repeated enough, one-dimensional terms become hypnotic, and we are unable to notice the contradiction between our descriptions of reality and reality itself (Marcuse 1964: 16). Contradictions in one-dimensional language represent the “unification of opposites” (Marcuse 1964: 93). When politicians talk about achieving peace, they are really seeking war; when they talk about the wealth of the United States, they negate poverty; when they talk about democracy, they conceal oligarchy and private interests. In a similar way, one-dimensional thought rejects all critique, and instead offers only justification for our current state. This form of communication delegitimizes non-conformist language (Marcuse 1964: 89). For example, in the realm of one-dimensional language, how can you possibly oppose the War on Drugs when “war” represents a righteous crusade, set on improving health and safety in America’s inner cities? One-dimensional communication not only conceals contradictions, it repels criticism (Marcuse 1964: 88). Any opposition, even when based on fact, appears immoral and ridiculous. The goal of one-dimensional language is not only to conceal reality, but also to convince the public that those in power have our best interest in mind. One-dimensional communication uses universal terms to describe the experience of the particular (Marcuse 1964: 208). America claims freedom for all of its citizens, yet controls the behavior of welfare recipients. The free market promises equal opportunity and class mobility for all, yet these opportunities are almost exclusively available to privileged classes. Marcuse takes a rather pessimistic view of society, and claims that there is one dimension to society that is “everywhere in all forms” (Marcuse

1964: 13). One-dimensional communications represents a lack of political imagination that refuses to acknowledge any alternatives, often because the structure of that society benefits its elites.

Marcuse believes that we can counter uncritical thought through what he calls “two-dimensional” communication. This form of communication is rooted in Plato’s dialectical logic, based on the idea that appearance is necessarily different from reality. The dialectic assumes that everything in existence has an opposite, and value judgments determine which is preferable (Marcuse 1964: 129). Knowledge, for example is preferable to ignorance, and freedom is preferable to servitude. The problem with one-dimensional communication is that it only affirms and defends our current state, while it negates the existence of opposite or antagonistic forces. Two-dimensional communication considers concepts not only in terms of their current state, but their historical development and possible alternatives as well. It recognizes the tension between reality as it appears, and reality as it could be (Marcuse 1964: 100). While dominant ideologies keep the public focused on the first dimension, two-dimensional discourse offers a contradiction to reality (Marcuse 1964: 145). One-dimensional language leads the public to believe that our current government and economy has reached its final state, and that critique and progress are no longer needed. However, two-dimensional communication reminds us that society is never perfect, and that there are always other options.

Through the conformity and repression in one-dimensional society, protest becomes “unimaginable” (Marcuse 1964: 9). When the general public is seduced by hypnotic terms, when contradictions are hidden, when false needs become true needs, it

becomes difficult to critique society and consider other possibilities. What little critique exists is directed at the wrong subjects. For Marcuse, the ultimate manifestation of one-dimensional society and the end of critique was the rhetoric surrounding the Cold War. During the Cold War, critique was aimed at communist societies, particularly the USSR. Cold War propaganda painted the USSR and other communist countries as manipulative and suppressive; their goals set on global communism achieved through intimidation and force. However, Marcuse believes that capitalist societies, including the United States, are just as totalitarian as communist societies, but in a rationalized, and thus hidden, way. While dictatorial communist society suppress individuality, our workers are exploited and alienated, but we justify their position through ideologies that encourage hard work. Not only is the critique of communist societies misguided, it distracts from the critique of capitalist societies. “Does not the threat of an atomic catastrophe which could wipe out the human race also serve to protect the very forces which perpetuate this danger?” he begins *One-Dimensional Man*. “The efforts to prevent such a catastrophe overshadow the search for its potential causes in contemporary industrial society (Marcuse 1964: xxxix). This hatred of the radical other, and the fear of a disaster that exists only in speculation distract the public from a critique of the forces that led the world to the brink of war in the first place. Instead of critiquing the political and economic motivations that led the United States into the Cold War, the public relies on capitalism, and the freedom it promises, to protect them against their new enemy. In fact, Marcuse asserts that the real enemy is not communism or totalitarianism. The real threat to capitalism and its enforced conformity is liberation (Marcuse 1964: 55).

