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One-Dimensional Algorithm: Rereading Marcuse's Critical Theory Through Platform Culture

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This article rereads Herbert Marcuse's critical theory through algorithmic curation on commercial social media platforms, pursuing a dialectical argument in two directions: first, that platform capitalism structurally reproduces Marcuse's diagnoses of false needs, incorporation, and one-dimensional thought; second, that platform dynamics exceed his framework—in its passive-subject assumptions, its vagueness about resistance, and its inability to account for the simultaneous production of homogeneity and fragmentation. From this tension, the article develops the concept of algorithmic incorporation: the process by which oppositional thought, practice, and identity enter a platform-mediated cycle of visibility, normalization, commodification, and domestication. Drawing on #BlackLivesMatter as a sustained analytical case, it shows how the four phases operate and specifies observable indicators through which each could be empirically tested. The concept is distinguished from Marcuse's incorporation, Gramsci's transformism, and Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, and corrects accounts—including Bennett and Segerberg's connective action—that foreground platform infrastructure's enabling dimensions without reckoning with its costs to movements. Because incorporation operates without a deciding agent, the article concludes, tactical evasion cannot substitute for infrastructural change.

Keywords: Marcuse, Frankfurt School, algorithmic incorporation, platform capitalism, critical theory, digital activism

On June 2, 2020, many corporations posted black squares to their Instagram feeds under the hashtag #BlackoutTuesday, declaring solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement as protests swept American cities following the police killing of George Floyd. Within days, the gesture had been replicated

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tens of millions of times. Within weeks, marketing firms were circulating reports on the brand equity value of public solidarity statements. Within a month, the platforms that had drawn sustained criticism for algorithmically suppressing Black creators' content (Cotter, 2023) were featuring Black Lives Matter imagery in their own promotional materials. The political demand to defund or abolish the police was losing ground in policy debates even as its visual symbols achieved unprecedented global circulation.

What happened here was not censorship. It was something more consequential: the smooth absorption of a political rupture into the value chain of platform capitalism. Dissent was not suppressed; it was promoted, aestheticized, and monetized until the edge that made it dangerous had been worn away. This article calls this process algorithmic incorporation—a technically automated, platform-specific instantiation of dynamics that Herbert Marcuse (1964) diagnosed in *One-Dimensional Man* 60 years ago.

Marcuse's (1964) *One-Dimensional Man* argued that advanced industrial society had neutralized the critical, negating dimension of human thought—not through overt coercion but by systemically producing false needs, incorporating dissent, and colonizing language by operational logic. For Marcuse, the welfare-state subject does not resist oppression: It desires its own subjection. These arguments have been revisited and contested: Kellner (1984) subjects Marcuse's (1964) political program to sustained critique, and Feenberg (2002) challenges his philosophy of technology's unidirectional determinism. Yet for all this secondary engagement, Marcuse's (1964) framework has rarely been put in sustained dialogue with the specific technical mechanisms through which contemporary digital platforms produce and administer cultural life. That dialogue is overdue.

This article approaches that dialogue dialectically neither treating Marcuse (1964) as straightforwardly vindicated by contemporary platforms nor dismissing his framework as historically obsolete. The first movement shows how platform culture structurally extends Marcuse's diagnoses. The second shows where platform dynamics exceed his analytical reach—specifically in his assumption of a passive subject, his vagueness about resistance, and his inability to account for the simultaneous homogenization and fragmentation platforms produce. Between these two movements, the concept of algorithmic incorporation emerges as a theoretical contribution that inherits Marcuse's critical commitments while specifying the mechanisms he could not anticipate.

Two scope conditions should be stated at the outset. First, the object of analysis is not platform culture in the widest sense but the specific practice of algorithmic curation on advertising-funded commercial social media platforms. Infrastructures organized on other principles (state-owned platforms, subscription services, federated or noncommercial networks) may incorporate opposition differently or not at all, and the argument developed here does not claim jurisdiction over them. Second, this is an account of one causal mechanism among several. Movement strategy, legacy media coverage, state repression, elite response, public opinion, and offline organizational capacity all shape what becomes of a political movement, and none of them is reducible to algorithmic dynamics. The claim advanced here is that algorithmic curation constitutes a distinct, under-theorized mechanism operating alongside these factors, not that it displaces them. Where the analysis foregrounds platform infrastructure, it does so to isolate a variable, not to assert its sovereignty.

