CHAPTER 7

Letter to Herbert Marcuse on Automation

On August 8, 1960, Herbert Marcuse wrote Dunayevskaya, requesting help for his work on a book that was published as One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). She related automation, state-capitalism, workers’ subjectivity, and the dialectic in response to this query from Marcuse:

One of my problems will be the transformation of the laboring class under the impact of rationalization, automation and particularly, the higher standard of living. I am sure you will know what I mean if I refer to the discussion among the French sociologists in Arguments and especially Serge Mallet’s articles. It is a question of a changing—that is to say—a more affirmative attitude of the laborer not only towards the system as a whole but even to the organization of work in the more highly modernized plants. Mallet’s field study of French workers in the Caltex establishment in France points up sharply the rise of a highly co-operative attitude and of a vested interest in the establishment.

Now, what I should like to ask you is first, your own considered evaluation as far as the situation in this country is concerned, and secondly, if it isn’t asking too much—reference to American literature on this problem pro and contra. I know that your own evaluation runs counter to the thesis of reconciliatory integration of the worker with the factory but I would also like to know whether there is any sensible argument for the other side.

August 16, 1960

Dear HM:

...Your letter of the 8th came at an auspicious time since the special issue of News & Letters, which will be issued as a special pamphlet, Workers Battle Automation,¹ has just come off the press and should be of value to you because you will see the workers speaking for themselves on the conditions of labor and the alleged high standard of living. I know, from the time I last spoke to you, that you consider these views as being the result of my influence. While

¹ Workers Battle Automation by Charles Denby et al. (Detroit: News and Letters, 1960) is included in RDC, pp. 2843–905. —Editor.
it is true that Charles Denby and some (by no means all) of the writers of this pamphlet are Marxist Humanists, you would make a serious mistake if you considered their views so exceptional that they did not represent the American proletariat. They represent a very important segment of the American workers and in all basic industries—auto, steel, coal—and the conditions they describe are what they experience on the line, not what some sociologists see in a “field study.” I would like to call your attention also or especially to p. 6, “Which Way Out,” because, contrary to the monolith not only of Communists but radicals who think they must have a “united voice” when they face the public, workers here disagree openly. Angela Terrano, whom you may recall I quote in *Marxism and Freedom* because she has raised the question of what kind of labor in the true Marxist sense, and who then used the expression that work would have to be totally different, “something completely new, not just work to get money to buy food and things. It will have to be completely tied up with life” (p. 275) here rejects Automation altogether, whereas the editor insists that if the workers managed the factory it would not be a House of Terror and works along the more traditional channels of workers’ control of production, shorter workday, etc.

Secondly, I happen to know a Caltex engineer who says some very different things than Serge Mallet. I had him add a special paragraph on the question you raised, but his study of “Oil and Labor” published in the *Fourth International* in 1948² was quite a comprehensive one and as I doubt you have it I enclose that too. (But when you have finished please return at your convenience.) At the same time I am not sure that you have my article in *Arguments* on “State Capitalism and Bureaucracy,”³ which deals with some of the sociologists you no doubt have in mind, as C. Wright Mills, who speak on somewhat a higher level than the epiphenomenal “Organization Man,” and contrasts that to a state capitalist analysis of the times we live in. Since it was simultaneously published also in English I am enclosing the *Socialist Leader* of January 2, 1960,⁴ which does so. I will also try to locate the “Two Worlds” article at the beginning of the year which dealt with the American economy in the postwar years as it goes from recession to recession.⁵

---