While advanced industrial society marks the end of critical thought, Marcuse points out that criticism of dominant society led us to capitalism in the first place. He claims that “freedom of thought, speech, and conscience,” were used during the Enlightenment to critique society, and subsequently lead to the development of capitalism (Marcuse 1964: 3). These values created a method of criticism for feudalism and aristocracy, and sought to replace these antiquated systems with a more efficient and rational one. During the Enlightenment and the development of capitalism, critique was encouraged, where science and reason prevailed while religion and traditional society were criticized (Marcuse 1964: 4). However, as capitalism became better at meeting the needs of individuals, and a select demographic became richer and more powerful, dissent was discouraged, and any development came from within the status quo (Marcuse 1964: 4). Free enterprise granted individuals more freedom than aristocratic and monarchical societies, and the industrial revolution brought about more efficient means of production (Marcuse 1964: 4). While society still claims to value freedom and reason, they have lost their original power to critique, and do not analyze capitalism (Marcuse 1964: 5). Innovators and politicians of today become no better than the monarchs and religious authorities who crushed progress and free thought that undermined their authority. Marcuse argues that because of the increase in the standard of living from the early twentieth century to the mid century, people have become comfortable in their position in society, despite the fact that alienation and exploitation still exist. When basic needs are met, opposition seems unneeded, especially when that opposition threatens the structure of society (Marcuse 1964: 4). However, as Marcuse points out, the satisfaction of needs has nothing to do with freedom of thought or dissent (Marcuse 1964: 4). Even if a society

fulfills your needs, individuals still have the right to critique their society. Critical thought thus becomes a class privilege. Once an elite group uses critical thought to transform society to meet their own needs, they can suppress criticism from other groups (Marcuse 1964: 132).

ALL LIVES MATTER AND THE LOGIC OF MANIPULATION

Marcuse's theory is not limited to politics and the economy. The development of race relations follows a similar pattern to the development of class struggle that Marcuse outlines in *One-Dimensional Man*. In regards to white supremacy, the United States went from a time of slavery and segregation, to a post-Civil Rights era where there is no longer official institutional discrimination. While many people, a majority of whom are white, would like to think that we now live in a post-racial society, racism is far from over on both an institutional and individual level. In both the race and class struggles, an obvious injustice was met with some reform that alleviates parts of the problem, but does not do away with it entirely. While minimum wage laws, child labor laws, limits on hours, and OSHA regulations have all improved working conditions, workers are still alienated from their labor and often have little say in the decisions their bosses and employers make. Similarly, while the thirteenth amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made official bans on slavery and discrimination, prejudice still exists in our institutions and in the minds of individuals. While progress has been made in both spheres, old ways of exploitation and discrimination are only repackaged into more rationalized and acceptable methods. Wage slavery is wage slavery, no matter if the wage is a dollar an hour or fifteen. Similarly, racial prejudices can manifest as overt violence, or complacent apathy. Justifications for exploitation penetrate public consciousness and everyday

discourse. Rhetoric about the “self-made man” and “pulling yourself up by your boot straps” caused many working class people to be unaware of the exploitation they face. White people are overwhelmingly comfortable with the state of race relations today. In both the class and racial struggles, the small gains made in the past century make it easy to feel like the fight is over. Celebration of these gains overshadows the problems of the present. In this paper, I will argue that white people rationalize their prejudices and biases in favor of color-blind conceptions of race, while perpetuating racism through their negation of reality and the Black experience.

