

## **Great Refusals: Past, Present, and Future**

Lauren Langman and Avery Schatz

The conjunction of Marx's critique of alienation, Weber's work on purposive rationality, and Freudian understandings of character, desire and repression, as these are integrated by the Frankfurt School, particularly in the work of Marcuse, provides an interdisciplinary perspective from which the legitimation crises of capitalist economy, including its one-dimensional culture and liberal governance, evoke various grievances, discontents, and collective emotions. As Marcuse (1969) argued, the shallowness of consumerism, along with the mind-numbing mass media, illuminate the failures of late industrial society that have prompted the emergence of a "new sensibility" and given rise to great refusals with Utopian visions. Although the latter present no specific programs of action, they envision a post-capitalist society that provides equality to everyone, genuine democracy, freedom, and agency, and community. These conditions will enable all humans to fulfill their creative human potential and species being, and attain the dignity thwarted by the capitalist political economy, its hegemonic ideologies, and its one-dimensional culture.

This presentation investigates a series of such great refusals and Utopian visions as it discusses how progressive movements can be understood as mobilizations for dignity insofar as they have sought to realize an egalitarian world in which the freedom of each would mean the freedom of all, with the goal of that freedom comprising the universalization of dignity. However, this world will not simply happen because it is desirable. While the forces of domination, along with their internalized hegemonic ideologies that naturalize and normalize the arbitrary may seem all powerful, that very power creates the negation that impels history. Movements that change history require actors and agents capable of organizing and mobilizing the many "great refusals" that seek radical and total structural transformation. Such agents are not likely to come from either the current working classes or even the well-meaning, often socialist, liberals who support benevolent, indeed generous reforms to the poor who serve to reproduce the system. These progressive actors, along with the needed "organic intellectuals" devoted to Great Refusals, can only come from the margins where people have not fully internalized hegemonic ideologies. Furthermore, such social change also depends on changing people's underlying character, values, and identities, which indeed is the case with the activists working for radical and total progressive transformation.

We are now seeing an explosion of progressive movements – Great Refusals that seek a better world. And these movements are fueled by the new sensibility noted above, stoked by the sterility of a one-dimensional culture with its racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. These visions now confront a failing neo-liberal globalized capitalism that generates not only inequalities, hardships, and misery for so many, but also and environmental despoliation that may lead to the very extinction of humanity. Hope for a better future still lives.