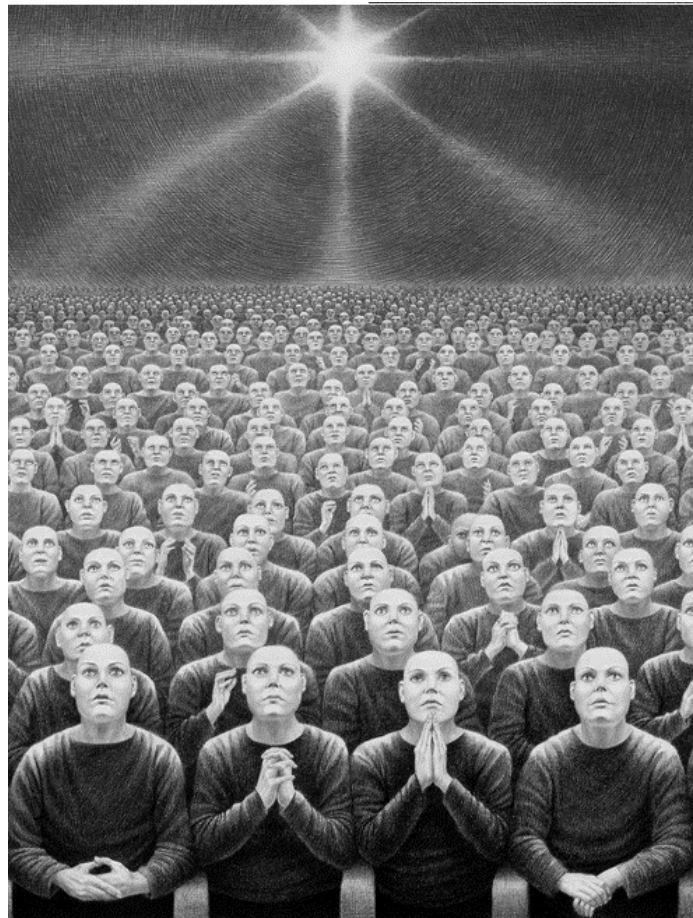


Are We Living in the Brave New World?

A philosophical and literary analysis of the Happy Consciousness in contemporary western society.



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I. Introduction

“[...] in the one remaining dimension of technological rationality, the *Happy Consciousness* comes to prevail.”

Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 79

We live in a world that is characterised by a paradoxical tension. On the one hand, contemporary individuals value their freedom and individuality above all else. On the other hand, they do not hesitate to commit themselves to a way of life that is ambivalent, both in terms of freedom and in terms of individuality. Loud and colourful advertisements proclaim the newest lines of expensive phones, fashionable clothes, or even fizzy drinks as a sure-fire way to make one's personality stand out and so become 'happy'. Slogans like “Think Different.”, “Be wonderful. Be memorable.”, “Open Happiness¹,” and in one case even a plain and simple “Consume.”, are designed in such a way that they incite the thought that to buy this or that product is to express one's own individuality.² The irony, of course, is that by doing so the exact opposite seems to be achieved. The problem however, is that this irony seems to be lost on many people, who, as a result, do not seem to question their own position: in an already vast, but still growing part of the world, where the economic situation is such that people are encouraged to consume goods that are of no utility for the immediate survival of themselves and their families, the drive to consume everything from technological gadgets to pre-packed and powdered food is intimately integrated in everyday life.

One of the most powerful and persistent voices who aimed to shed light on the problematic position of the individual in modern society was Herbert Marcuse. Throughout his whole career, right until his death in 1979, Marcuse warned his readers about the dangers that are inherent to living in a society with a social-economic structure that both constitutes – and benefits from – a consumer mindset. In his 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man*³ Marcuse explains how people living in modern society are at risk of being dominated and oppressed by political, economic and technological forces, because these forces create certain ways of living. He argued that this might result in a loss of our capacity for imagination, critical thinking, autonomy and reason in general, making us the perfect 'tool' for a politics of conformity. To explain the mechanisms behind this conformity, Marcuse introduces the concept of the 'Happy Consciousness,' which could be defined as follows: the Happy Consciousness is a hallmark of the individual who believes that conformism to the status-quo is rational, because the system “delivers the goods⁴,” and thereby becomes blind to any possible alternatives, as well as his own lack of freedom.⁵ Marcuse's Happy Consciousness perfectly describes the way of thinking that would allow for the consumer mind-set to come to fruition, and explains the loss of freedom and individuality in which it results.

¹ In their 2015, so called 'Happiness Study' the word happiness is used 204 times, but nowhere is it defined in any way. http://www.coca-cola.co.uk/content/dam/journey/gb/en/hidden/PDFs/Coke_Choose_Happiness_Research_Study_2015.pdf.

² Slogans from first to last were used by Apple (1997-2002), Zara (current company slogan) and Coca-Cola (2015) in Australia and New-Zealand.

³ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press 1966).

⁴ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 79.

⁵ *Idem.*, 84.

Admittedly, the above might at first sight seem to be an extreme position to hold –adding to the fact that Marcuse wrote his *One-Dimensional Man* more than fifty years ago, during the height of the Cold War, when social conditions as well as the technological possibilities were in some respects wildly different from what they are now. For example: a greatly increased globalisation has changed the world beyond recognition for someone living back in the 1960s. The gap between the third – and first world countries is steadily disappearing, with some economies in the far east well on track to match, and maybe even surpass the western economies, while through technologies like the internet and the portable devices we use to connect to it, the world has in some respects shrunk down to the size of a tablet-screen.

As a consequence of this increased globalisation that thrives, among on other things, on economic growth, we have been putting an increased strain on the Earth’s resources, as well as its capacity to cope with the waste products and pollution that come with this way of life. Contemporary thinkers writing about these developments, like Peter Sloterdijk, or Bernard Stiegler say that today we have entered a new epoch in the Earth’s history. We have left the Holocene and entered the Anthropocene: the age that is defined by – and cannot be seen apart from – the way human activity has shaped the Earth’s climate and ecology, as well as our awareness of this dynamic. As a result of this awareness the firm belief in growth that typified the post-war economic mindset of what Marcuse called ‘advanced industrialised society,’ as well as the consumer ideology that was part and parcel of it, has been revealed to be less unquestionable than Marcuse seems to have thought.

Consequently, the Happy Consciousness described by Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man* must surely be a little less ‘happy,’ or at the very least, a lot more sceptical. And in a way this is true. One just has to look at the world right now to notice a pervasive discontent: the political climate in many parts of the world is dominated by a surge in popularity of extreme ‘right-wing’ populist parties and personas that play into the feelings of ‘Unbehagen’ that many people feel dominates their daily lives, and many fear for the possibly catastrophic consequences that life in the Anthropocene could have in their own lifetime, as well as that of future generations. Yet, in the face of this ‘apocalyptic’ awareness and sense of pervasive discontent, the consumer mindset – and the political, economic and technological forces that constitute and facilitate it, as described by Marcuse – still seems to be very much in place. For this reason, I believe that to do away with Marcuse’s insights in the light of fifty years of global development would be unwise, and that his intellectual framework can still be a potent tool to assess the tensions present in contemporary society. In this thesis I will attempt to analyse the status of Marcuse’s Happy Consciousness in our contemporary western society.⁶

To do this I will draw on the dual sources of philosophy and fictional literature. Fiction can be a valuable tool in laying bare existing structures by situating them in a place that is ‘no-

⁶ It is not my aim to give any statistical argumentation or proof directed at one, specific or distinct country, region or international conglomerate, as this is not the point of this project. The point is to concretise certain tendencies that may show themselves to anyone looking at our society through a critical lens. These tendencies are present in varying degrees of strength throughout the whole world, but because they can be said to be strongest North-Western Europe and the United States, and the used sources and ideas also originate from these areas, the reader may, in valuing the strength of the argumentation, consider these areas as the main “patients” of this diagnosis.

where.’⁷ That is not to say that the characters, the locations and conditions of the world depicted in the novel are ‘no-where,’ or in any way impossible or irrelevant at all. On the contrary: the (science) fictional novel enables us to closely (clinically) observe the way the characters react to – and behave under the conditions and challenges that are put before them, as if the whole were taking place in a literary Petri dish.⁸ After analysing Marcuse’s thinking and concepts as developed in *One-Dimensional Man*, I will use these concepts to analyse two novels, and this specific Marcusean way of looking at what takes place within the fictional Petri dish will further enable me to identify the concepts, dynamics and tendencies that I will analyse in this thesis.

As this project has to bridge the gap between past and present, I will use two works of fiction: First of all, I will use Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932)⁹ to mirror the Happy Consciousness as Marcuse perceived it in his own time, and subsequently I will read Michel Houellebecq’s *Les Particules Élémentaires* – of which I will use the English translation *Atomised* (1998)¹⁰ – to connect it to our own epoch. I have chosen to use Huxley’s *Brave New World*, as it is a (satirical) vision of the future that is shaped and organised through the combined forces of genetic engineering and pacification of its citizens by encouraging mindless hedonism. Thus, it entails 1) a powerful warning of the potentially dangerous sides of technological progress and consumerist tendencies already present in Huxley’s time, and even more so in Marcuse’s; and 2) , as we shall see, an almost one-on-one example of a society that embodies the Happy Consciousness to the extreme. As a contrast, Houellebecq’s novel, being more recent, gives a far more pessimistic, almost nihilistic account of society in which the Happy Consciousness is stretched to the point of breaking. The extrapolation of the Happy Consciousness through fifty years of global developments and two fictional, extreme cases will yield an interesting philosophical reflection on our own contemporary society.

The first part of this thesis will be an elaboration on Marcuse’s relevance for the present despite the various ways society has changed since its publication, followed by the exposition of the parts of his intellectual framework relevant to this thesis. In the second part I will turn to Huxley’s *Brave New World*, which, because it can be read as an extreme exaggeration of the tendencies Marcuse saw in his society, will serve to elucidate how we should understand these concepts. I will then in the third part extrapolate Marcuse’s view with the help of Houellebecq’s *Atomised*, and will attempt a diagnosis of our own contemporary society by contrasting, weighing and comparing the concept of the Happy Consciousness as it emerges in these two works of fiction, in order to assess whether the Happy Consciousness is still a significant feature or symptom in the world of today.

⁷ Carl Freedman, *Science Fiction and Critical thinking* (Indiana: SF-TH Inc. 1987), 187.

⁸ Hub Zwart, “*Limitless* as a Neuro-pharmaceutical Experiment and as a *Daseinsanalyse*: on the use of fiction in preparatory debates on cognitive enhancement,” in *Medical Health Care and Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer 2014 [2013]).

⁹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage Classics 2014 [1932]).

¹⁰ Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. Wynne, Frank (London: Vintage 2000 [1998]).

1. Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and the Happy Consciousness

1.1.1 Relevance of Marcuse and *One-Dimensional Man* today

Since my objective is a diagnostics of the present, one might wonder why I choose to use an almost sixty year-old work of social philosophy to analyse contemporary society in the first place. So, what is Marcuse's relevance today? In 1964, Marcuse's influential work *One-Dimensional Man* was published and soon became a staple in the diet of critically starved student – and (extreme) left political movements around the world. This was especially true for the United States, to which Marcuse and other predominantly Jewish members of the Frankfurt School fled their exile from surging anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. His sometimes radical ideas became hugely important for radical left-wing political groups during the 1960s and the 1970s demanding social change, but thereafter his popularity declined steadily. Contemporary discourse seems to have almost forgotten Marcuse. So let me first all highlight the relevance of his intellectual framework, and how it can be extrapolated to contemporary society.

Remarkably, perhaps, while reading *One-Dimensional Man* in the 21st century, one is immediately confronted with a sense of familiarity. At times it almost feels like it could have been written today, although some parts of the book are undeniably outdated. For instance, the very first sentence of the introduction states: “Does not the threat of an atomic catastrophe which could wipe out the human race also serve to protect the very forces which perpetuate the danger?”¹¹ A little bit further on in the text, one of the examples of consumer manipulation Marcuse mentions involves the real case of a “luxury fall-out shelter,” with Marcuse adding that even though “carpeting, scrabble and TV are provided in the \$1000 model [...], no logic or language should be capable of correctly joining luxury and fall-out.”¹²

Yet, these undoubtedly outdated (and for us sometimes even endearingly terrifying) examples can serve to clarify still present phenomena. Substitute ‘atomic catastrophe’ for ‘extreme Islamic terrorism’ and ‘wipe out the human race’ for ‘wipe out the western way of living,’ and suddenly this example seems applicable to the vicious circle that is ‘the war against terror’ of our time, with on the one hand the role Europe and the United States played in creating the conditions for Islamic radicalisation to flourish – for instance by selling weapons to parties or dictators whom they would later come to demonise – and on the other hand their current policies which for various reasons only seem to fan the flames of extreme radicalisation, rather than subduing it.

This example merely serves to show the temporal and cultural malleability of Marcuse's way of revealing the inner contradictions of phenomena occurring in a given society. But can we extrapolate this to current society as a whole? When Marcuse analyses one of the major themes of *One-Dimensional Man* – the “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom”¹³ that prevails in Advanced Industrial Society – he points at the oppressive tendencies that exist in some modern (and, at the time of publication, mostly western) societies and states: “There are large areas within and without these societies where the described

¹¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, i.

¹² Idem., 89-90.