While the white consciousness remained largely unaware of race relations in America, a new wave of media attention to police brutality against people of color in the 2010’s brought race into the public discourse once again. The murder of Trayvon Martin at the hands of neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman is one such case. Zimmerman stalked, chased, and eventually shot Martin, a 17-year old Black boy who was en route to his home late one night. Zimmerman was found not guilty of second degree murder because the jury believed he was acting out of self defense, even though Martin was unarmed (Alvarez and Buckley 2013). While this case began as a matter of self-defense and “stand your ground” laws, it lead to dialogue about racial profiling and the state of race relations in America. Zimmerman’s acquittal and a new wave of racial discourse fueled the creation of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter. Alicia Garza, an activist and labor organizer, wrote a “Love Letter to Black People” on Facebook to express her feelings after Zimmerman’s trial. In a reply to Garza’s post, Patrisse Cullors first used #BlackLivesMatter. The hashtag quickly gained popularity, and Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi turned #BlackLivesMatter into a unified movement, committed

to addressing the systematic discrimination against Black people in America and around the world (Garza 2016). The movement gained traction once again in 2014, when seventeen-year old Michael Brown was shot and killed by a white officer in Ferguson, Missouri. When the jury decided not to indict the officer in November of that year, protest began once again. #BlackLivesMatter was used almost two million times on Twitter in the following three weeks (Hunt 2016).

While #BlackLivesMatter calls attention to the racial disparities in our society today, the movement is not without criticism. A content analysis of Twitter posts after Eric Garner's death at the hands of police in 2014 reveals that the hashtag #AllLivesMatter was used as a counter-argument to #BlackLivesMatter. Supporters of #AllLivesMatter claim to have a "color-blind" view of race relations, and assert that society values all people the same. While some #AllLivesMatter posts call for unity while ignoring obvious discrimination ("#AllLivesMatter All of them. Black, white, Asian, mixed race, you name it. ALL LIVES MATTER"), others are explicitly racist ("This is not about skin color! It's about resisting arrest and disrespecting authority. #AllLivesMatter #SupportPolice as they have a job to do") (Carney 2016). #AllLivesMatter supporters view the Movement for Black Lives as a racist organization, because it ignores the struggles that other groups face. #BlackLivesMatter supporters are viewed as "thugs," their protests labeled as selfish and petty complaints (Rickford 2015). Justifications for white supremacy have always existed. From biblical rationales stemming from the story of Noah and Ham, to scientific rationales found in phrenology and eugenics, white society has always found a way to justify its dominant position. However, in #AllLivesMatter rhetoric, the prevailing ideology that sustains white

domination is a complete denial of white supremacy and racial inequality. Whiteness has rationalized its position to the point where it no longer has to confront its privilege. This is characteristic of one-dimensional communication, because it allows society to distance itself from the harm it creates.

Rationalization is a key feature of one-dimensional society because it provides justification for inequalities. One positive outcome of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s is its rejection of overt forms of racism. However, while the general public grew to disapprove of the KKK and other white supremacist groups, the same racist values were strategically transformed into rationalized forms. The criticism of welfare recipients, hip-hop culture, and the war on drugs are all racially charged issues that are disguised as crusades for the public good. However, these forms of discrimination are acceptable because they are rationalized. [happy consciousness]

#BlackLivesMatter and the Movement for Black Lives offer much needed criticism to race relations in America. The movement gives marginalized people a platform on which to speak, and builds solidarity with allies and other organizations fighting for people of color. Following the pattern of two-dimensional thought and language, the Movement for Black Lives brings contradictions between societal values about race and the reality of race relations to light. #AllLivesMatter, on the other hand, illustrates one-dimensional communication, as it uses unity and equality as a guise for prejudice and discrimination. It assumes that advocating for Black lives ignores the values of other lives. On the contrary, The Movement for Black Lives is founded on collective liberation: “when black people get free, everybody gets free” (Garza 2016). Rather than asserting that one group is more important than another, #BlackLivesMatter

calls attention to a broken system that must be fixed. #AllLivesMatter hides behind a positive message and attempts to delegitimize the voices of the oppressed. On a broader level, it represents both an inability to critique society, and the privilege for White people to ignore racial conflicts.

