

## Understanding “TDS”: Perception, Marcuse, and the Loss of Dialogue



*Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.*

### **A Posture of Understanding, Not Judgment**

I am trying to understand, not to judge. As I contemplate what is happening culturally and politically, I notice something that feels different from the normal tension of ideas that has always existed. There have always been differences in perspective. The right and the left. The progressive and the

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conservative. The socialist and the capitalist. These tensions, when held well, create meaningful dialogue. I actually believe those discussions are beautiful.

Yet something shifted several years ago during Donald Trump’s first presidency. Whatever one’s political position, a cultural reaction emerged that did not fade when his presidency ended. It is still alive today. Trump himself was once admired in many progressive circles as a successful developer and a larger-than-life New York figure. But when he began challenging certain progressive narratives, something ignited that, in my view, has not always been healthy.

### **The Loss of Dialogue**

I am a strong advocate of debate. The left speaking with the right. The conservative listening to the progressive. Socialists and capitalists explaining not only what they believe but why they believe it, including the ideological assumptions and the potential costs of those beliefs. Healthy disagreement sharpens thought. But dialogue begins to break down when one perspective is permitted while another is dismissed outright.

### **Herbert Marcuse and the Question of Tolerance**

To understand some of the intellectual currents beneath this moment, I find myself drawn back to Herbert Marcuse, one of the central thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Marcuse’s life story matters if we want to understand his ideas rather than caricature them. Born in Berlin in 1898 into a Jewish family, he lived through the upheaval of World War I, the collapse of the Weimar Republic, and the rise of Nazism. He watched a modern society fracture under propaganda, ideological polarization, and eventually authoritarian rule. When the Nazis came to power, he emigrated and eventually settled in the United States, where he became a citizen and later worked in intelligence analysis during World War II studying fascist regimes. His concerns about mass persuasion, cultural conditioning, and the fragility of democratic institutions were not theoretical abstractions. They were forged in trauma.

Marcuse’s project was emancipation. He feared that societies could drift into domination while believing they were practicing freedom. In *Repressive Tolerance* (1965), published in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, he argued that what appears to be neutral tolerance in liberal democracies may in fact reinforce existing power structures. He proposed what he called “liberating tolerance,” writing that it would mean intolerance toward movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left.

Here is where, in my view, he crossed a bridge too far.

Marcuse believed that restoring social balance required asymmetry. He suggested that speech and political movements he considered regressive or reactionary should not receive equal tolerance, because equal tolerance, in his framework, only perpetuated structural injustice. The Left, in his view, represented emancipatory potential. The Right, in many people's interpretation of his work, represented domination.

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The problem is this: once you grant yourself the authority to determine which ideas are liberating and which are oppressive, you also grant yourself the authority to suppress those you deem regressive. The moral language becomes protective, even redemptive, but the structural outcome is constriction. It is not difficult to see how such a framework, even if born from fear of fascism, can justify narrowing speech and limiting dissent in the name of higher moral aims.

Marcuse was not a cartoon villain advocating chaos. He was attempting to prevent another descent into authoritarianism. But in redefining tolerance as selective rather than universal, he introduced a philosophical rationale for political intolerance that can easily be appropriated by future movements convinced of their own moral superiority.

### **Projection, Symbolic Containers, and Political Identity**

And so it has been, and so it has been done, I fear.

When intolerance is framed as virtue, disagreement can begin to feel dangerous rather than necessary. Over time, a psychological pattern can emerge in which a single figure becomes the symbolic container for collective fear, anger, and ideological threat. In my observation, Donald Trump has become such a figure for many people. This does not mean he is beyond criticism. He is hyperbolic. He exaggerates. He is not known for humility, and many critics perceive narcissistic traits in his public persona. Those critiques belong within legitimate political discourse.

But something else seems to have happened beyond critique.

In some circles, the reaction to Trump appears less like political disagreement and more like moral absolutism, where the goal is not merely to oppose him electorally but to delegitimize, silence, or destroy him socially and culturally. Meanwhile, political leaders on other sides of the aisle have often been treated with greater tolerance even amid public debates about leadership, age, or cognitive capacity. Supporters and critics interpret these dynamics differently, but the asymmetry itself raises psychological questions worth exploring.

At what point does disagreement become dehumanization? At what point does a political stance transform into what many people now call “Trump Derangement Syndrome,” where perception narrows so dramatically that only one narrative remains visible?

### **A Neuroscience Lens on Cultural Polarization**

What concerns me most is the psychological pattern beneath the rhetoric. When perception narrows, confirmation bias intensifies. Evidence that contradicts one’s viewpoint is filtered out. Nuance disappears. This is not limited to one political side. Hypocrisy and emotional reactivity exist across the spectrum. But the emotional intensity surrounding Trump has, in many cases, taken on the qualities of a cognitive rigidity that resembles a syndrome.

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From a neuroscience perspective, this raises important questions. Human beings possess a beautifully developed prefrontal cortex, the executive functioning region that allows us to reflect, inhibit impulses, and integrate complex information. Emotions absolutely belong in politics. Passion matters. Conviction matters. But when emotional reactivity overwhelms executive functioning, reasoning becomes impaired.

In clinical language, we sometimes refer to this as hypofrontality, a state in which the prefrontal cortex does not sufficiently regulate more primitive emotional responses. When that happens, perception becomes binary. The world divides into heroes and villains. Dialogue gives way to outrage. And again, this can occur on both sides of the political spectrum.

### **A Call Toward Compassionate Balance**

My aim in writing this is not to excuse Trump’s flaws or elevate one ideology over another. Rather, I want to ask deeper questions. Why has one political figure become such a powerful psychological trigger? What does it reveal about fear, identity, and ideological capture? And how do we return to a culture where strong disagreement does not require the destruction of another person’s humanity?

Perhaps Marcuse himself, if read carefully, offers a paradoxical lesson. A philosophy born from fear of authoritarianism can, when stripped of context and applied rigidly, unintentionally encourage its own form of intolerance. That does not mean Marcuse was wrong in his concerns. It simply means that ideas carry psychological consequences when they move from theory into lived political identity.

The deeper question is not whether someone supports or opposes Trump. The deeper question is whether we are still capable of thinking broadly, listening carefully, and allowing the prefrontal cortex to guide us toward thoughtful engagement rather than reflexive hostility. If we lose that capacity, the issue is no longer politics. It becomes a matter of perception, cognition, and the health of our shared cultural mind. And perhaps the real work ahead is not defeating one another, but rediscovering how to think, speak, and disagree without surrendering our humanity in the process.