¹³ Idem., 1.

tendencies do not prevail – I would say: not yet prevail.”¹⁴ Marcuse’s prediction concerning the expanding sphere of advanced industrialisation, as we have seen, seems to have come true, with an increase in global production, commodification and consumption as the inevitable result. Even the formally communist People’s Republic of China seems to have dipped its toes in Faustian waters, with developments like the to some maybe bizarre concept of ‘Singles’ Day,’ on which single people celebrate their being single by buying themselves gifts, resulting in a country-wide online shopping spree that in 2016 reached an exorbitant collective spending of 17.8 billion dollars in just one day.¹⁵ Suffice it to say that many of the topics Marcuse touched upon can still, albeit in altered forms, be relevant to our day and age.

1.1.2 The Dialectical method and critical thinking

Marcuse, being a member of the Frankfurt School, used the dialectical method as a way to uncover that what is hidden, but already present. It originates from the thinking of Hegel and, after him Marx, two authors whose importance for Marcuse – or any thinker of the Frankfurt School for that matter – cannot be overlooked. The dialectical method of thinking looks at reality with all its facts, certainties and seemingly static social or scientific structures, and tries to reveal the inner contradictions that exist therein. This way of thinking is ‘negative,’ not in any normative way, but because it negates a certain reality, to uncover that which is looming inside. The aforementioned case of the luxury fall-out shelter may serve again as clarification. Marcuse stated that no one who thinks rationally or logically should be able to connect the adjective ‘luxury’ with the concept of fall-out. There exists a tension between these two words that is inherently contradictory: no amount of TV, carpeting, or scrabble can offer luxury or comfort in a world ravaged by nuclear radiation. The problem however, is that this contradiction is not immediately visible to everyone.

For Marcuse, the concealment of the contradictory nature of a luxury fall-out shelter had a number of reasons: the conditions in the 1960s were such that the average person in the United States lived in actual fear of ‘mutual assured destruction,’ and the annihilation of the known world through atomic warfare was considered an actual possibility.¹⁶ In other words, it became a fact of life: given the way the society of that time was built around the dual forces of production and consumption, it seems only logical that some company would eventually come up with the idea of making a profit out of producing and selling luxury bomb shelters. Marcuse would say that it all seemed perfectly rational, meaning that, given the situation, the contradiction between ‘luxury’ and ‘fall-out’ would not be perceived as being contradictory. Rational as it may be in a given society, Marcuse would instead insist that a society which can produce the conditions in which such a potent contradiction can be perceived as rational, must be irrational itself, and once you are fully aware of such contradictions in the society you live in, you cannot but demand change. For those who are not convinced by the Cold War example of a luxury fall-out shelter, suffice it to say that we live in a time where someone can call himself

¹⁴ Idem., xvii (my emphasis).

¹⁵ Frank Lavin, “Singles’ Day Sales Scorecard: A Day In China Now Bigger Than A Year in Brazil,” in *Forbes* (Nov. 15, 2016) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/franklavin/2016/11/15/singles-day-scorecard-a-day-in-china-now-bigger-than-a-year-in-brazil/#2b7c6b981076>.

¹⁶ In a way it still does, of course, but these fears are not as prominent as they once were.

a 'Marketing Guru,'¹⁷ and a great number of people are losing their mind over having to be mindful.

From the above we can deduce two things. 1) the relation between what is true and what is not, between what is, and what could be, is historical, and 2) because it is historical, there must always be a tension between what is *actual* and what is *possible*, and if one is to have change, one should be able, through dialectical or negative thinking, to reveal the contradictions present at any time and place in history.

Here then we have the central problem of *One-Dimensional Man*: one-dimensional individuals cannot see past the veil of the actual, into the realm of the possible. They cannot reflect critically on their society, nor on their position therein, and therefore they cannot be free. The result is that advanced industrial societies are in danger of becoming a one-dimensional society where paradoxical situations are taken for granted because they remain concealed: Marcuse sees a world where the *irrational* becomes *rational* because "[u]nder the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole."¹⁸ Conformity to the way things are seems like the rational course of action for the individual, because non-conformity would simultaneously clutter the engine of the machine that creates a comfortable way of life, and have an immediate negative financial and social effect on the individual. The catch, of course, is that conformity is only rational within the limits of the system, and because one-dimensional thinking makes it impossible to see beyond those limits, the status quo becomes the *only* rationality.

This would seem to be the end of any kind of real opposition, let alone any kind of cultural or political plurality. For how can one effectively oppose the status-quo without being perceived as irrational, or downright crazy? Marcuse would say that true opposition becomes impossible in the one-dimensional society, but that this does not spell the end for plurality. Instead, opposition is *incorporated* by the prevailing rationality. Marcuse calls this the flattening of discourse. This flattening of discourse occurs because any oppositional voice that refuses to be incorporated will receive the stigma of irrationality, and so loses its subversive potential, making achieving social change progressively more difficult.

1.2 The Role of Technology and False Needs in Closing of the Realm of the Possible

1.2.1 Technical Rationality

Marcuse believes that one of the most important factors in the aforementioned closing of the realm of the possible and the shaping of society as a whole is (the use of) technology. To understand this, one must keep in mind that when Marcuse speaks of technology, he speaks of technology in a very broad sense. A distinction is made between technology as a whole and

¹⁷ Stephen Brown & Pauline Maclaren, "The Future Is Past: Marketing, Apocalypse and the Retreat from Utopia," in *Marketing Apocalypse: Eschatology, Escapology and the Illusion of the End*, ed. Jim Bell, Stephen Browne & David Carson (Routledge 2003), 260.

¹⁸ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 2.

technics proper, the latter being individual pieces of technology or inventions, like cars, televisions, chips and other machines. Technics proper are neutral in *essence*, but as they are always used in a certain way within a certain context, they can effectively never be truly neutral.¹⁹ So, technology as a whole should not be seen as individual technics. Instead, it should be understood as a social process:²⁰ society is shaped by the way the totality of available technics is used in that society, and in a sense society can be said to shape itself, because the availability of technics depends on the creative ingenuity of the individuals that live therein.

Marcuse goes on to say that it follows from the above that the way society is organised is determined by those who hold power of the direction of the available technics, who are the people who own the machines and subsequently direct it at the flourishing of a capitalist economy. The technological prowess to produce on a massive, unprecedented scale has come to dictate the modes of production, and subsequently the ways individuals fit in the system that is so created: a system wherein it is economically viable for an individual to train for a certain occupation, and once that occupation is attained, the earned salary will enable him to buy the products that the system produces, and so live a comfortable life.

Marcuse envisages the workings of the technological society almost as intricate as a naturally occurring ecosystem. If there's a niche, it will be filled. It's all very rational. The big difference of course, is that this system is everything *but* natural, and the niches are created with a specific goal in mind. The rationality of our time is technological rationality, because technology determines what the rational way to live is, and as seen before, non-complicity will have immediate negative effects and is perceived as irrational. Technological rationality is a new form of social control.²¹ Those who are in power in advanced industrialised societies are democratically elected governments that with a capitalist ideology aimed at the maximization of profits through production and consumption of commodities apply the technological apparatus to fulfil their needs accordingly. Technological rationality, then, is also political rationality, and because politics are an expression of a specific political ideology, technological rationality should also be regarded as ideological.²²

Important to note is that we should not think of this political technological rationality as being some kind of master plan drawn up by a congregation of 'big bad' capitalist conspirators. The people in power are those people – or organisations – that influence the direction of the technological apparatus through the ideology they represent. In most contemporary western societies this is a capitalist ideology that encourages excessive production and consumption. However, the latter does not mean that the individuals who carry out this ideology are themselves free from this capitalist use of the technological apparatus and how it shapes society, and through it, their own lives. They might in some cases be more conscious about it than the average individual, but given that they probably support the ideology they carry out, they are even less likely to critically assess its premises.

¹⁹ Arnold Farr, "Herbert Marcuse," in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2017 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/marcuse/>.

²⁰ Herbert Marcuse, "Some Social Implications Of Modern Technology," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhard (New York: Continuum 1982), 138.

²¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 9.

²² *Idem.*, 11.

To sum up: technology, being the totality of technics available for application by the democratically elected political ideology, has in advanced industrialised society become a new form of social control that determines the way it is rational to live one's life, regardless of one's financial or social position in society. Of course, forcing individuals to live in a certain way from which they themselves will not actually benefit has in the past led to often violent revolutions, organised as a serious force of opposition, that have led to significant changes in social structures. One only has to look at the cause(s) of any violent revolution in the past to see that involuntary oppression is a high-risk line of action. In other words, oppression of an entire people needs the people's cooperation if it is to rid itself of serious, potentially subversive opposition.

1.2.2 False Needs and Repressive Desublimation

The best way to get an individual to become complicit to his own oppression is to have him identify with the ideology of his 'oppressors.' Marcuse understood this well, and he says this is best achieved through instilling people with desire for the things that the system has to offer. The desire so instilled takes the form of what Marcuse calls 'false needs,' as opposed to 'true needs.' To understand the distinction, consider the following example: the donkey runs because it wants to eat the carrot on the end of the stick. The one-dimensional individual runs because he wants to have the iPhone 7 dangling just out of reach. The distinction is, I hope, instantly clear. The one-dimensional individual does not *need* the phone in the same way the donkey *needs* the carrot. The immense simplification of this analogy lays bare the essence of the distinction between true and false needs. It is satisfaction in function of survival, against satisfaction in function of satisfaction.

Of course, Marcuse does not mean to say that survival is the only goal of the human experience. In reality true needs like food, clothing and housing, should, as is so often the case with Marcuse, be seen as historical. The fact is that the world and humanity's place in it changes continually, and the shapes our vital needs take change with it. True needs change with a society's culture, like the rise of agriculture meant the inclusion of cultivated crops in man's diet, and penicillin became a true need in function of survival and longevity from the moment it was discovered. These needs become false needs when they are imposed on people living in a society in the sense that they surpass their original goal, like when certain crops are made out to be more desirable because they are labelled 'super foods,' or when one can take a pill to 'cure' every minor ailment.

Clear as this difference may be, Marcuse says that for those living under the current technological rationality the distinction is often concealed. They fail to see that these needs are not their own, because they fail to see the 'otherness' of these needs. The externally imposed need is thus internalised, which causes the individual to identify with the false need, and because it is ideologically superimposed, he can be said to identify with the powers that oppress him.²³ Of course, false needs are not restricted to iPhones, but can be both material and immaterial. In fact, Marcuse says that almost all needs, from the new the car you bought to drive to the job you have always wanted, to the yearning for the weekend that is felt whilst

²³ Idem., 4-5.

performing said job, and the alcohol and chicken wings you will share with your friends when the weekend finally comes, are actually false. And by gratifying those needs the system that produced them stands to benefit, and the dynamic is perpetuated. Up to this point, Marcuse's account has mostly been a reiteration and expansion of classic Marxist ideas, but here Marcuse takes a step past Marx. The desire to satisfy false needs also transcends class oppositions that we find in traditional Marxist thought. The rich and the poor work to satisfy the same needs: they want the same products, they watch the same programs etc.²⁴ The needs and aspirations of both classes have become virtually identical. Broadly speaking those needs are as follows: live a comfortable life, work, and consume. In other words, false needs offer a mould for the individuals of an *entire* society to fill. But how can needs possibly be created on such a grand scale? Marcuse's answer is deceptively simple: sex sells.

For the psychological mechanisms that underlie the creation of false needs Marcuse calls on Freudian psychoanalytic concepts. *One-Dimensional Man* is less overtly psychoanalytic than its predecessor *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), but in it Marcuse still draws on some of Freud's categories to explain the dynamics that play a part in the individuals' repression through needs, namely the manipulation (or re-direction) of libidinal energy in order to align the libido with commercial goals through a process called 'repressive desublimation.' To understand this desublimation, one must know that the term is an inversion of the Freudian mechanism of sublimation. Sublimation is the diversion of the sexual impulse from its original end, towards a less sexual 'higher' end, which is often cultural. This means that the sexual energy that creates the images and fantasies which are socially unacceptable and private, is turned into something that is useful to the individual, as sexual energy is satisfied in a non-sexual way and is used in the creation of something potentially beautiful, or critical, like a powerful work of art.

However, sex has been brought into the public sphere and, according to Marcuse, can no longer be considered true taboo.²⁵ Through certain cultural developments, like the hippy and psychedelic movements of the 60s, sex steadily lost its intensely private and taboo meaning and became a tolerable cultural image. This fact was not lost individuals and companies with a commercial interest, and soon sex was even used on a daily basis to advertise products. Think about larger-than-life billboards with half-naked babes telling the viewer to stop for hamburgers, or muscled male models lavishly spraying themselves with the latest perfume, but also the sexualisation of the workplace: Marcuse gives the example of the 'sexy office girl' or the 'virile sales executive,' that have themselves become some sort of marketable role model, working behind big open windows for all the world to see.²⁶ But this seems to have a consequence. Because human sexuality has been integrated into society, it seems to have lost its need for sublimation. As a result, and because there is no need for the libido to be redirected by the individual itself, it can be directed by external forces.

²⁴ *Idem.*, 8.

²⁵ Marcuse here makes a distinction between erotic and sexual energy. Eros, in Freud's later works, stands for the sexual constitution of the entire individual organism, whereas sexual energy is typified as being a partial drive. As Marcuse states: "Libido transcends beyond the immediate erotogenic zones" (IDM, 75), which, added to the above, seems to mean that Marcuse thinks that erotic pleasure is in the age of advanced industrialised society is more and more restricted to the private sphere, whereas sexual energy (de-eroticised) has been flung into the public sphere, thereby relinquishing control over its direction or application.