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The method is critical-theoretical: conceptual exegesis of Marcuse's primary texts—spanning *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), *Repressive Tolerance* (1965), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), and *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (1972)—placed in dialogue with platform capitalism studies (Srnicek, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018), algorithmic media theory (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014), digital labor scholarship (Fuchs, 2014; Terranova, 2000), and surveillance capitalism theory (Zuboff, 2019). The #BlackLivesMatter movement across 2014–2020 functions throughout as an analytical case through which the argument is developed and the concept demonstrated.

The contribution this article makes operates at two levels. Within the platform studies literature, it provides a mechanism-level account of how oppositional content is absorbed—going beyond structural descriptions of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) to specify the sequence through which absorption proceeds and the conditions under which it can be interrupted. Within the digital activism literature, it supplies a corrective to frameworks that emphasize the enabling dimensions of platform infrastructure. Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) influential account of connective action shows how digital platforms lower the organizational barriers to collective action, enabling decentralized political mobilization at an unprecedented scale. This account is not wrong; it captures the visibility phase of the cycle this article maps. What it underestimates is what follows: the normalization, commodification, and domestication that convert the platform-amplified movement into a component of platform value. Algorithmic incorporation does not deny theenabling power of platforms; it describes what that enabling power costs.

Marcuse's Critical Apparatus

False Needs and the Organization of Desire

One-Dimensional Man (Marcuse, 1964) draws a sharp distinction between true and false needs. True needs are those freely determined by individuals that make existence meaningful and could, in principle, be articulated with social emancipation. False needs are imposed from without by a repressive social order—needs that direct individuals toward consumption and substitute for the demands that genuine emancipation would require (Marcuse, 1964). The argument is not about deprivation but about the systematic misrecognition of administered desire as autonomous choice.

Advanced industrial society, Marcuse (1964) argues, continuously produces these false needs and channels subjects toward satisfying them. The result is not passive compliance but active consent: subjects come to demand their own subjection. The groundwork for this argument appears in *Eros and Civilization* (Marcuse, 1966), where Marcuse showed how libidinal energy is organized by the performance principle to serve capitalist productivity. *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964) extends this from the psychological to the structural: the welfare state does not conceal repression behind gratification—it makes repression the object of gratification.

Incorporation: The Domestication of Dissent

Incorporation names the process by which oppositional thought, practice, or movement is recognized by the system, absorbed into it, and ultimately transformed into an instrument of the

system's own reproduction (Marcuse, 1964). The mechanism is not suppression but assimilation. The system does not reject criticism; it accommodates it, commodifies its surface, and neutralizes its transformative force.

Marcuse (1965) sharpens this in *Repressive Tolerance*, where he argues that the pluralist tolerance characteristic of liberal democracies functions as a mode of domination. Admitting dissent into public discourse—treating all viewpoints as equally entitled to circulate—does not empower opposition; it strips opposition of the capacity to organize rupture. The radical content of a critique and its militant form are separated: The content is permitted to circulate as one opinion among others, while its political force is dissolved. Marcuse (1972) extended this analysis in *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, tracing how the 1960s counter-culture (music, art, alternative modes of life) was not merely tolerated by capitalism but actively appropriated as a marketable commodity. The counter-culture became a culture industry before it became social transformation.

Incorporation thus operates through recognition, not prohibition. This is the mechanism's efficiency: What is welcomed does not need to be suppressed. The #BlackoutTuesday phenomenon is a case in point. The platform's algorithm amplified solidarity posts not despite their political content but because high-engagement political content generates the interaction metrics on which advertising revenue depends. Incorporation requires no conspiracy, no editorial decision, and no ideological censorship. It is an automatic effect of the platform's structural logic.

One-Dimensional Thought and the Reign of Operational Language

Two-dimensional thought preserves the tension between what is and what ought to be—the capacity to measure the given against possibilities that transcend it. One-dimensional thought eliminates this tension, closing off the conceptual space in which critique operates. The result is not intellectual poverty but something subtler: naturalizing the existing order as the only order and rendering alternatives literally unthinkable (Marcuse, 1964).