Marcuse believes that one-dimensional communication dominates in the public discourse. #AllLivesMatter rhetoric is no exception. As an example of one-dimensional thought, “its language testifies to identification and unification, to the systematic promotion of positive thinking and doing, to the concerted attack on transcendent, critical notions” (Marcuse 1964: 88). #AllLivesMatter rhetoric would have us believe that racism is over. With the end of segregation, with a Black president serving two terms, we have reached a “post-racial” society, where race is no longer an important factor. “All Lives Matter” sounds unifying, uplifting, rational, and just. However, these positive statements highlight the happy consciousness that disregards reality in favor of an idealized world; a world that does not exist. For white people, denying racism is easy and safe. It allows us to feel good about ourselves, while retaining our privilege. However, these claims of peace and unity between the races are not grounded in fact. #AllLivesMatter ignores police violence, hate groups, institutional discrimination, and micro aggressions against people of color. Our large-scale institutions socialize all white people to hold some sort of prejudices against minorities. However, now that overt racism is no longer acceptable, these prejudices are expressed implicitly. The happy consciousness suppresses the racist values of the subconscious mind, and sublimates them into color-blind views on race. This complete negation of the Black experience leaves the white masses comfortable and content. #AllLivesMatter allows white people to disengage from reality. We no longer

have to feel guilty for continuously abusing people of color because we can negate existing prejudice with feel-good rhetoric. Positive thinking represents the privilege to feel good about your own beliefs and actions, while avoiding uncomfortable aspects of reality. Black people, on the other hand, are forced to deal with discrimination on a personal level everyday. Their protests are criticized as unpatriotic, selfish, or anti-White, requiring them to appease white people, in a manner that does not offend (Kivel 2002: 37, 91).

The rationality of modern racism is sustained through the use of one-dimensional thought and language. #AllLivesMatter uses shallow words that make the public feel good about society, however, these descriptions of society are not grounded in reality. Color-blind conceptions of race relations cause us to ignore inequalities while simultaneously convincing ourselves that society as a whole has defeated race-based hatred. While these arguments sound accepting and supportive, they actually serve a selfish purpose. White individuals are convinced that they hold the moral high ground because they no longer “see” race. They believe that they hold no prejudices because they are not members of the Klan or other white supremacist groups. They may have Black friends, or treat the Black people they encounter with respect. While these may be positive improvements, the failure to acknowledge racial inequality in broader society is a form of racism that leads to complacency and apathy. It allows white people to keep their privilege, but feel good about it because they can detach themselves from the more overt racist acts carried out by others. Another type of one-dimensional language that distracts from race conflicts predates Twitter and #AllLivesMatter. Coded terms allow us to talk about race without bringing up race explicitly. Terms like “culture of poverty,”

“welfare mothers,” and “inner city” all have implicit racial biases, but avoid race directly (Kivel 2002: 59). This is another way for white people to ignore race problems, because they can disguise their prejudices as opposition to other things, like poverty and violence.

A society that refuses to acknowledge its flaws is doomed to remain flawed. A one-dimensional society is limited to a single dimension because it fails to recognize its problems. Not only does #AllLivesMatter negate reality in favor of comfort, it tries to undermine the opposition by turning its argument against itself. To many white people in denial, #BlackLivesMatter is considered a racist movement because it puts the well being of black people over the well being of other racial groups. However, the goal of #BlackLivesMatter is not black supremacy, but a desire to end prejudice and violence against black people (Garza 2016). Protest is also suppressed because reactionaries direct criticism at the wrong things. Instead of talking explicitly about race, #AllLivesMatter supporters claim that disparities between whites and Blacks are due to cultural or individual flaws, rather than racial privilege. Additionally, many #AllLivesMatter supporters also support the Blue Lives Matter movement, which claims that police are the real victims. Without two-dimensional critique, white supremacy will continue to dominate society, at the cost of Black lives.