²⁶ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 74-5.

The way the current technological rationality utilises human's basic sexual instincts seems to be twofold: first, internal sexual energy is externalised by making sexuality part of the public sphere. Second, it is harnessed, and through sexual cues in public places like the workplace, and advertisements on TV or the side of the road, directed at the gratification of false needs. This is how Marcuse envisions the role of sexuality in convincing people that external needs are actually their own as a means to promote the consumption of certain goods and making of certain life choices from which the system stands to benefit, further cementing their mutual dependency. Because this desublimation is used to perpetuate the individual's desire to satisfy externally imposed false needs, and thereby making him more closely tied to the society's own rationality, it is also *repressive* desublimation.

Another important consequence of desublimation is that the original products of sublimation, critical works of art, by being integrated into society, lose the power to confront the beholder with something alien: an alternative reality that has the potential to lay bare conflicts and tendencies in oneself and in one's society. In other words, art loses its subversive power by becoming part of the society it was meant to criticise. It is not uncommon to see a piece of Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* stuck to a fridge, or Marx's *Das Kapital* for sale in the local drugstore, and while Marcuse states that this does not necessarily change the content of these works *an sich*, it radically changes the context in which these works are perceived, and the function they can fulfil.²⁷ Marcuse seems to envision a situation where Dali's clocks are completely molten and have merged with the cash flow: the sexual energy that, by being sublimated, once created them is now used to make people want to buy a molten clock fridge magnet from the museum gift shop.

1.3 The Happy Consciousness

The result of technological rationality with its repressive desublimation is a way of living and thinking that deploys our own natural impulses to warm us to the idea of conformity to a system that produces both the needs *and* the ways those needs can be satisfied. It strongly restricts the way individuals can choose to live their life. The biggest achievement of advanced industrialised society, says Marcuse, is that people actually seem to *enjoy* their own unfreedom. To the end of giving a face to this phenomenon Marcuse introduces the concept of the Happy Consciousness.

The Happy Consciousness –a way of thinking which “[...] reflects the belief that the real is rational, and that the established system, in spite of everything, delivers the goods,”²⁸ is an allusion, or a nod, if you will, to Hegel's figure of the ‘unhappy consciousness’: the unhappy consciousness sees the contradictions in itself, in its way of thinking, but is helpless to do anything about it, and is therefore unhappy.²⁹ This loss of ‘active’ autonomy³⁰ is compensated by a ‘passive’ autonomy. In other words, it is free insofar as it knows it is *not* free. Awareness

²⁷ Idem., 64.

²⁸ Idem., 79.

²⁹ Ludwig Heyde, “Autonomy and the Unhappy Consciousness,” in *Ethical Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Leuven: 1998), 259.

³⁰ If one can call autonomous, or even realistically attainable, the perfect realisation of self. Hegel certainly doesn't seem to think that realisation of self can be reached through an isolated, self-centred autonomy, but instead by belonging to the universality of reason. (Heyde, *Autonomy*, 259)

of such a contradiction is a powerful thing, and indeed, the figure of the unhappy consciousness is a prevalent factor in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: occurring at moments where a figure of consciousness, previously perfectly content with itself, figures out its own untenable nature, and undergoes transition.³¹ So, the unhappy consciousness, being aware of its own contradictions and typified by finitude and autonomy, is a powerful force for progress, as it would go against reason to remain (im)passive in the face of your own unfreedom. Marcuse inverts the unhappy consciousness and stretches the figurative shoe to the size of those in contemporary society who would fit it. The Happy Consciousness is in a sense the exact opposite of the unhappy consciousness: "it is the token of declining autonomy and comprehension."³² What this means is that the Happy Consciousness is the culmination of all the above: the blind *acceptance* of the closing of the realm of the possible, as well as the imposition of false needs and the reification of the social conditions, because the technological rationality has made good on its promise of a comfortable life, condensed into – and understood as a way of thinking and behaving.

Before I go on, it should be understood that Marcuse does not want to make a normative claim on what it means to be happy in the loaded sense of the word. I believe every attempt at a normative theory of happiness is a doomed and inherently flawed venture. Happiness indexes like the annual World Happiness Report are the contemporary equivalent of the felicific calculus, devoid of any qualitative content, because the criteria on which the outcomes are based are so broad that they are impossible to evaluate in any phenomenologically consistent way.³³ Marcuse would say that every individual should be perfectly capable of formulating what it means to be happy for himself, as long as he possesses autonomy. Any attempt at an external conception of happiness would undermine this autonomy. Consequently, this means that Marcuse cannot but think that the attainment of happiness, whatever it may be, is impossible under the current technological rationality.

So, from all the above we can deduce that there are three factors that are necessary to keep the consciousness 'happy': 1) high standards of living that ensure a comfortable way of living; 2) the internalisation of false, external needs that define what it means to lead comfortable, successful life, as well as the means to satisfy them; and 3) the transformation of the individual's de-eroticised sexual energy into desire to satisfy these needs. All these factors spin a web in which the individual is free to move and live, which according to Marcuse results

³¹ Heyde, *Autonomy*, 254.

³² Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 76.

³³ Consider the following an example of the strange conclusions that such an analysis as the World Happiness Report can yield: the happiness index of the World Happiness Report is calculated by weighing a nation's social control, freedom to make life choices, generosity, corruption perception, positive affect, positive affect, and gross domestic product (GDP) against the hypothetical nation of 'Dystopia', which represents the lowest possible score of the happiness index for a nation. Interestingly, since the 2016 report, the happiness index of Dystopia has dropped by 0.48 points (from 2.33 to 1.85). The reason for this, according to the official website, is the inclusion of the Central African Republic, whose variables of social control and GDP scored so low, that the nation's inclusion reshaped the normative determination of Dystopia, as defined in the report. In other words, the Central African Republic, at least in the happiness index's own terms, redefined what it means to live in a dystopia.

John F. Helliwel, Haifang Huang & Shun Wang, "Statistical Appendix for "The social Foundations of World Happiness," in Chapter 2 of *World Happiness Report*, (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2017), 3 & <http://worldhappiness.report/faq/> (2017).

in “[...] euphoria in unhappiness.”³⁴ The fact that Marcuse keeps speaking in terms of ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ doesn’t make an unmuddled reading of this dynamic easy, but it does say something about the way Marcuse perceives it. He speaks of unhappiness in terms of the perpetuation of the mechanisms that keep the individual trapped (sometimes willingly) in a reality that thrives on the individual’s inability to think and act as an autonomous being, which for Marcuse equals unhappiness.

Of course Marcuse is not blind to the discontent present in society. He writes: “[...] the happy consciousness is shaky enough –a thin surface over fear, frustration and disgust.” But instead of leading to a call for change, this discontent can have the opposite effect, as shown in this example from George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*³⁵, which perfectly describes this idea: In *Nineteen Eighty-four* each day at a set time the basic instincts of the citizens of Oceania, over which Big Brother rules with the Party, are fanned aflame by means of a transmission on the ‘telescreen,’ a tool for total observation and around the clock propaganda which is basically the lovechild of ‘Bentham’s Prison’ and 24/7 televised propaganda. In what is called the ‘two-minutes hate,’ all citizens of Oceania are forced to watch a clip that shows Oceania’s enemies, in most cases Mr. Goldstein, the (probably) fictional leader of the opposition, and are encouraged to vent all the fear, frustration, aggression and discontent that they experience from living under the strict, scarce and totalitarian rule of the Party on something that might not even exist. This redirection of basic instincts (in the ‘two minutes hate’ normally civilised people turn into animalistic caricatures of themselves³⁶), away from the Party, towards an invisible enemy in a way reminiscent of and similar to that of repressive sublimation, serves to turn discontent into a form of social cohesion.

The above might seem counter-intuitive, and is by no means totally convincing, but at the end of the day, says Marcuse, all the discontent in the world hasn’t been enough to rally the people to fight for qualitative change. As a result he is in the position to state that discontent is not so much a realistic possibility to make people aware of alternative ways of organising society as it is an incorporated symptom of the society they choose to live in: discontent is the price to be paid for comfortable living. The mechanisms that allow for the Happy Consciousness to prevail conspire to convince the individual he has no choice but to ‘choose’ to live a life he has no full control over, and to make it so that this choice is wholly internalised and therefore unconscious.

1.3.1 The Happy Consciousness As Object of Analysis

Now, the nature of Marcuse’s work, being a grand theory which uses Marxian and Freudian categories to create a way of understanding tendencies present in society, is such that it requires for the looking glass to be put aside in order to see the causes that underlie the observable phenomena. A consequence of this approach, however, is a high level of abstraction, which makes it hard to mark the boundaries of these tendencies. This means that in order to use Marcuse’s concepts, in this case the Happy Consciousness, for the comparative analysis I propose to make, a certain level of demarcation should be present. It is no use zooming in on a

³⁴ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 5.

³⁵ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four* (London: Signet Classics 1977 [1949]).

³⁶ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, 14.

concrete phenomenon, planting a 'Happy Consciousness' sticker on it and claim to have explained anything at all. Thus, in order to make a meaningful analysis of our contemporary society, some minor conceptual clarifications will have to be made.

Nowhere in *One-Dimensional Man* does Marcuse explicitly state what he believes to be the exact or approximate number of people with a Happy Consciousness in advanced industrialised society, nor would it have made any sense if he had done so. The Happy Consciousness describes a qualitative phenomenon, that of the lack of autonomy that goes along with conformity to comfort, so to speak. But the quantitative side should not be ignored. However, as may be symptomatic to his brand of philosophy, Marcuse tends to downplay nuance in the name of the poignancy. As a result, it sometimes sounds as if Marcuse deems the tendencies he describes in *One-Dimensional Man* fully crystallised. So, if we are to understand the level of integration of the Happy Consciousness, I think it would be helpful to make a distinction between the Happy Consciousness and what is called a 'false consciousness.' A 'false consciousness,' an arguably classical Marxist term, is a way of explaining, and in a way justifying, how an ideology comes to dominate the individual's consciousness (or that of a whole class or people), in such a way that it becomes blind to the forces that influence its thinking. It is a mystification of the forces that be. On the one hand positing a false consciousness can be a helpful way of revealing certain tendencies that exist in a society that lead towards acceptance of a given social reality, but on the other hand it is highly problematic, for he who ascribes the false consciousness implicitly lifts himself above the recipient thereof. In a way this is an a-posteriori judgement that refuses falsification, because the receiver's own experience, and thereby also his ground for rejecting the judgement, is preemptively invalidated by the ascriber. As a consequence, in its own way, it flattens the discourse by means of preliminary disqualification.

Now, we could understand the Happy Consciousness as being a false consciousness, and at times Marcuse seems to do so himself. In one case he writes that: "[t]o the degree to which they correspond to the given reality, thought and behaviour express a false consciousness [...] and this false consciousness has become embodied in the prevailing technological rationality."³⁷ From the formulation of this sentence we can see that Marcuse is at least aware of the problematic nature of ascribing a false consciousness to anyone. Yet throughout *One-Dimensional Man* he does not seem to be able to fully detach himself from the implication that any act of reason (or any action) within technological rationality is determined, at least for an important part, by that rationality, and that therefore purely independent thought is impossible. Yet, independent thought is the conditional requirement for negative thinking which is only 'cure' that Marcuse offers in order to escape the grips of technological rationality. Are we then truly doomed to slip down the slope of the Happy Consciousness?

Sure enough, the parts in *One-Dimensional Man* that completely downplay the subversive potential of individuals who are caught in the technological rationality are some of the least convincing. I do not mean to say that qualitative change in the social structure of contemporary society would be easily realisable, but it seems not to be as generally unthinkable as Marcuse seems to imply. Marcuse says that every call for radical qualitative change, every

³⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 145.

thought of an alternative reality is instantly disqualified as utopian³⁸ in light of the ‘rational’ reality of everyday life. This might be true up to a point, but it certainly does not explain that so many people are able to point out the *dystopian* aspects in society. More and more we seem to have come to a point where discontent, instead of being a force for social control, seems to have begun to poke holes in the Happy Consciousness. Sure, this discontent has not yet led to any significant, widespread change, but it represents a certain potential and has to be taken seriously. At some point, all the comfort in the world will not be enough to keep the misery at bay.

So as not to downplay the potentially subversive discontent already present in Marcuse’s time, I would say – and I think Marcuse must have meant it in this way too – that instead of positing the unhappy consciousness as a potential for negative (dialectical) thinking as an antithesis against the Happy Consciousness thesis, going into this analysis we should understand the distinction as gradual: imagine a scale where the unhappy consciousness, as the conditional requirement of autonomous, negative thought, sits on one end and the total integration of the Happy Consciousness on the other. In this view only the space in between is theoretically interesting, as this can subject of a fruitful analysis. With this tool at hand, we can begin our analysis of the contemporary status of the Happy Consciousness through fiction, starting with Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

³⁸ here: literally no-where, impossible.

2. Brave New World: Happiness in Captivity

2.1 Introducing *Brave New World*

For anyone who has read Huxley's *Brave New World* some, or indeed almost all parts of Marcuse's must surely sound familiar. Its depiction of a technological society that is totally controlled and organised by a small group of people guided by a specific technological ideology reads like an over-amplification of Marcuse's advanced industrial society: a society where all the tendencies described by Marcuse have come uniformly true. I will therefore give a Marcusean reading of this work of dystopian science fiction to the end of putting these tendencies in the fictional Petri dish, and apply the perfect temperature.