The instrument of this closure is operational language: discourse that reduces concepts to their measurable functions, eliminates productive ambiguity, and produces a certainty that forecloses critical distance. Language stops opening toward alternatives and begins stabilizing the status quo. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) make a parallel argument about the culture industry, showing how standardized cultural production colonizes the forms of experience through which critique might otherwise arise.

On contemporary platforms, this dynamic takes a specific technical form. Visibility requires conforming to engagement-optimized language conventions: brevity, affective intensity, frictionless shareability. Complexity, ambiguity, and sustained argument are penalized algorithmically—not because the platform prohibits them but because they fail to generate the interaction metrics the platform's advertising model requires. The grammar of platform discourse is an operational grammar in Marcuse's (1964) sense: It rewards what can be immediately processed and acted upon, while encoding as illegible what requires sustained critical reflection.

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The Algorithmics of One-Dimensionality

Marcuse's (1964) three concepts (false needs, incorporation, and one-dimensional thought) are not separate pathologies. They are dimensions of a single process in which the system forecloses the conditions under which it could be challenged. What follows examines whether that process has found a platform-specific form, and whether Marcuse's analytical vocabulary illuminates it—or shows its own limits in the attempt.

Recommendation Systems and the Technical Production of False Needs

What makes Marcuse's (1964) false needs thesis analytically powerful is its insistence that the organization of desire is structural, not merely psychological. Desire is not simply satisfied or frustrated; it is produced—and produced in ways that foreclose the demands emancipation would require. This insight retains its force in the platform context, though the production mechanism has transformed. Where Marcuse's analysis rested on broadcast advertising and mass media creating standardized wants for aggregate audiences, platform capitalism operates through personalized, adaptive, real-time systems that learn from behavioral data and construct individualized information and entertainment environments (Srnicek, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018). The platform's interest is not in satisfying desire but in sustaining it: an attention model requires not that wants be met but that they perpetually recur.

YouTube and TikTok recommendation algorithms construct each user's next content experience from completion rates, replay patterns, sharing behavior, and granular interaction data. The result presents as personalization but functions as the reproduction of prior preferences. Gillespie (2014) shows that algorithms are not neutral conduits but political objects that systematize particular values and determine which content circulates. TikTok's For You page is exemplary: It delivers an infinite stream of content that varies the user's prior preferences without departing from their implicit parameters. The system does not offer the user what they asked for; it offers what it predicts will sustain engagement. Bucher (2018) calls this programmed visibility—a regime in which the algorithm quietly narrows the range of expression that circulates by rewarding engagement-optimizing content forms. In Marcuse's (1964) terms, the platform organizes desire away from the unknown, the other, and the transcendent, and toward the familiar, the affirming, and the habitual.

Filter Bubbles and the Algorithmic Closure of Critical Distance

Marcuse's (1964) critique of operational language extends into the information-environment level of platform culture. Pariser (2011) argues that algorithmic personalization creates isolated information environments in which users encounter content that confirms rather than challenges their existing views. Sunstein (2017) develops the implications for deliberative democracy: Algorithmically curated information ecosystems undermine the conditions (exposure to difference, the capacity for revision) on which meaningful public reasoning depends. The empirical claims of the filter bubble thesis have been contested; Guess and Lyons (2020) and others show that the degree of informational isolation Pariser (2011) posits may be overstated in practice.

The connection to Marcuse (1964), however, does not depend on the filter bubble thesis holding in its strongest form. What matters for Marcuse's one-dimensional thought argument is not the absolute isolation of information environments but the structural weakening of critical distance and negating thought. This weakening is an algorithmic effect even where isolation is partial. Twitter/X research demonstrates that exposure to opposing views can paradoxically harden rather than moderate political commitments (Bail et al., 2018), suggesting that the platform architecture promotes reactivity over deliberation—a configuration closer to Marcuse's operational language than to the communicative rationality Habermas (2022) envisions.

The critical point here is the invisibility of the mechanism. Ideology can, in principle, be exposed and challenged. An algorithm that produces the same structural effects operates largely outside reflective awareness, experienced as technical neutrality—a "natural" feature of the information environment rather than a structured imposition of particular communicative norms.