ALLIES AND THE SECOND DIMENSION

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse describes a problem he sees in contemporary society: a negation of social problems for the sake of comfort. For this problem, he offers a solution: the development of critique against the prevailing society that uses two-dimensional thought and language. However, the leap from problem to solution is vague, and Marcuse gives no clear, practical methods for critiquing society. In terms of the racial

struggle, the Movement for Black Lives and similar organizations led by people of color represent a second dimension that bring facts about race relations to light. However, white people have consistently failed to effectively support anti-racist movements. In his book *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, Paul Kivel outlines the qualities of effective white allies, all of which utilize abstraction and two-dimensional discourse. From dialectical logic, we know that appearance is always different from reality. As white people, our realities are shaped by white supremacy, and our privilege allows us to avoid addressing race in our day-to-day lives. Therefore, it is important for white allies to assume that racism is everywhere, because we often cannot recognize it. Even whites that are oppressed because of class, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity do not understand the experience of people of color. Therefore, white allies must be willing to listen to people of color talk about their experiences. Allies also notice who holds positions of power. Whiteness is always the default in a white-supremacist world, although privilege keeps white people largely unaware of this. White people must recognize that we often hold power because of our own privilege or the discrimination of others. Allies notice the ways that racism is justified and denied. Today, racism is highly rationalized, and seldom appears in overt forms. Instead, prejudice is revealed through racially coded terms like “culture of poverty,” “urban,” and “thug.” Allies should rid their own language of these words, and help other white people recognize their harm as well. Allies use the principles of intersectionality to see how gender, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity change how individuals experience oppression. Allies educate themselves about the history of white supremacy, and the ways that racism has transformed over time. White allies stand up to injustice, even if it

puts them in an uncomfortable or difficult situation. Above all, white allies must realize that they are first and foremost allies in the racial struggle. Therefore, they must offer their support, but cannot lead the movement (Kivel 2002: 97-98).

CONCLUSION

Marcuse ends *One-Dimensional Man* on a pessimistic note. In the introduction, he suggests that his thesis oscillates between “two contradictory hypothesis”: first, that modern society will continue to reject social change, and second, that contradictions will allow change to occur (Marcuse 1964: xlv). Marcuse believes that “the first tendency is dominant,” and backs up this claim through the absolute comfort and conformity in modern society that he describes throughout his book (Marcuse 1964: xlv). By the end of his work, he continues to favor the first hypothesis. Because one-dimensional society polices all communication, he feels that critique can now only come from the aesthetic dimension. Art and literature, Marcuse believes, liberate the speaker from the dominant discourse, allowing them to “call men and things by their name” (Marcuse 1964: 251). As Marcuse sees it, critique must retreat into allegory and abstraction. Despite Marcuse’s pessimism, I see promise in his second hypothesis. After all, #BlackLivesMatter and the Movement for Black Lives have brought much needed criticism into the public discourse. Although reactionaries have tried to silence the movement through #AllLivesMatter and similar rhetoric, #BlackLivesMatter remains as a sign of those who are brave enough to critique despite retaliation. Marcuse believes that most people are unable to critique society because they benefit from it too much. This is certainly the case for white people, who benefit from our privilege to the point where we do not have to address race. However, Marcuse does believe that the “outcasts and outsiders” who “exist outside the

democratic process” have the potential to critique society, because they have nothing to lose (Marcuse 1964: 260). White people benefit from racial inequality too much to be able to accurately critique the state of race relations today. However, following the lead of Black activists, we can unlearn toxic whiteness and dismantle white supremacy.

One important thing we can take away from *One-Dimensional Man* is that critique is an ongoing process. No society is perfect, but its flaws cannot be addressed until they are brought to light. Conflict and contradiction are the driving forces of history, and a failure to acknowledge their existence is a failure to harness their liberating and transformative potential. Comfort is truly the most dangerous condition. The elites of any given society will always try to maintain their power at the disadvantage of others. However, through rigorous and unending criticism we can achieve justice that is long overdue.

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