The world of *Brave New World* is a fascinating example of a world not beaten into submission like in other famous dystopian novels like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* or Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), but of a world slowly lulled into pleasant conformity. Through the dual forces of biological engineering and psychological conditioning citizens of the World State are designed and prepared for life within the global society from the embryo stadium as sanctioned by the ten World Controllers, who safeguard and execute the World State's ideology. In the numerous 'Hatching Facilities' the future generations are bottle-grown and designed to live specific lives, with specific roles within a rigid predetermined caste system (from 'Alpha-Plus' to 'Epsilon Semi-Morons'), and in the 'Neo-Pavlovian Conditioning Rooms' newly born (or rather: decanted) infants are psychologically hardwired to hate, fear, love and desire the things that benefit the World State's consumer driven efficiency. Growing up, their conditioning is fine-tuned through 'hypnopaedia'³⁹ or sleep-teaching. These combined forces result in a stable society consisting of happy individuals to whom the world seems tailor-made to fit their own being, while in reality it is exactly the other way around.

First and foremost, *Brave New World* is a satirical novel of ideas. It takes certain tendencies present in Huxley's own time, for an important part inspired by certain trips he made to the United States prior to the writing phase⁴⁰, and blows them up to their often hilarious, yet frightening ultimate conclusions. The citizens of the World State are encouraged to indulge in mindless hedonism and consumption and to fornicate to their heart's desire to keep their passions low and the wheels of the system turning. The immediate gratification of all this lust and desire is facilitated with products like 'zippicamiknicks' (undergarments with front zippers for maximum accessibility), or Malthusian belts (made out of real morocco-surrogate!) bulging with contraceptives to remove any possibility of natural pregnancy. Even the games the people are taught to like facilitate a maximum level of components that have to be produced, to keep production and consumption high⁴¹. All these ideas serve to satirise the way Huxley thought the future might actually turn out if left unchecked.

For a Marcusean reading of the novel I will first analyse the three main characters as three different 'stages,' if you will, of the Happy Consciousness, namely, 1) Lenina Crowne as

³⁹ Hypnopaedia: "The greatest moralising and socialising force of all time!" In: Huxley, *Brave New World*, 23.

⁴⁰ David Bradshaw, "Introduction By David Bradshaw," in: *Brave New World* (London: Vintage Classics 2014), xix.

⁴¹ "Imagine the folly of allowing people to play elaborate games which do nothing whatsoever to increase consumption. It's madness." In: Huxley, *Brave New World*, 3.

the 'happy' integrated stage; 2) Bernard Marx as the discontented stage; and 3) John the Savage as the unhappy consciousness. I will then pit them against each other to see how they contrast and influence each other throughout the novel, as their interrelations can be seen as a kind of microcosm of society.

2.2 A Clash of Consciousnesses

Lenina Crowne is a well-rounded product of the World State's Fordian technological rationality. In fact, she is not merely born into a system in which she fits, but, like all other citizens of the civilised world, she is born *of* it. Lenina is a Beta-Plus citizen, which means that despite lacking the above average intelligence and limited critical mental capacity which Alpha citizens are allowed to have in order to fulfil their functions, she is born into a privileged position. She has a good job at the London Hatching Facility and is, even for a Beta-Plus, uncommonly pretty. Consequently, she is a highly desired sexual commodity among the higher castes, which enables her to float with ease from partner to partner⁴² for the daily after-work dose of games, 'feelies' and meaningless sex.

Let us take a look at a typical day in the life of Lenina Crowne. Straight from the roof of her workplace she will partner up, and get in a helicopter to fly to today's entertainment. She can play numerous state approved games, like Centrifugal Bumble-puppy, Escalator Squash, and electromagnetic Obstacle Golf (where the ball is electromagnetically led past the obstacles into the hole), which are designed to be easy to play, easy to win and thus to stimulate chemical brain processes linked to satisfaction through victory. When these urges are satisfied, she and her partner will, once again, fly off together. This time to the 'feelies,' which are some sort of enhanced virtual reality cinema experiences in which the viewer can not only see and hear the action, but can smell the smells, taste the food and feel the tactile sensations of the characters on the screen.⁴³ The feelies are pornographic to a high degree and do not leave anything up to the audience's imagination: "the stereoscopic lips came together again, and once more the facial erogenous zones of the six thousand spectators [...] tingled with almost intolerable galvanic pleasure. 'Ooh...'"⁴⁴ With their passion incited, Lenina and her man leave the feelies and go back home. She zips down her zippicamknicks, and man and woman consummate their casual bond.

Of course not every day looks exactly the same, but the differences are merely variations on the theme. On the whole, Lenina dances to the tune (sometimes even literally⁴⁵) of the state's all-encompassing rationality. An intricate closed system of conditioned reification of the social order through the creation of false needs and the conditions of their instant gratification, raging

⁴² For, as the hypnopaedic proverb goes: "everyone belongs to everyone else" In: Huxley, *Brave New World*, 34.

⁴³ "[...] dazzling and incomparably more solid-looking than they would have in actual flesh and blood, far more real than reality, there stood the stereoscopic images, locked in [one] another's arms." Conceptually infantile, these features are meant solely to stimulate both the positive and negative senses, and if need be are even brought in accordance with a moral duality: in the novel's sole elaborately depicted feely, negative sensation are linked to the antagonist, and after having dealt with this antagonist, the story gets a happy ending, both literal and figurative. In: Huxley, *Brave New World*, 146.

⁴⁴ *Idem*.

⁴⁵ Another popular after-work pastime are the community dances, where people are whipped to a frenzy by music from 'London's Finest Scent and Colour Organs' or 'Calvin Stopes and His Sixteen Sexophones.'

repressive desublimation of the natural instincts and a sense of comfortable belonging all conspire to make Lenina, and many millions like her, perfect examples of the Happy Consciousness.

Still, not everything can be roses and sunshine all the time, for the citizens of the World State are still capable of feeling, and, as the Controllers are perfectly aware, “feeling lurks in that interval of time between desire and its consummation.”⁴⁶ Yet, the state has an answer to that. If, for example, by some miracle, Lenina is left on her own for the night, she could always embark on a ‘soma holiday.’ Soma is the state-sanctioned, perfectly synthesised drug. It causes a kind of numb euphoria and is described as having “all the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects.”⁴⁷ Soma serves to bridge the uncanny valley, that empty space that exists underneath “the solid substance of their distractions,”⁴⁸ where the state’s reach falters and the human mind takes over.

In many cases soma seems to be the glue that keeps the Word State together. In fact, Bernard Marx at some point reflects on a colleague of his and muses: “people said of him [Benito Hoover] that he could have got through life without ever touching soma. The malice and bad tempers from which other people had to take [soma] holidays never afflicted him. Reality for Benito was always sunny⁴⁹,” strongly implying that for the great majority of people reality is not always as sunny as they want to – and in fact do – believe. The above rhymes strongly with Marcuse’s typification of the Happy Consciousness as ‘euphoria in unhappiness.’ As we have seen a state of perfect happiness, whatever that would be, can in no circumstance be attained in a state of unfreedom, but the illusion of happiness in conformity can. Taking, or refraining from taking Soma can therefore be seen as the choice to stay unfree but comfortable, as the affirmation or denial, subscription to or opting out of the state’s rationality, a choice that is made progressively easier when the choice is made from a privileged social position, like Lenina’s. A position not shared by Bernard Marx.

Bernard Marx, an Alpha-Plus citizen who (it is rumoured), through some unfortunate mistake during the embryo stage, has been left with the physique of a Gamma-Minus⁵⁰, does not seem able to fit into society the way Lenina does. The others, people from the Alpha caste – but much to Bernard’s dismay also some from lesser castes – treat him as an inferior individual, which has made Bernard a somewhat miserable, cynical man. Because of this slight physical deviation, the desires and false needs that are thrown up by the state are not all within his power to satisfy, which opens up the way for frustrations to become a manifest aspect of his life, as indeed they do. Bernard’s job as a hypnopædic specialist, which made him more aware of how certain ‘truths’ are developed, only heightens his cynicism.⁵¹ These two factors, and the self-consciousness in which it results, leave him utterly miserable: “I am I, and I wish I wasn’t⁵²,” he muses when he finds himself at eye level with a Delta citizen.

⁴⁶ Huxley, *Brave New World*, 37.

⁴⁷ *Idem.*, 46.

⁴⁸ *Idem.*, 47.

⁴⁹ *Idem.*, 51-2.

⁵⁰ *Idem.*, 151.

⁵¹ “One hundred repetitions three nights a week for four years, thought Bernard [...]. Sixty-two thousand four hundred repetitions make one truth. Idiots!”⁵¹ In: Huxley, *Brave new World*, 40.

⁵² *Idem.*, 54.

Yet, Lenina takes a certain liking to him despite her friend's objections⁵³, and Bernard, jumping on the opportunity, takes her out on a date. Bernard and Lenina seem to occupy almost completely opposite positions within the status quo, with Lenina possessing a Happy Consciousness and Bernard an unhappy consciousness. Yet, things might turn out not to be so black and white. On their first date, hovering in their helicopter, they have a conversation that very clearly demonstrates how their respective worldviews compare:

[*Bernard, complaining about the sound of the helicopter radio*]: 'I want to look at the sea in peace,' he said. 'One can't even look with that beastly noise going on.'

[*Lenina*]: 'But it's lovely. And I don't want to look.'

'But I do,' he insisted. 'It makes me feel as though...' he hesitated, searching for words with which to express himself, 'as though I were more *me*. If you see what I mean. More on my own, not so completely a part of something else. Not just a cell in a social body. Doesn't it make you feel like that, Lenina?'

But Lenina was crying. 'It's horrible, it's horrible,' she kept repeating. 'And how can you talk like that about not wanting to be a part of the social body? After all, everyone works for everyone else. We can't do without anyone. Even Epsilons...'

'Yes I know,' said Bernard derisively. '“Even Epsilons are useful”! So Am I. And I damned well wish I weren't!'

Lenina was shocked by his blasphemy. 'Bernard!' she protested in a voice of amazed distress. 'How can you?'

In a different key, 'How can I?' he repeated meditatively. 'No, the real problem is: How is it that I can't, or rather – because, after all, I know quite well why I can't – what would it be like if I could, if I were free – not enslaved by my conditioning.'

'But Bernard, you're saying the most awful things.'

'Don't you wish you were free, Lenina?'

'I don't know what you mean. I am free. Free to have the most wonderful time. Everybody's happy nowadays.'

He laughed, 'Yes, “Everybody's happy nowadays!” We begin giving the children that at five. But wouldn't you like to be free to be happy in some other way, Lenina? In your own way, for example; not in everybody else's way?'

'I don't know what you mean,' she repeated.⁵⁴

Bernard is utterly miserable, and is, to a considerable extent, aware of the forces that determine the way he can live his life. He seems at first glance to be the embodiment of Hegel's subversive unhappy consciousness, and being an Alpha-Plus citizen, should possess (to some extent) the mental capacity for independent thought. Should we then, recalling the image of the 'Happy Consciousness scale,' put Bernard on the side of negative extremity, as unhappy consciousness? I think we should not, for the reason that despite his self-consciousness, he does not wish to truly be free. He expresses his wish several times, but when push comes to shove, he covers back to his miserable, albeit safe position in the World State. Take for example an encounter Bernard has with the Director of the London hatching Facility. The director, going on reports of Bernard's untypical behaviour, threatens to send Bernard into exile in a Sub-centre in Iceland, outside of reaches of the World State. At first Bernard takes pride “in the thought that

⁵³ “He's so ugly! [...] and then so *small*.” In: Huxley, *Brave new World*, 39.

⁵⁴ *Idem.*, 78-9.

he stood alone embattled against the order of things⁵⁵,” but when moments later he receives word from a friend that the director is looking for a replacement at the hypnopaedic centre, “Bernard was appalled. Of that imagined stoicism, that *theoretical* courage, not a trace was left.”⁵⁶

Bernard’s physical deformity and relatively high sense of awareness of the social order make him an individual of paradoxical sentiments. To a relatively high degree he is aware that he is not free, that no one is free, and that his awareness of this fact makes him an individual. Yet, his self-consciousness does not lead him to any kind of decisive action, and instead of criticising the social order around him he envies those who do fit in because, on account of his conditioning, he cannot *but* want to identify with the system he was born of. From the above conversation between Bernard and Lenina we can conclude the following: Lenina cannot see an alternate reality, where she is free to be happy in her own way, for the simple reason that she fully identifies with the social conditions around her. Consequently she is free to be happy in precisely her ‘own’ way, which means that actually she is not free at all. Bernard, on the other hand, being alienated from and miserable through his position in society cannot make the happiness of the World State his *own* happiness, but because he is so much a product of his society and he has never seen anything else, he cannot give content to any abstract concept of an alternative reality that he might have. Instead, he envies everyone who does fit in and blames himself. He constantly walks his personal tightrope between envy and contempt, dangling over a gaping schism of misery and alienation. Bernard might be the most ‘unhappy’ Happy Consciousness in *Brave New World*, but, in a sense, he still chooses to live within the rationality of the World State. Bernard’s Happy Consciousness cannot become unhappy consciousness in collision with Lenina’s consciousness, because in the end, they subscribe to the same worldview.