The #BlackLivesMatter Case: Incorporation in Practice

The absorption of digital activism into platform value chains illustrates incorporation's platform-specific operation most sharply. Marcuse's (1964) framework anticipates the dynamic: Oppositional practice is recognized by the system, welcomed, and ultimately transformed into an instrument of the system's reproduction (Marcuse, 1964). *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Marcuse, 1972) traces an early instance: The 1960s counter-culture, including its music, art, and alternative modes of living, was not merely tolerated by capitalism but actively appropriated as a commodity. The pattern Marcuse identified in the culture industry now operates through algorithmic infrastructure.

The #BlackLivesMatter movement, across its trajectory from 2014 to 2020, allows the four phases to be traced. A note on evidentiary status is necessary before proceeding. The account offered here is an interpretive reconstruction built on existing scholarship—principally Freelon et al.'s (2016) analysis of Ferguson-era Twitter—rather than an original empirical study. Its purpose is to demonstrate that the four-phase model is analytically coherent and to specify what evidence would confirm or disconfirm it. Where the argument makes claims about measurable change over time, those claims should be read as testable propositions, and the final part of this section states them in a form suitable for testing.

Freelon et al. (2016) show that during the 2014–2015 Ferguson period, Twitter was genuinely enabling for the movement: It allowed activists to set national news agendas ahead of legacy media, circulate eyewitness testimony that contradicted official accounts, amplify marginalized voices, and reach audiences far beyond the movement's organizational base. Their analysis also documents a communicatively heterogeneous field, encompassing on-the-ground reporting, sustained structural critique, and community-building discourse alongside expressive and affective content. This is the visibility phase: The movement's content enters the platform and is amplified, not despite its political character but because politically charged content generates the shares, replies, and reactions that drive metric performance. The movement is welcomed because it is valuable. The heterogeneity Freelon et al. document matters for what follows because it establishes a baseline: At the outset, platform amplification carried a wide range of communicative forms, including analytically demanding ones.

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This observation also resolves an apparent paradox in the model. If the algorithm rewards short, immediate, affectively intense content, one might reasonably ask how such content could become more so at a later stage—surely it had to possess these properties from the beginning to be amplified at all. The objection is well taken, and answering it clarifies what the normalization phase claims. Amplification during the acute phase of a protest cycle is substantially event driven: an exogenous shock (a killing, a verdict, a mass mobilization) supplies engagement from outside the content itself. Under these conditions, the engagement threshold for circulation drops, and material that would ordinarily fail to travel does travel, including long-form policy documents, legal explainers, and organizational statements. The event, not the format, does the amplification work.

Normalization happens when the event recedes, and the platform's baseline optimization reasserts itself. The claim is not that movement content becomes shorter than it was at the moment of rupture. It is that the range of content capable of sustaining circulation narrows, and narrows selectively against complexity. Two distinct processes produce this narrowing. The first is a selection effect internal to the algorithm: As exogenous engagement subsides, only content clearing the ordinary threshold continues to be distributed, and analytically complex material clears it least reliably. The second is an adaptation effect among producers: Participants who observe which of their posts travel adjust subsequent output accordingly, a process Bucher (2018) captures in her account of the algorithmic imaginary—users acting on their inferences about what the system wants. Normalization is thus neither purely imposed nor purely chosen. It is the joint product of algorithmic selection and rational producer adaptation under conditions of metric feedback.

The normalization of "defund the police" is unusually well documented, and the evidence suggests that compression carried a measurable political cost. Ebbinghaus et al. (2025) note that the slogan peaked in Google searches at the height of the 2020 protest wave and outnumbered every other movement demand in search frequency—a near-perfect index of successful circulation (p. 1200). Yet polling from the same period found 31% support and 58% opposition, and decisively, support was higher across all social groups when respondents were asked about substantive proposals to divert funds from police departments rather than about the slogan itself (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025, p. 1200). The formulation that traveled was less persuasive than the argument it compressed. This is the normalization phase rendered legible: What the platform environment selects for is shareability, not persuasive efficacy, and the two can diverge sharply. The compressed form also proved more useful to the movement's opponents than to the movement, as Republican strategists attached the slogan to the broader movement to create liabilities for their opponents (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025, p. 1203).