Things start to change, however, when Bernard takes Lenina to the New-Mexico savage reservation⁵⁷, where they meet John the Savage. John was born to a natural mother (who came from the World State) into the New-Mexico savage reservation, a world of ritual and culture, in which he is rejected because he does not look like everyone else. From his mother he hears fragments and snippets from a different, Other world outside his reality in which everyone is happy, but his mother, now a peyote and mescal addict (for lack of soma) cannot tell him anything he can understand from his own frame of reference. She does, however, teach him how to read, which sets him apart from all the other children in his village. Around his twelfth birthday John is given a dishevelled copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, which he learns by heart and from which he derives all the values with which he comes to identify himself. His becomes a world of virtue and honour. By the time Bernard and Lenina visit his village he is equal parts tribal savage and Shakespearean hero.

⁵⁵ *Idem.*, 85.

⁵⁶ *Idem.*, 90 (my emphasis).

⁵⁷ Some parts of planet Earth were not seen to be fit to be colonised, owing to unfavourable geography or lack of natural resources. These areas were simply fenced off and labelled ‘savage reservations,’ an obvious allusion to the Native American reserves in the United States. Within their boundaries people still live and breed naturally, and are left to their own devices. These reservations therefore serve as a contrast to the strict efficient Fordian rationality of the World State.

John and Bernard instantly bond over the fact that they feel alone in their environment. John tells Bernard his life story and having been deeply moved by it, Bernard decides to take John back with him to London in order to shake people from their 'happy' dogmatic slumbers. Yet, John's appearance does not have the desired effect. Instead, the confrontation with the citizens with a mysterious individual from another world merely causes curiosity instead of subversion. Bernard, by showing John to the world, manages to humiliate the director of the London Hatching Facility, who (as Bernard already knew, turns out to be John's father⁵⁸, but the reveal causes extreme hilarity to everyone else: "'My father!' [...] the comically smutty word relieved what had become a quite intolerable tension. Laughter broke out, almost hysterically, peal after peal, as though it would never stop. [...] My *father!* Oh Ford, Oh Ford! That was really too good."⁵⁹

John's otherness is understood only as a curiosity, entertainment, like watching a monkey in a zoo. As a consequence the whole affair affects Bernard in a perhaps unsuspected way. Being the one who brought John with him from the reservation, Bernard enjoys a brief and intense spike of popularity, and is showered with all the things that he always envied everyone else for: "Success went fizzily to Bernard's head and in the process completely reconciled him (as any good intoxicant would do) with a world which, up till then, he had found very unsatisfactory. [...] he did genuinely believe there were things to criticise. (At the same time he genuinely liked being a success and having all the girls he wanted.)"⁶⁰

Success, here, has the same effect on Bernard as soma. It 'blinds' Bernard to his desire for change and makes him choose his own pleasure above freedom. But it cannot last. After a short while John refuses to be Bernard's exhibition object, and people lose interest, leaving Bernard to stand in the ruins of his short-lived success. With success gone, Bernard immediately resorts to soma to drown his misery. It follows that Bernard, after having seen an alternative to his own social reality through John, decides for himself that the chance at success in the given order is enough to keep playing the game. In any case, he deems it is preferable over the dusty, grimy world of the savage reservation.

Lenina, also confronted with the dirtiness of the reservation, and through the physical deterioration of John's mother is predictably disgusted from the outset. She is even more convinced of the value of comfort and stability than she was before. Yet, she develops a desire for John. At the same time John, from the moment he sees Lenina, falls hopelessly in love with her, but their potential union is severely complicated by their respective backgrounds. For Lenina John is an object of lust, as Lenina is an object of love for John. Lenina's lust could easily be satisfied, but love for John, with his Shakespearean influence, has to be earned through devotion and sacrifice. The two intertwined – but here conflicting feelings lead to an eventual confrontation where Lenina unzips her clothing and throws her naked self at him, confused to the point of desperation by John's seemingly conflicted signals. Driven mad by the conflict between his strong physical lust and deep ideological romanticism he slips into a mad frenzy:

⁵⁸ Nearly twenty years before the events of the novel take place the director and Linda took a trip to the reservation, where they were separated by a storm. After searching in vain, the director abandons the search and Linda and she ends up in the village, alone and pregnant.

⁵⁹ Huxley, *Brave New World*, 131-2.

⁶⁰ *Idem.*, 136.

“he caught her by the shoulder and shook her. ‘Whore!’ he shouted. ‘Whore! Impudent strumpet!’”⁶¹

The significance of this encounter is that maybe for the very first time in her life, Lenina is confronted with a strong desire that cannot be instantly gratified, and instantly tiny cracks in her Happy Consciousness start to appear. She feels empty, depressed and physically nauseous, and these feelings are not instantly flattened by soma holidays. Even her usefulness for the state is put to question when she distractedly forgets to vaccinate a bottled embryo and inadvertently causes the first casualty from sleeping sickness in half a century twenty-two years later.⁶² Yet, after this temporary intrusion of frustrated desire, Lenina goes on with her life like before, albeit maybe a little more sad.

Lenina and Bernard both fail to develop a truly unhappy consciousness in confrontation with John’s ‘pre-civilised consciousness,’ with what they have never before been able to experience. They both end up sort of clinging to what is left of their former lives. Throughout the novel they slide up and down the scale of the Happy Consciousness, but both never end up (willingly or not) as masters of their own life. John, however, once introduced into the brave new world, quickly realises that he cannot emotionally, morally, psychologically, or intellectually accept the reality he finds himself in. His confrontation with the ‘civilised’ world pushes him to the edge step by step.

The first time John utters the famous words from which the title is derived, “O brave new world that has such people in it⁶³,” John exults (in line with the sentiment expressed by Miranda in the original Shakespearean line from *The Tempest*) when Bernard tells him he can go with him to London. However, the next time John thinks back to these words, they take on another meaning. John, upon arriving in London, is met as an honourable guest and is taken on a tour through the city and its facilities. The first time he actually sees the price that is paid for comfort and stability in the World State Miranda’s words come back. They are standing in a small factory where the completed products from the assembly line are inspected by

[...] eighteen identical curly auburn girls in Gamma green, packed in crates by thirty-four short-legged, left handed male Delta-Minuses, and loaded in the waiting trucks and lorries by sixty-three blue-eyed, flaxen and freckled Epsilon Semi-Morons. ‘O brave new world...’ by some malice of his memory the savage found himself repeating Miranda’s words. ‘O brave new world that has such people in it.’ [...] the savage had suddenly broken away from his companions and was violently retching [...], as though the solid earth had been a helicopter in an air pocket.⁶⁴

Horrified by these nightmarish identical worker slaves, and disillusioned and offended by his clash of values with Lenina, John cannot but look at the ‘civilised world’ without feeling sick. The loss of individuality, here symbolised by Huxley as the endless repetition of the same faces, is what finally pushes John over the line: as he is shouldering his way through an ocean of identical twins waiting for their daily soma distribution Miranda’s word once again come back and

⁶¹ Idem., 170.

⁶² Idem., 164.

⁶³ Idem., 121.

⁶⁴ Idem., 139.

[...] mocked him derisively. 'How beautiful mankind is! O brave new world...' [...] The Savage stood looking on. 'O brave new world, O brave new world ...' In his mind the singing words seemed to change their tone. They had mocked him through his misery and remorse, mocked him with how cynical a note of derision! [...] Now, suddenly, they trumpeted a call to arms. 'O brave new world!' Miranda was proclaiming the possibility of loveliness, the possibility of transforming this nightmare into something fine and noble. 'O brave new world!' It was a challenge, a command.⁶⁵

Immediately acting on this call to arms John single-handedly tries to start a revolution. Helped by the sympathising Helmholtz Watson⁶⁶, and from a distance by a conflicted Bernard, he throws all the soma out of a window. The situation gets dangerous as the hordes of Delta citizens try to tear apart the men who are taking away their soma, but the police swoop in with soma vapour cannons and water pistols filled with anaesthetics and put a quick end to the revolt. The World State, in a show of technical rationality, strikes down this freak spike of irrational behaviour, both through immediate action *and* retroactively by having conditioned the Deltas to not even be able to consider John's actions as rational.

The whole event is rather underwhelming in terms of consequences. John, Bernard and Helmholtz get brought before the Controller, Mustapha Mond, who unflinchingly spells out the state's rationality: why things work like they do and why, given the current situation, things cannot possibly be different. For their involvement Bernard and Helmholtz get sent into exile to live out their lives among other potentially subversive individuals on Iceland, and John, who now fully understands why he hates the civilised world, decides to leave London and try to live as a hermit in a deserted lighthouse in the countryside. John becomes the irrational in face of rational: he would literally starve himself if it meant that he never had to eat anything from the civilised world again: "'That'll teach them,' he thought vindictively. It would also teach him."⁶⁷

In the end it is not starvation that spells the end for John. He is rediscovered by sightseers from London and when Lenina finds her way there, overcome by violent emotion, he attacks her with a whip. Spurred on and fascinated by this explosion of basic sexual and violent instincts, the crowd around them gets whipped into a frenzy, and John finds himself physically overwhelmed by the freak violent orgy that follows. The next morning he hangs himself in the staircase of his lighthouse, unable to live with his actions of the previous night, and tormented by the shadow of the World State.

A Marcusean reading of *Brave New World* suggests that, in a world where all the tendencies set in motion by advanced industrialised society have come uniformly true, the only response to any outside perspective seem to be mild depression, exile or suicide. Fortunately we do not live in such a world, as Marcuse knew well. Still, from reading of *Brave New World* from a Marcusean perspective we can deduce that it is 1) comfortably easy to subscribe to a way of life that perfectly fits one's socio-economic position, and that we are put into that position by the way society is shaped and organised by the technological rationality; 2) that the inability to do what the system tells you to want to do can lead to violent frustrations and misery that will not necessarily lead one to adjust one's worldview, or act accordingly; 3) that the possibility of negative, dialectic thinking alone does not necessarily lead to social change,

⁶⁵ Idem., 184-5.

⁶⁶ An interesting character who also comes into conflict with the World State by being too individual. I chose to leave him out of this analysis for reasons of compactness.

⁶⁷ Huxley, *Brave New World*. 214

because isolated 'irrational,' subversive behaviour has no chance in the face of an all-encompassing rationality.

Marcuse must have been conscious of such a dynamic, which must have been an important motivation to write about this topic: to slowly make people more aware of their own unfreedom, so that the irrational becomes more rational and the rational increasingly less rigid. Yet, as stated in the introduction, the tendencies that Marcuse saw may have changed in the last fifty years for a number of reasons. In the next part I will attempt a Marcusean reading of Houellebecq's *Atomised* to see how much of Marcuse's conceptualisations we can still find the society portrayed therein, and whether it will yield any insights into our contemporary social reality.

3. Atomised: Elementary Particles in the Course of History

3.1 Introducing *Atomised*

As I stated in the introduction I choose to use *Atomised* because, first of all, it is a more recent work that enables us to trace the Happy Consciousness back to our own time. Furthermore, the novel touches on a number of other topics relevant for this analysis: it discusses cultural revolutions started in the 1960s and praised by Marcuse for their potential subversive content, and it discusses the consequences these revolutions had for subsequent generations. The novel also explicitly discusses Aldous Huxley – both as a key player in the abovementioned cultural revolutions, and more specifically as the writer of *Brave New World*, the latter of which will prove interesting for this comparative analysis.

The lives of *Atomised* protagonists, half-brothers Bruno and Michel, are, as we will see, influenced by – and connected to all the above. Bruno is a complete societal misfit. His passionate nature, combined with an unfortunate past, conspire toward a life of professional failure, meaningless sex, perversion, misanthropy frustration and general discontent. Bruno wants desperately to belong, but in way reminiscent of *Brave New World*'s Bernard his frustration over the impossibility of fitting in, along with the actions and world-view in which it results, diminish the possibility of fitting in altogether. Michel, on the other hand, despite an equally unfortunate past, is able to do well for himself professionally. His gifted mind enables him to become a prominent molecular biologist, and his singular devotion to his research ensures a position of relative academic independence. Yet, Michel suffers emotionally, or rather, from a total lack of emotion. His professional status should enable him to live a relatively happy, comfortable life, yet he does not feel anything. He is detached and lonely and sort of drifts through life as a silent observer. He is determined to find meaning, but cannot find it, while Bruno looks for meaning in all the wrong places.

In the end Michel, through his research on human DNA, lays the foundation for what Houellebecq calls a 'metaphysical mutation' – a radical, global revolution that changes the whole world and the people living in it – by theoretically devising a way for humans to become immortal. As an isolated phenomenon, immortality is of no particular interest for this analysis, yet the motivation for (and the content of) Michel's discovery might enable us to shed some light on the aim of this thesis, being a reflection on the state of the Happy Consciousness in contemporary society. Houellebecq seemed to have tried to condense the frustrations and discontent in society as he sees it – as well as the causes thereof – into his two protagonists. We shall look at both Bruno's and Michel's familial and cultural origins to see how they were shaped by them, and what they can teach us about contemporary society.

3.2 Inheriting the Weight of the World

To locate the wellspring of the miseries of both Bruno and Michel, it might be helpful to begin with their mother: Janine Ceccaldi, beautiful daughter of a brilliant physicist, who is a tragic figure in her own way. She is described by Houellebecq as a being a *precursor*, which refers to

individuals who, on the one hand, are “ideally adapted to their time and social status”⁶⁸ and on the other hand, because of their openness for new customs and ideas are “merely catalysts – generally of some sort of social breakdown – without the power to stamp their authority on change [...]”⁶⁹ Janine marries Bruno’s father Serge Clément, a man who saw economic opportunities in commercial plastic surgery inspired by “the use of sex in marketing and the resulting breakdown of the traditional couple [...]”⁷⁰ which already foreshadows their own divorce. Janine’s life becomes increasingly entangled with the west-coast hippy culture of psychedelic drugs and sexual liberation inspired – and in a way instigated by intellectuals including popular personalities like Alan Ginsberg and Aldous Huxley, but more importantly, advocated by Marcuse as a potential way to escape from the domination of the technological rationality of the time. The hedonism that this lifestyle required is incompatible with the idea of family, so she divorces Bruno’s father, leaves Bruno to be raised by his maternal grandmother and meets Michel’s father, Marc Djerzinski, a silent, detached filmmaker. When Michel is born, he is born into a household of sex and psychedelic New Ageism, and a largely absent father. One day, when Marc Djerzinski decides to come home, he rescues an infant Michel (crawling in his own excrements) from an almost cult-like New Age orgy instigated by Janine in their own home, and he delivers Michel to be raised by his paternal grandmother.

From this brief history it can hardly be surprising that the lives of the half-brothers are in part predetermined by the choices of their parents and the ways those choices were symptomatic for their times. The fact that Houellebecq calls their mother a precursor hints at the suggestion that these occurrences should not be seen as isolated or trivial. Janine’s life choices are reactions to a status-quo that does not provide full satisfaction. The psychedelic intellectualism of the likes of Ginsberg and Huxley was a clear reaction against the consumption/distraction society, which found its ultimate dystopic formulation in *Brave New World*, and the way society was organised in such a way as to facilitate it. This psychedelic intellectualism led to the hedonistic 60s hippy-culture of sexual liberation, psychedelic drugs and, later, rampant New-ageism. For better or for worse, these phenomena became a part of culture, and instead of overthrowing the status quo they were conceived to oppose, they were incorporated into it. This cultural incorporation is what Marcuse meant when he talked about the (increasing) impossibility of true plurality in the technological rationality. Ironically, while Marcuse actively supported and lauded certain parts of these movements for having the potential to be a force of opposition against the current rationality, the cultural incorporation of these forces had some unforeseen consequences – a point that Houellebecq is eager to make in *Atomised*.

The above becomes immediately clear when we interpret some themes found in the novel, and how they influence the lives of Bruno and Michel as exaggerated examples of certain common themes. For instance, the sexual liberation, understood as the liberation of sex into society, of which his mother, through the way she lived her life – and father, with his commercial cosmetic surgery clinic, were true spearheads, left Bruno with severe sexual frustration, bordering on (and often passing for) perversion. The intrusion of ‘American sex

⁶⁸ Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 26.

⁶⁹ Idem., 26.

⁷⁰ Idem., 28.

culture' in Europe, the result of the gradual disappearance of the sexual taboo along with the incorporation of sexual energy into the commercial spheres, had also made sex, as the book's narrator⁷¹ puts it, into a "new sport in which to compete."⁷² But Bruno, being a rather ugly – and in his younger years chubby – individual is not able to compete in this new sport, echoing once again Bernard's position in *Brave New World*. Yet, owing to his frustration, and moreover through the frantic attempts at relieving it, Bruno's only goal in life was to become sexual.⁷³ Unable to satisfy his lust, around his eighteenth birthday he starts masturbating at girls in commuter trains or the beach, and later he turns into a veritable (yet rather restrained) sexual predator, always chasing after young or underage girls by whom he is invariably, and understandably, brutally rejected or ignored.

Another example can be found in the 'Lieu du Changement,' a place in which Bruno spends a few weeks in pursuit of sexual fulfilment. Originally it was intended "that this haven of humanist and democratic feelings would create synergies, facilitate the meeting of minds and in particular [...] provide an opportunity to get your rocks off,"⁷⁴ but after twenty years, as the original visitors had become old and unable to play out their 'Dionysian' delights, the Lieu du Changement changed into a place of 'betterment' through New Ageism, while maintaining its reputation of a somewhat sad hedonist paradise. Yet, when revenues drop, the business plan is changed to include lifestyle courses like 'Tantric Accounting' or 'Personal Development: positive thinking (for 5000 francs a day)' for rich bankers and managers, marking, once again, the full circle motion of the incorporation of a movement conceived as an escape from the economic system, into that system. In this place of New Age self-help and degrading bodies Bruno reads a certain kind of desperation in people's (including his own) futile attempts at finding peace with time slipping through their fingers in the face of depression and bitterness.⁷⁵ Bruno soon discovers his is a lost case. He finds a fleeting moment of happiness when he sits down on a flight of stairs and just *stops*.⁷⁶ Bruno realises his life in this world is beyond repair, and at the end of the novel he checks himself into a psychiatric ward indefinitely.

The last example of the consequence of the 'intrusion' of the consumption/production culture into post-war Europe that I will discuss, is the disappearance of the nuclear family, and what it means for the generation that had to deal with this. In one of *Atomised's* many sociological diatribes the narrator recounts the clash between two wildly different worldviews that took place around the 1950s: one based on largely Christian mores, the other on an increasing moral relativism released into the world by popular mass entertainment. The former worldview gained meaning through religion and 'familial' love, as prescribed by Christian morals, and together with a rise of wealth and comfort (electrical appliances!) these laid the

⁷¹ The novel is structured like a (fictional) biography written from the perspective of a researcher of Michel's life and environment decades after the becoming immortal of the human species. Owing to its structure, for better or for worse, the novel often reads like a sociological manifesto or essay.

⁷² *Idem.*, 74.

⁷³ *Idem.*, 73.

⁷⁴ *Idem.*, 114.

⁷⁵ "Dedicated exclusively to sexual liberation and desire, the Lieu du Changement naturally became a place of depression and bitterness." In: Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 126.

⁷⁶ "[Bruno] had stopped wishing, he had stopped wanting, he was nowhere. Slowly, by degrees his spirit soared to a state of nothingness, the sheer joy that comes of not being part of the world." In: Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 154.

perfect foundation for a 'happy' uncomplicated life. The latter worldview experienced the flipside of the same coin: once again through the intrusion of American mass culture, and consequently through the same technologies⁷⁷ that improved the quality of life for the previous generations, a new generation was 'seduced' to a world of sex, drugs and rock & roll that did not go well with the values of their parents' generation. The consequence was a moral relativism wholly incompatible with the rigid Christian values and the nuclear family, which can be seen as having been a symptom thereof. The new generation grew up without a set of morals and unconditional familial love to supply them with meaning.

While this conclusion should once again be read as a (rather misanthropic) amplification of certain themes, it does place a finger on certain important changes with respect to the previous generations. Under secularisation and sexual normalisation divorces have become all the more common, and the consequent gradual decline of the nuclear family has had visible implications for the post-war generations. In *Atomised* both protagonists are raised by their grandmothers. When Bruno's grandmother dies, his father sends him to a boarding school where he is ruthlessly, gruesomely abused at the hands of some older boys. Michel, who meets his mother for the first time when he is fifteen years old, cannot form any intimate relationships with women as a result of lack of maternal love in his youth. These are just two examples, but everyone knows at least someone who has suffered emotionally from the implosion of the 'unbreakable' bond of mother and father, regardless of the congenial or openly hostile nature of said implosion.

Moreover, *Atomised* makes the case that the decline of the nuclear family resulted in a heightened focus on individual to compensate for the loss of meaning previously found through family and religion. The narration implies that this individualisation (like Marcuse stated) can only take place in the economic, commercial sphere. This leads, on the one hand, to an increase in egotism and narcissism in those whose physical embodiment and socio-economic position allows them to compete, and an amorphous middle class consisting of those who realise they can't compete and try to individualise by being like all other poor souls, which seems like no way to individualise at all. Attempts at individuation outside the workings of the system result in phoney New Age mysticism, and a position on the fringes of society. In any case, according to the narrator, the moral relativism and loss of meaning caused by these shifting values resulted in "a general mood of depression bordering on masochism."⁷⁸

From the above examples from *Atomised* a pattern seems to emerge: a lot of the (cultural and economic) phenomena tied up in a direct or indirect cause and effect relationship with the technological rationality and its society organised around the production/consumption dynamic, while leading to pleasant conformity in one generation, may result in depression, frustration and alienation in the following generations. The incorporation of certain reactionary movements, or utopian projects into one sweeping rationality does not make the discontent that led to these 'failed revolutions' go away, and some direct causes intrinsically linked to the workings of the technological rationality, like the commercialisation of sexual energy and the decline of the nuclear family, may have a negative impact on the 'happiness' – and maybe more importantly – on the functionality of individuals living under the whims of the current system.

⁷⁷ "With refrigerators and washing machines designed to make for a happy couple came the transistor radio and the record player, which would teach the adolescents how *flirt*." In: Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 63.

⁷⁸ *Idem.*, 81.

The tendencies described above, because they are so widespread seem to be bad news for pleasant conformity. In other words, *Atomised* seems to make the case that the Happy Consciousness, and the forces that constitute it, might have an expiration date.

3.2.1 *Brave New World: Utopia or Dystopia?*

An explanation for the dynamic, or pattern described above can perhaps be extracted from a part of *Atomised* where Bruno delivers an unrelenting monologue on the merits of *Brave New World* unto Michel:

[*Bruno sits down on his brother's couch, mildly inebriated*] 'I've always been struck by how accurate Huxley was in *Brave New World*' [...]. 'It's phenomenal when you think he wrote it in 1932. Everything that's happened since simply brings us closer to the social model he described. Control of reproduction is more precise and eventually it will be completely dissociated from sex altogether, and procreation will take place in tightly guarded laboratories where perfect genetic conditions are ensured. Once that's happened any sense of family, of father-son relationship, will disappear. Pharmaceutical companies will break down the distinction between youth and age. In Huxley's world, a sixty-year-old man is as healthy as a man of twenty, he looks as young and has the same desires. When we get to the point that life can't be prolonged any further, we'll be killed off by voluntary euthanasia; quick, discreet, emotionless. The society Huxley describes is happy; tragedy and extremes of human emotion have disappeared. Sexual liberation has come to stay – everything favours instant gratification. Oh there are little moments of depression, but they're easily dealt with using advances in antidepressants. "One cubic centimetre cures then gloomy sentiments." This is exactly the sort of world we want to live in.

'Oh, I know, I know,' Bruno went on, waving his hand as if to dismiss an objection Michel had not voiced. 'Everyone says *Brave New World* is supposed to be a totalitarian nightmare, a vicious indictment of society, but that's hypocritical bullshit. *Brave New World* is our idea of heaven: genetic manipulation, sexual liberation, the war against age, the leisure society. *This is precisely the world that we have tried – and so far failed – to create.*'⁷⁹

From this quoted part of Bruno and Michel's conversation, and especially from the last sentence, we can learn a lot about the way Bruno looks at his society and the contemporary world as a whole. Bruno sees the model of society of *Brave New World* as a beautiful utopia, because in it all the frustrated desires Bruno carries within him are instantly lifted, and all his fears and insecurities are erased. But when we, once again, look at this text through a Marcusean lens, Bruno's tragic misconception lies in the fact that he does not realise that these desires – the sexual desire and his desire to blend and fit in with the masses – and his fears – the fear of getting old and being unable to compete, the fear of decline – are not his *own*: Bruno does not realise that his life is practically negatively determined by the values of his society, the values that have been shaped and imposed by the post-war technological consumption/production rationality, especially since he is not able to fulfil the 'role' thrust upon him. Bruno is shaped by what he cannot achieve, what he wants but cannot have while other people can.

The main reason for this is, as can be induced from the many parts of *Atomised* that deal with crippling depression and frustration, is that the desires and expectations invoked in contemporary individuals might be incompatible with the society they were loosed upon. To illustrate this point, let us look briefly at the differences between *Atomised*'s society and that of

⁷⁹ Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 186-8 (my emphasis).

Brave New World with regards to sexual freedom and the heightened focus on the individual as a result of the disappearance of the nuclear family, and the way they fit into these respective societies.

In *Brave New World* sexual freedom is effected, or imposed as a way to repress the citizens of the World State. It is successful in gratifying the (false) needs of the population because the citizens are 1) conditioned from birth to believe that everyone belongs to everyone sexually; 2) genetically engineered to be attractive to and attracted by a set of corresponding classes, and 3) sexual reproduction has been cut out of the human experience. Therefore, this new human sexuality coincides perfectly with the leading social and technical structures. Two notable exceptions, of course, are Bernard and John the Savage, and these two characters serve to tear down the hypothetical sexual civility of brave New World to the messy plane of reality. The positions of Bernard and John suggest that when the conditions of the World State are replaced by the conditions of contemporary society, a similar 'ideal' sexual liberation is in fact impossible. Sex is not available to everyone at any time. The biggest source of Bruno's frustration, for example, is the fact that society and culture project sex into the public sphere, making it seem normal that everybody should have regular sex with beautiful men and women, and that everyone wants to. Bruno suffers from these expectations, cannot find any output for his desires and becomes so frustrated that he ends up medicated in a psychiatric ward.⁸⁰

Brave New World's class system can be seen as an answer both to the loss of the nuclear family, and the problem of individuality. Everyone is raised by the state and the idea of a family is made repulsive through psychological conditioning. In addition everyone is completely genetically predetermined. The future intelligence, physical appearance, function and worldview of a certain individual is planned out before the ova from which it is to be developed is fertilised and bottled. While all the lower classes consist entirely of large groups of identical twins, the Alphas and Betas all retain a certain level of physical distinctiveness, but they are (almost) invariable attractive. Furthermore, they are still psychologically conditioned to think exactly the same. They are raised in groups of similar to identical individuals and are taught that meaning is meaningless and all they have to desire is what the state *wants* them to desire. Together, genetic predetermination and psychological conditioning mean a predetermination of individuality. The World State has replaced individualism with a hierarchal collective identity which it absolutely needs in order to function. As a result everyone likes what he *has to* like and everyone is supplied with the illusion of being free to be oneself, through the illusion of freedom. When this illusion falters, as in the case of Bernard, the happy facade crumbles.