A concrete illustration clarifies the contrast the model predicts, and it should be read as illustrative rather than as measurement. In the acute phase documented by Freelon et al. (2016), the amplified field carried demanding long-form content: eyewitness threads reconstructing events in real time, posts tying a particular killing to a longer history of racialized state violence, and statements circulated in full, sometimes photographed and posted as images to escape the platform's character limit. What sustained circulation as the 2020 wave crested and receded was its compression: the three-word demand to defund the police, which peaked in search and outran every other movement demand even as the substantive proposals it stood for drew markedly higher support when put to respondents directly (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025). The

move from the full statement to the three-word slogan that replaced it is what the model means by a selective narrowing against complexity.

An alternative reading of the same evidence deserves acknowledgment because it is a serious rival. One might conclude simply that commercial platforms are effective instruments for generating attention and ineffective instruments for converting attention into durable political change. This reading is compatible with everything described above, and nothing in this article contradicts it. What algorithmic incorporation adds is an account of why the conversion fails—and the answer is not that platforms are merely inert or ill-suited to the task. It is that the same mechanism that produces the attention actively reshapes what is being attended to, and does so in a direction that serves the platform's revenue model. The failure of conversion is not a shortfall in platform capability; it is a structural consequence of platform design.

Commodification follows as the movement's positioning enters corporate brand strategy. That sociopolitical stance-taking functions as an instrument of brand equity is not an imputation from outside the marketing field; it is that field's own explicit theory. Writing in 2020, and addressing brands navigating precisely this moment, Vredenburg et al. (2020) set out a typology of brand activism in which alignment between activist messaging, corporate purpose, and prosocial practice yields "the largest gains in brand equity," while the decoupling of message from practice constitutes what they name woke washing—inauthentic activism that risks misleading consumers and damaging equity (p. 444). The framework is prescriptive rather than critical: Its purpose is to help brands convert sociopolitical alignment into durable market value without incurring reputational cost. This is worth dwelling on because it means the commodification phase does not require a hidden mechanism to be inferred. The apparatus theorizes itself publicly in the disciplinary literature in the same year and for the same conjuncture.

Subsequent experimental work has refined the practice, and one of its findings bears on the argument of the previous section. Testing brand activism messaging across contexts including racial equality, Ahmad et al. (2024) find that concrete messages specifying changes internal to the organization produce higher perceived fit and greater brand authenticity than abstract ones, and that promising activist commitment without fulfilling it or congruent woke washing is more destructive than misalignment between brand and cause. The structural parallel with the movement side is worth noting, since neither literature draws it. On the movement side, the compressed slogan traveled furthest and persuaded least; on the brand side, abstract stance-taking circulates easily and authenticates poorly. In both cases, the form best adapted to circulation is not the form that accomplishes what the circulation was for. The selection pressure operating on content in an engagement-optimized environment is indifferent to whether the content achieves its purpose, and this indifference is symmetrical: It degrades the movement's demand and the brand's credibility by the same logic and for the same reason.

What that literature does not settle is the platform-side operation of the phase, and the honesty required elsewhere in this analysis applies here too. That #BlackoutTuesday generated advertising inventory for the platforms hosting it, that movement-adjacent content became a viable targeting category, and that brand uptake peaked after rather than concurrently with the movement's own engagement peak are claims

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this article advances as propositions rather than findings. They are the least documented of the four phases, and the indicators specified below are offered in that spirit: as an agenda, not a result.

Domestication, the final phase, is the point at which the movement's symbolic presence persists while its transformative demand ceases to move institutions. Here, the outcome is measurable. Ebbinghaus et al. (2025) hand-compiled police budget data for 264 major U.S. cities and matched it against comprehensive protest data. They found no evidence that the protests produced defunding: police spending as a share of city budgets fell only from 10.47 to 10.19%, with no structural break coinciding with the protest wave, and the relationship between protest size and budget change was positive rather than negative (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025, pp. 1205, 1207). In cities with large Republican vote shares, protest was associated with significant budget increases; in cities with large Democratic vote shares, where the demand met a more sympathetic audience, budgets were not reduced either (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025, pp. 1208, 1211). The demand achieved peak informational salience and zero fiscal effect in the same months.

Their explanation, however, is not the one advanced here, and the divergence should be stated plainly rather than absorbed. Ebbinghaus et al. (2025) rule out electoral incentives as the driver of the Republican backlash and offer tentative evidence instead for policy makers' own conservatism, entrenched right-wing influence in city politics, and the lobbying weight of police unions (pp. 1209–1210). These are institutional and partisan mechanisms operating at the municipal government level, not effects of algorithmic curation, and the authors caution against causal readings of their estimates in any case (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025, p. 1206). Domestication as used here names a pattern—the decoupling of symbolic circulation from institutional outcome—and specifies where in the platform cycle that pattern becomes observable. It does not establish that platform dynamics caused the decoupling. On the best available evidence for this case, the proximate causes of the policy failure lie in city councils rather than in recommendation systems. The platform analysis contributes an account of why the demand arrived at those councils in the compressed form opponents found easiest to use against it

Stated as testable propositions, the model predicts the following. Within a movement's platform corpus, mean post length and the proportion of posts containing sustained argumentation should decline from the acute event phase to the post-acute phase, while the image-to-text ratio should rise. Engagement returns to analytically complex posts should decay faster than returns to affectively immediate posts across the same interval. Brand and advertiser activity in movement-adjacent content categories should peak measurably after the movement's own engagement peak rather than concurrently with it. And the correlation between platform engagement volume and institutional policy outcomes should weaken across the cycle. Each of these is falsifiable with existing computational methods applied to archived platform data, and establishing them is a task this article commends to subsequent empirical work rather than one it claims to have completed.

Marcuse's Constitutive Limits

The Subject Problem: From Passive Consumer to Prosumer

The deepest structural limitation of *One-Dimensional Man* is its subject. Marcuse's (1964) one-dimensional individual is a largely passive figure (manipulated, administered, incorporated) whose critical

resources are so thoroughly depleted that liberation must come from outside: from minorities, the excluded, and those who remain at the system's margins (Marcuse, 1964). Feenberg (2002) identifies the philosophical source of this limitation in Marcuse's (1964) philosophy of technology: By treating technology as a unidirectional instrument of domination, Marcuse forecloses the possibility of its immanent transformation.

Platform capitalism produces a different subject. The prosumer (a figure simultaneously consuming, producing, and generating value) is neither the passive consumer of Marcuse's (1964) account nor the autonomous individual of liberal theory (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Terranova (2000) identified this subject's distinctive condition in her analysis of free labor: Internet users produce cultural value without compensation, generating the content, interaction, and data that constitute the platform's commodity. Fuchs (2014) systematizes the political-economic implications. Zuboff (2019) adds a further layer: Users are not merely unpaid producers but the sources of behavioral surplus value—the data traces that platforms extract, refine, and sell as prediction products.

This prosumer subject occupies a contradictory position that Marcuse's passive consumer cannot account for. The prosumer actively reproduces the logic of incorporation (by optimizing content for engagement, learning platform grammar, participating in the economy of amplification) while simultaneously being its object. This is not a failure of critical consciousness; it is a structural position in which the conditions of visibility are the conditions of normalization.

The political-economic question Marcuse (1964) leaves unanswered is equally significant: Who incorporates and who profits? Incorporation in Marcuse's framework operates as a systemwide logic with no specifiable beneficiary. Platform incorporation is entangled with concrete capital structures: advertising-dependent business models, engagement-optimizing algorithms calibrated to shareholder value, and the concentrated ownership of platform infrastructure (Srnicek, 2017).

Beyond the Great Refusal: Resistance Within the System

Marcuse's framework for liberation rests on the Great Refusal—a radical, total rejection of the existing order rather than its immanent transformation (Marcuse, 1964). In *An Essay on Liberation* (Marcuse, 1969), Marcuse elaborates this as a new sensibility capable of sustaining opposition across aesthetic, somatic, and political dimensions. Kellner (1984) locates the structural weakness of this framework precisely here: Marcuse's refusal to specify the practical subject of liberation leaves an unbridgeable gap between critical diagnosis and political program.