From a Marcusean point of view, the society in *Atomised* can also be said to be preconditioned in a way. The technological rationality to which the people are born, without the biological aspect, also create certain castes or niches that are necessary to be filled, and people can only choose a limited set of ways to live their lives as befits their social-economic backgrounds and intelligence. Of course there are exceptions, but most individuals will, along broad lines, live the lives they are expected to live. The problem however, is that unlike the people of *Brave New World*, the people in *Atomised* are not psychologically conditioned to like their 'path,' which means people have to find their own individuality, their own meaning.

⁸⁰ which, when you think about it, is a similar fate to that of the citizens of *Brave New World*, who are totally unable to get by without their soma medication.

For Bruno and Michel this has two different ways of playing out. Bruno, trying to find meaning through his own (frustrated) narcissistic egotism, despite having above average intelligence, finds out he cannot find meaning through the things around which he organised his life, despite trying to reinvent himself constantly. Michel, who is cold, passionless and detached throughout the novel, is in a way Bruno's polar opposite. He does walk the path laid out in front of him: he gets good grades, goes to college, and very successfully fulfils his professional duties, yet he finds no pleasure or meaning in it. For Michel, the pinnacle of happiness is the 'Italian Fortnight' at Monoprix.⁸¹ In *Atomised* there is no way to become an individual on one's own terms, but there is also no illusion of individuality like in *Brave New World*, which leaves the people of its society in an awkward position. In *Brave New World* it is just John and Bernard who experience this dichotomy, but in Houellebecq's novel, this is the defining problem of our time.

The answer *Atomised* supplies is a synthesis between these two different kinds of miseries, being the passionate, and the cold. In the end, Michel decides to play Huxley *sans satire*. Inspired by the miseries of his brother as well as his own cold detachment, Michel devises a way to reproduce human DNA indefinitely, cutting away the need to reproduce sexually from the human experience and with it all the frustration and depression that rise from having to become an individual in a system which makes that impossible. In a way, Michel creates the frustration-free utopia Bruno so ardently wished for, with the exception that in it, Bruno would never have existed at all.

So what does the above mean for the Happy Consciousness in *Atomised*? The novel seems to make the case that there is no longer such a thing, not truly. Except for a tiny fraction of the population whose socio-economic position, and physical and mental heredity allows them to compete economically, professionally and sexually and so fulfil all their desires, the vast majority of people seems doomed to a life of crippling frustration and/or apathy. The unhappy conformity of Bernard in *Brave New World*, has turned into a total inability to function, a depressed consciousness, so to speak, marked by passivity. The invasion of 'American sex culture,' like a misplaced Trojan horse, has finally spilled its guts over the generation that came after its societal absorption. A Marcusean reading of both novels suggests that while a widespread Happy Consciousness can be raised by a technological rationality that produces both the desires and the ways that these desires can be satisfied, it is far from obvious that this mindset is successfully carried on through the generations, as the phenomena and forces that constitute it carry in themselves their own destruction.

So, should we be looking in the direction of the solution *Atomised* to suggest – that is, a biological alteration, or intervention in the human genomic? This possibility should be taken seriously, despite the fact that genetic intervention instigated by Michel in *Atomised* is as of yet out of reach of our current technological capabilities. In fact, there is a very active bio-ethical debate surrounding this very issue, with thinkers like Peter Sloterdijk, who states it is very likely that in the near future "biotechnologies may be put to use as 'anthropotechnologies' to open up

⁸¹ "[...] He was delighted when his local Monoprix had an 'Italian fortnight.' This life so well organised, on a human scale; happiness could be found in this; had he wanted for more, he wouldn't know where to find it." In: Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 143.

new possibilities [...],” of reacting to our current situation.⁸² What he means by this is that genomic information could in the near future be used for technological interventions that could pervade the human essence – in other words, enhance or change our genome and brains – in order to respond successfully to our rapidly changing environment.⁸³ However interesting the above may be, analysing the bioethical side of *Atomised* – as well as that of *Brave New World*, is not the aim of this thesis. Reading both novels from a specifically Marcusean viewpoint the fictional future and contemporary perspectives – and with them the bioethical aspects – are seen as a way to observe how current and past conditions and tendencies in society influence the way humans behave and think under a specific ideology.

⁸² Hub Zwart, *From Utopia to Science: Challenges of personalised genomics information for health management and health enhancement*, (Springer 2009).

⁸³ For further reading: Zwart, *From Utopia to Science* (2009).

4. Facing the Consequences: adaptation or destruction?

Given the overly pessimistic and misanthropic nature of Houellebecq's novel, I will now briefly discuss how the examples found in *Atomised*, being the sexualisation of the public sphere and the paradoxical nature of individualisation, pertain to our own contemporary society. I will also raise the spectre of two examples of phenomena not found so explicitly in *Atomised*, being the influence of economic and political globalisation and the Anthropocene.⁸⁴

Earlier, we saw that there are three factors which have to be in place to keep the Happy Consciousness 'happy:' 1) high standards of living that ensure a comfortable way of living; 2) the internalisation of false, external needs that define what it means to lead comfortable, successful life, as well as the means to satisfy them; and 3) the transformation of the individual's de-eroticised sexual energy into desire to satisfy these needs. We also, through reading *Brave New World*, found that were one of these factors to give way or to interfere with another, it would not automatically turn the Happy Consciousness into an unhappy consciousness, or in other words, to a call to arms in function of social change. Instead, the Happy Consciousness should be understood as a phenomenon of gradual intensity, and that it comes down to a 'choice' (unconscious or conscious, like in the cases of Bernard and John respectively) to keep – or not to keep living under the comfort of the current technological rationality. With this toolset, let us look at some phenomena and trends present in contemporary society.

4.1 Sexualisation and Individualisation

Bruno's frustration from *Atomised*, in a way foreshadowed by Bernard in *Brave New World*, is, obviously, an a-typical occurrence. There are undoubtedly individuals whose sexual frustrations lead them on a path of self-destruction, but it would be absurd to say that just about anyone is in danger of becoming a non-functional sexual predator because sex has lost – or is at least still in the process of losing – its taboo status and has been commercialised. Still, a few contemporary examples of negative effects of rampant sexuality and repressive desublimation are not hard to come by.

Think for example about the way new technologies, especially the emergence of the internet and the consequent (almost) limitless access to pornography, shape the way people think about and perceive their own and others' sexuality. A virtual environment that enables people to exert their sexual desires outside the public sphere is not a bad thing in itself. Still, it already becomes problematic when a large group of people who regularly consume pornography acquire unrealistic images and expectations of what a 'normal' sexual relationship should be, thereby potentially pushing others into a role they do not wish to hold. Additionally: pornography is considered to be highly addictive. When the factor of addiction is added to the (in theory) almost limitless access to any sexual fantasy, fetish, or perversion through the

⁸⁴ I want to make clear that I by no means have the pretension that I can treat these examples with the attention to detail they deserve within the confines of this thesis. Consequently, they will serve as broad stroke Illustrations for the way we can evaluate the relevance Marcuse's intellectual framework anno 2017 and how we can use it to look at the world around us.

internet, we end up with a potentially toxic combination that could lead to social isolation, crippling debts and further frustration, as the perceived images are not real or attainable.

Another example would be the suggested relationship between a rise in the number of anorexia nervosa cases and cultural ideals of beauty, which with the way sexuality pervades the public sphere (through advertising, television, clothing etc.) nowadays seems ever present everywhere⁸⁵, driving ever younger children to live up to unrealistic standards of beauty that are a direct (yet contingent) result of the way sexual energy is redirected for consumption purposes.

In short, the release of sexuality into the public sphere has some definite negative, potentially destructive consequences that potentially endanger the Happy Consciousness. The reason for this is that for some people the means to satisfy their needs have been taken away, and their sexual energy has not sufficiently been de-erotised, or, because of a 'sexual saturation' in society, has been re-erotised. But even in our time, extreme cases like Bruno's frustration in *Atomised*, or cases of crippling, even fatal anorexia nervosa, while they have to be taken seriously, are relatively isolated occurrences and do not cause any danger to comfortable conformity on any large scale.

More common is the unrealistic standard of beauty which people have to live up to, and instead of having a negative impact on comfortable conformity, the false need of wanting to look like the models on the billboards and television is arguably more likely to *strengthen* the hold system that created these image have on the individual. It can even be seen as a new form of sexual selection: oftentimes the choice for buying a certain product, especially the ones that can be seen by any passer-by, is influenced by the effect it may have on the possibility to attract a sexual mate. People often rely on their external appearance as a way of projecting one's 'unique' identity and sex-appeal onto possible mates, in a way similar to the way a peacock flaunts its elaborate tail feather display to any watching hen.⁸⁶ Not participating in this 'ritual' could significantly decrease one's chance of fulfilling one's sexual desire. It seems then that the influence the increased cultural saturation of sexual has on conformity to the system outweighs the negative aspects potentially capable of detracting from it.

This brings us to another typical occurrence for our time: personal branding as a way of exerting one's individuality, which, in essence, is what an over-emphasis on outward appearance is. Yet, as the direction of this exertion is influenced by an unrealistic external standard toward which potentially many millions strive, it rather accomplishes the opposite. This paradoxical tension that typifies modern individuality was already present in Marcuse's time, but whether it is due to the decline of the nuclear family as proposed in *Atomised*, the workings of a commercialised sexual selection described above, or is more of a direct result of the effect of mass advertising, it seems that the average individual is getting increasingly less 'individual.' It seems that the tendency toward a one-dimensional society that Marcuse described has, at least at the level of public life of the individual, continued its course and might have even picked up some momentum.

Yet against this affirmation stands a possible denial of the tendency towards comfortable conformity. Again, the conclusion of *Atomised* – which roughly goes: compete and burn out,

⁸⁵ For further reading: Sonja Van't Hof, & Malcolm Nicolson, "The Rise and Fall of a Fact: the Increase in Anorexia Nervosa," in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, Vol. 18, No. 5 (1996)

⁸⁶ Geoffrey F. Miller, "Waste: A Sexual Critique of Consumerism," in *Prospect* (Feb. 1999)

or give up and drown in an amorphous middle class – seems overly black and white as well as pessimistic, but when nuanced and contrasted with *Brave New World* a more realistic dynamic reveals itself. As described before, just like the society of *Brave New World* with its biologically engineered caste system where everyone performs the job he was designed for, advanced industrialised societies can be said to have the same niche-making effect, except without the meticulous planning. The system requires the niches to be filled, just like a naturally occurring ecosystem, but they are often filled by individuals who are not ‘made’ for the job. Instead of performing a less lucrative job one is good at or simply likes, one could end up choosing the better paid job anyway in order to live at the level of desired comfort, or live up to an externally imposed standard of ‘success.’ Combine this with fact that the scientific consensus is that under the strain of global competition and new technologies, life, especially in the workplace, is speeding up, and the equation spells a big ‘risk group’ of individuals that is likely to suffer from a burnout or chronic stress.⁸⁷ Consequences of chronic stress can be felt on both the level of the individual and society, and include anxiety, depression, cardiovascular diseases, social isolation, total professional dysfunctionality, or even suicide.⁸⁸ Its occurrence even sparked the rise of a medical sociology as a new science.⁸⁹

In a world where success in life is increasingly associated with personal economical, and/or professional achievement, these negative developments that have already been forming over the last 50 years are bound to increase in severity and relevancy. It is clear that the answer to the question of what it means to be an individual in the 21st century leans both toward affirmation and denial of the tendencies described by Marcuse. The situation has turned out not to be so black and white as expected, and under the pressure of globalisation, these tendencies can be found in an increasing number of societies around the globe.

4.2 Globalisation and the Anthropocene

Despite the fact that Marcuse did expect that the dominating tendencies of advanced industrialised societies would eventually come to prevail in an increasing amount of societies around the globe where they had not yet done so, he spent very little attention on developments in globalisation, which seems to be leading force in the ‘speeding up’ of the world under the strain of global competition. His underexposure of globalist tendencies was probably due to the prominence of the East-West dichotomy, and the opposition of the capitalist and communist ideologies that typified the Cold War era, which, coinciding with a prominence of post-war nation rebuilding policies resulted in a period of relatively heavy political isolationism. Marcuse saw this dichotomy as an enormous blockade to the spreading of the capitalist rationality of advanced industrialised society. In fact, Marcuse stated that were capitalism and communism to start competing without military force, it would make possible the idea of “[...] a genuine

⁸⁷ For further reading: James S. House, “Understanding Social Factors and Inequalities in Health: 20th century progress and 21st century prospects,” in *Journal of Social Health and Behaviour*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (June, 2002) 125-142. & A. Weber & A. Jaekel-Rheinhard, “Burnout Syndrome: a disease of modern times?,” In: *Occupational medicine*, Vol. 50, No. 7 (2000), 512-517.