Platform dynamics surface forms of resistance that Marcuse's (1964) binary (incorporation or total refusal) cannot adequately classify. The tang ping (躺平, lying flat) movement that emerged in China in 2021 refused the imperatives of intensive work and competitive consumption without positioning itself as organized political opposition or as a Great Refusal in Marcuse's sense. Sun (2025) characterizes it as passive resistance to an entrenched ethos of overwork that is neither withdrawal nor program but a claim to personal agency and social critique, and traces its trajectory from a single forum post to migration across Weibo and Douban, where reposts, memes, and emoticons amplified its reach. Hsu (2022) records that the originating post was subsequently deleted and that the movement drew sustained condemnation from state media—a

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response that indexes the disruption it was taken to represent. That post had itself invoked Diogenes and what Žižek (2009) calls kynicism—the rejection of official culture through irony and sarcasm—which situates tang ping alongside the humor Cho identifies in attention-jacking rather than opposite to it. De Certeau (1988) offers a more apt theoretical frame than Marcuse does here: Such practices are tactical rather than strategic, using the dominant system's own tools to pursue ends the system did not intend.

Homogeneity or Fragmentation?

Marcuse's (1964) one-dimensionality presupposes a homogenizing tendency: the system produces standardized subjects, closes off genuine plurality, and eliminates the differences through which critical thought might arise (Marcuse, 1964). This assumption made sense in the context of mass-media capitalism, where a few broadcast institutions produced content for mass audiences.

Platform capitalism simultaneously homogenizes and fragments. Platforms impose standardized engagement metrics, universal content-format conventions, and algorithmically enforced visibility norms across the full diversity of their users. Instagram's progressive standardization of formats, from photographs to stories to reels, imposed a formal homogeneity on vastly different political and cultural projects. Similarly, platforms enable and actively encourage the proliferation of micro-identities and niche communities: The same Instagram that enforces format hosts thousands of distinct subcultures, each with its own visual vocabulary and community norms.

This double movement is less anomalous than it first appears, and the Frankfurt School itself supplies part of the vocabulary for it. Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) concept of pseudo-individuation names exactly this operation in the culture industry: the production of superficial differentiation atop a standardized substrate, such that consumers experience as personal choice what is in fact the controlled variation of a uniform template. The political economy of the same arrangement was consolidated under what Robins and Webster (1999) describe as Sloanism—the annual model changes, styling, and brand image introduced at General Motors in the 1920s, which extended the calculative rationality of scientific management from the organization of production into the management of consumption itself (p. 99). What matters for the present argument is their further observation that this system was informational from the outset. Differentiated mass consumption depended on the collection, aggregation, and dissemination of data about consumer behavior, giving rise to market research as an industry and to early data-processing corporations serving what they characterize as record-conscious and surveillance-conscious firms—an apparatus that one contemporary advocate of scientific marketing described as the quantitative analysis of human behavior in the nth degree.

Algorithmic personalization is the mature form of this logic rather than a departure from it: maximal apparent difference at the level of the feed and minimal difference at the level of the format and the metric that governs it, sustained by a behavioral data infrastructure whose function was already recognizable in the 1920s. This genealogy also qualifies the novelty claim in Zuboff's (2019) account. The extraction of behavioral data to manage consumption is not an invention of platform capitalism; it is constitutive of differentiated mass consumption as such, and what platforms have altered is its granularity, velocity, and reach rather than its underlying purpose. Couldry and Mejias (2019) identify the extractive function this

serves in the present: diverse identities become differently monetizable segments, and performing identity generates the behavioral data platforms require. Marcuse's (1964) homogenization thesis is thus not so much wrong as insufficiently dialectical—it does not anticipate that plurality itself could become the medium of administration.

Algorithmic Incorporation

The Concept and Its Theoretical Position

Algorithmic incorporation names the process by which oppositional thought, practice, and identity enter a platform-mediated cycle of visibility, normalization, commodification, and domestication. It applies specifically to content oriented against dominant political, economic, or social arrangements—not to cultural difference in general. The #BlackLivesMatter analysis above traced this process across these four phases; what follows specifies the concept's theoretical architecture and distinguishes it from adjacent frameworks.

Marcuse's (1964) incorporation concept establishes the fundamental dynamic: Opposition is absorbed and neutralized by being made to serve the system's reproduction. Algorithmic incorporation preserves this logic while specifying the technical mechanisms that execute it. Marcuse described what happens; algorithmic incorporation maps how it happens—through which phases, under which conditions, at which points it might be disrupted. Repressive Tolerance (Marcuse, 1965) names the structural logic—domination through admission rather than prohibition—but likewise stops short of the mechanism.