⁸⁸ Weber & Jaekel-Rheinhard, *Burnout*, 514.

⁸⁹ House, *Understanding Social Factors*, 126.

world economy” which would entail “the demise of the nation state, national interest, national business together with their international alliances.”⁹⁰

While, again, none of these ‘predictions’ may have come uniformly true, they can all be recognised to some degree. After the fall of the Soviet Union, hard-line communism saw a dramatic decrease on a global level, and gradually, formerly communist economies opened up to the ‘western’ markets, as they had to keep up with the international commerce had become more prominent after the Second World War. At the same time, technological advances made for a smoother infrastructure of both goods and information. The end of the 20th century saw the formation of regional political and economic organisations like the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which have become increasingly influential – both on a political and economic level – on a global scale, putting less emphasis on national interest and the nation state, and more emphasis on international and global economy and cooperation. All in all, the above sounds like the perfect condition for an expansion of the definition and scope of Marcuse’s conceptualisations: one global advanced industrialised society aimed at economic growth unified under the capitalist rationality of production and consumption would surely lead to an incredible increase in the spread of the Happy Consciousness.

Based on what we have learned from the juxtaposition of *Brave New World* and *Atomised*, being that some affirming tendencies of the capitalist technological rationality carry in them their own denial, I would say that the above is not necessarily true. Globalisation has an enormous, multi-faceted impact on daily life in contemporary societies around the globe. One important aspect⁹¹ of this trend is the clash of cultures and a corresponding surge of nationalism. The recent ‘Brexit’ manoeuvre of the United Kingdom might be the most striking illustration of both sides of the story, being the gradual decline of the nation state, as well as the surge in nationalism and populism and racism it brings with it. Brexit can be said to be a reaction against the political and economic power of the European Union, a reaction against the loss of a national identity and a clash of cultures which followed from the opening of the border under EU regulations. Instead of being perceived as a chance for international cooperation in function of a healthy national economy⁹², many British citizens, rallied by multiple populist political forces, saw their country’s membership as a cultural and economic sinkhole, gobbling up their national identity and tax money and giving nothing in return. The campaign trail for leaving the EU only aggravated this populist sense of nationalism, playing into the pervading discontent of British society, related – but in many cases wholly unrelated to EU membership, like the high level of unemployment or the number of foreign residents. All the above eventually led to the recent narrow majority decision to leave the EU.

It seems that the democratic decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU, was a result of a collective Happy Consciousness – at least a percentile majority – turning unhappy in function of social change as a result of societal discontent, but ultimately, from a Marcusean

⁹⁰ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 63.

⁹¹ Which is by no means the only important aspect, but once again, because of the scope of this thesis I have limited my attention to this example.

⁹² Whether membership of the EU can facilitate this it is not my place, nor my wish to say, but this is undoubtedly one of the major reasons to become – and stay an EU member state.

perspective the only thing that the vote effected was a change of power from a larger political rationality to a more national one. But, ironically, rather than alleviating discontent this decision is more likely to increase it, as economic and political globalisation has become such an important force in the world that isolationism could potentially have severe negative effects on the national economy, as was seen in the months after the Brexit vote, in which the Pound Sterling made a nosedive towards an historic low as a direct result.⁹³ Whether this negative trend will continue remains to be seen, but is clear that globalisation can have enormous effects, both positive and negative, on the lives of individuals who have no direct control over its workings, but more importantly that globalisation is also felt on the level of nations, seen as a collection of individuals whose discontent can turn into a force of nature, for better or for worse.

A more direct danger to the individual Happy Consciousness is, perhaps, to be found in a parallel development to the shift from national to global technological rationality, which in a way is a radical departure from the kind of technological rationality Marcuse described in *One-Dimensional Man*. As we saw before, insofar as technological rationality can be understood as the application of the technological apparatus in function of certain ideology, and this ideology is carried out by those who became empowered through a democratic way, technological rationality is also political rationality. However, over the last decades multibillion multinational corporations have become increasingly more common and influential, giving rise to a new kind of rationality – what I will here call ‘corporate rationality.’

Many reasons for this shift can be given⁹⁴, but relevant here are the potential consequences this shift – or as of yet parallel movement – could have for the individual. It is clear that there are concrete worries that under the rising power of this corporate rationality the individual could come to suffer from decisions made, not for the good of politics, individuals, or the planet, but for the economic position of large multinational corporations.⁹⁵ A recent example of this unease was the widespread global protest around, and eventual dropping of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) proposal. The proposal was designed to improve trade relations between Europe and the United States, but according to activists would also lead an increased sphere of influence of big corporations in national and international politics. The proposed law included a clause which would have made it possible for a commercial investor to sue the country in which the investment was made if the primary agreement was in any way changed⁹⁶, meaning that a corporation could start a case against a nation that, through a democratic process, made a policy change that in any way came into conflict with the initial investment agreement.

The important implication following from this example is that under a corporate rationality everything that does not work toward an advantage of the corporation is of second rate importance, including individual rights and comfort of the individual, democratic integrity

⁹³ Zlata Rodionova, “Pound Sterling Hits New 31-Year Low Against the Dollar,” in *Independent* (Oct. 4 2016) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/pound-sterling-euro-dollar-brexite-latest-hard-theresa-may-conference-a7343736.html>

⁹⁴ like an increasing economic integration in politics (under the pressure of economic globalisation), the relatively high presence of neoliberal policies in national – and international politics in which political power over the economy is relinquished in function of the workings of the free market, and the open armed welcome multinationals enjoy for the influx of labour and capital they can bring to a national economy, and so on.

⁹⁵ Jeffrey Frieden, “Will Capitalism Fall Again?,” in *Bruegel Essay and Lecture Series* (Bruegel: 2006), 7.

⁹⁶ European Commission, *Factsheet on Investor-State Dispute Settlement*, (October 3 2013) http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2013/october/tradoc_151791.pdf

of nations, which could lead to short-term negative effects, but also, which is important for the last illustration of this thesis, the planet itself. That is not to say that the state of planet Earth is not an issue. On the contrary, in the long run, the biggest unforeseen consequence of almost two centuries of industrialisation, from the beginning of the industrial revolution to, more importantly, the intensification of industry under the post-war production and consumption ideology of the current technological rationality, might be the irreparable damage it has caused to Planet Earth, causing many contemporary thinkers to say that we have entered the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene is a term that marks our entrance into a new geographical period, one in which we can no longer explain all geographical phenomena through geography alone, because humanity has become a major force of influence on the surface, resources and climate of our planet. The reason, as stated above, is the human application of technology in function of production since the first industrial revolution, and especially under the post-war capitalistic technological rationality, or as Bernard Stiegler, a contemporary critical commentator on the Anthropocene and our position in it, puts it: “What is now called the Anthropocene corresponds to industrial capitalism, where calculation prevails as criteria of decision-making – as such, this constitutes the advent of nihilism.”⁹⁷ Stiegler sees the Anthropocene as the period where the consequences of the toxic way human technology has been used in function of capitalism since the industrial revolution have become apparent.

Some examples of the now-visible consequences as a result of our use of technology typical for the Anthropocene include the depletion of earth’s resources and fossil energy sources, overpopulation and climate change as a result the mass release of green-house gasses into the planet’s atmosphere. Whenever the already observable consequences of the Anthropocene will make themselves widely felt, they will have an enormous impact on the daily life of every individual, and with it, on the state of the Happy Consciousness in contemporary, or rather, future society. A few speculative examples will suffice to illustrate the dangers of the Anthropocene: overpopulation puts an increasingly bigger pressure on the available living space, food production and availability of drinkable water and the planet’s population is still rising at unprecedented levels. We may soon get to a point where our technological answers to Malthus’s predictions will fall short. Climate change could, through the combined forces of rising sea levels through the melting of the polar icecaps, and increasing drought through higher average temperatures, render enormous as of now still habitable areas uninhabitable, with mass migration and a further strain on the food supplies as logical consequences.

Of course, no one can say for sure how these factors will influence our future, but it is clear that things have to change if we are to limit their influence to acceptable levels. However, one of the big problems with the Anthropocene from a Marcusean perspective is that it is intimately linked with the workings of the current technological rationality, and as we have seen throughout this thesis, he was not overly optimistic about the prospect of widely carried social change. While general scientific consent is such that certain trends that will have an enormous impact on life on our planet have already been set into motion, and while steps –

⁹⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *The Anthropocene and Neganthropology*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: November 2014), 5.

from the level of the individual to that of global politics – are definitely being taken, it will still take a lot to ‘turn around’ a world in which the current technological rationality is still intimately tied in with daily life. Still, as we have seen the Happy Consciousness is far from unbreakable, and might conceivably turn into a force of social change before it is too late and the devastating consequence of our impact on Planet Earth threaten to break it for good.

5. Conclusion

I set out to evaluate the thinking of Herbert Marcuse, and in particular the Happy Consciousness as set out in *One-Dimensional Man*, in the light of our own contemporary society, to see if it were possible – and indeed fruitful to project his intellectual framework fifty years into the future. Using (science) fictional literature as an analytic tool has enabled me to identify and reveal certain tensions present in Marcuse’s thinking, as well as certain tendencies that Marcuse failed to predict, or simply could not have observed given the fact of his death in 1979.

By first analysing the concepts Marcuse laid out in *One-Dimensional Man* and reading them back into Huxley’s *Brave New World* we have seen that the Happy Consciousness – seen as the way of thinking and behaving in conformity to an ideological system that ensures a comfortable way of living – should be understood as a mindset that exists in many gradations and can be found in many forms. A Marcusean analysis of *Brave New World*’s main characters as different stages of the Happy Consciousness, as well as their interactions, gave us a fictional insight into the gradual – and multi-faceted nature of comfortable conformity. But most notably it showed us that it is perfectly possible to experience deep discontent, and *still* subscribe to the way of life laid out by the current rationality, like we have seen in the case of Bernard in *Brave New World*.

The same deep discontent is an important theme in Houellebecq’s more recent novel *Atomised*, in which Houellebecq identifies frustration and depression as the defining problems of our contemporary epoch. We saw that Bruno’s frustrated misanthropy and Michel’s apathetic, celibate lifestyle are caused both directly and indirectly by the post-war production/consumption rationality that has defined and shaped the social, economic and political situation for roughly the past half a century. Revolutionary cultural movements, intended to change or overthrow the system, were incorporated into it, and the forces they released into society and culture, like sexuality and a heightened sense of individuality, were normalised and commercialised by the leading technological rationality. Consequently, this led to a disintegration of the nuclear family, widespread loneliness and depression, misguided New Ageism and rampant sexual frustration. *Atomised* describes a situation where the factors which constitute the Happy Consciousness mindset – like the assurance of comfortable living and the means to satisfy one’s needs and desires – might give way, or disappear altogether. The potential for discontent becomes even stronger when we include the consequences that half a century of intense production, consumption, and waste have had for the planet we live on.

It seems that, be it in the sphere of sexuality, individuality, globalisation or our impact on the planet as a species, the workings of the technological rationality that are inherent to advanced industrialised societies potentially carry in themselves the seeds of their own

destruction. They have driven the Happy Consciousness into a state of crisis: instead of spreading further and further like Marcuse predicted in *One-Dimensional Man*, the tendencies toward comfortable conformity seem to actually be losing ground on a global level. There may just come a point where discontent with the current way of living, and the knowledge of the causes of this discontent will become so intense or widely carried that they will lead to significant and widespread social change. Yet, where, when, or even if this will take place, and whether in the long run it will be preferable to the current status-quo, for now remains a topic for (science) fiction.

Still, the fact that the scope of the Happy Consciousness seems to be shrinking also means that it is still here. It seems that tendencies towards both affirmation *and* denial of the Happy Consciousness mindset exist in contemporary society. The phenomena and tendencies described in *One-Dimensional Man* and *Brave New World* resonate with so many people, because they can still be recognised and felt in everyday life. Still, we are not living in the Brave New World – to answer the question raised in the title of this thesis – nor does the contemporary situation seem to be so dire as depicted in *Atomised*. Yet, this does not mean that we should disregard their messages. On the contrary: reading these works of fiction from a Marcusean viewpoint, gives more poignancy to the ideas found in both novels, and especially to Marcuse's thinking. It has made clear that despite the fact that Marcuse made some hard claims and sweeping generalisations and failed to predict that advanced industrialised society with its rationality aimed at the maximisation of production and consumption may eventually spell its own destruction, his intellectual framework can still be useful to explain the social phenomena and behaviour we see around us every day. It is to considerable extent able to explain shopping malls full of people buying all manner of products they do not need, the unhappy, empty faces on the daily commute to unsatisfactory jobs and the general dispassionate attitude of many towards our own planet and our responsibility for it.

But perhaps most striking is the way Marcuse's concepts can shed light on the way people continue to live their lives, not necessarily in the way they would want to, but in a way that answers to external standards of wealth, success and comfort. The resilience of Marcuse's message is proven by millions of people around the globe, who go on living their lives aware of their own frustrations and lack of freedom, but are unable, or indeed unwilling to change their own position. It might be true that discontent has become the price for easy living, but when will that price become too high to pay?

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