The relationship to Gramsci's (1971) concept of *trasformismo* requires more extended treatment. Gramsci (1971) showed that hegemony operates not primarily through coercion but by absorbing oppositional leaders and ideas into the dominant bloc. This process requires conscious agents: organic intellectuals who articulate subaltern interests to dominant ones; political institutions that co-opt oppositional representatives; cultural apparatuses that domesticate alternative imaginaries. Trasformismo proceeds deliberately, at a historical pace, and can therefore be recognized, contested, and organized against. It is a political process before it is a cultural one.

Algorithmic incorporation differs structurally from trasformismo in ways that go beyond scale or speed. No organic intellectual engineers the absorption of #BlackLivesMatter imagery into corporate brand strategy; no political institution deliberates whether to co-opt the tang ping movement. The algorithm performs these absorptions automatically through engagement-optimization routines indifferent to the political content they process. The platform does not decide to incorporate opposition; it incorporates whatever generates metrics, and opposition that generates high-engagement metrics is incorporated at speed and at scale. This automaticity means that algorithmic incorporation cannot be countered by the organizational strategies Gramscian analysis suggests against trasformismo—there is no agent to name, no institution to pressure, no intellectual to discredit. The mechanism is structural and technical rather than political and deliberate, which makes it both more pervasive and less legible. This is also, as the following section argues, the source of its most difficult political implication.

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From Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism, algorithmic incorporation is distinguished by its focus on collective rather than individual dynamics. Zuboff's analysis centers on extracting individual behavioral data for use in prediction products. Algorithmic incorporation focuses on what happens to oppositional movements and discourses—collective formations rather than individual behavior traces—as they pass through platform infrastructure. The two analyses are complementary: Surveillance capitalism is the structural condition within which algorithmic incorporation operates.

Entry Conditions and Subject Levels

Not all oppositional content enters the incorporation cycle. The visibility phase is triggered when three conditions converge. The content must carry sufficient engagement potential—the emotional intensity, shareability, and audience base that make algorithmic amplification profitable, or, as in the acute phase of a protest cycle, an exogenous event supplying that engagement from outside. It must not violate content moderation policies in ways that trigger automated removal; content that does is expelled rather than incorporated. And it must be algorithmically legible—structured through hashtags, keywords, and format conventions that allow the recommendation system to identify, classify, and route it (Gillespie, 2014). When any condition is absent, oppositional content is suppressed or ignored rather than incorporated.

The process operates simultaneously across three subject levels. At the content level (the political message or demand), incorporation proceeds through aestheticization and decontextualization, separating the symbolic from the structural. At the content producer level (the activist, organizer, or movement voice), it operates through the progressive normalization of platform-optimized self-presentation. At the collective identity level (the movement as a social formation), it manifests in the appropriation of the movement's symbolic codes and aesthetic vocabulary by dominant cultural institutions. These trajectories are interconnected but not simultaneous, and tracing them separately allows for a more precise account of where incorporation begins and where it might be interrupted.

The Limits of Tactical Evasion

The automaticity that distinguishes algorithmic incorporation from trasformismo also generates its sharpest political difficulty. If no agent decides, then there is no addressee for demands, no counterpart to negotiate with, and no institution whose capture would alter the process. This makes the question of resistance harder than the analysis so far has acknowledged, and it deserves to be confronted directly rather than gestured at.

The most documented repertoire is what Cho (2022) calls attention-jacking: the practices that developed among K-pop fan-identified accounts on Twitter during the 2020 protest cycle, in which fans posted short performance clips tagged with hashtags such as #whitelivesmatter to drown out anti-BLM content and flooded law-enforcement hashtags and reporting applications soliciting footage of protesters (p. 171). The originating episode, in which fans crashed a Dallas Police Department application by spamming it with fan videos, has been traced to a single tweet on May 31, 2020 (Cho, 2022, pp. 171–172). These are

genuine instances of the machinery being turned, and their logic is the one De Certeau (1988) describes: The tools are not escaped but redirected.

Cho's (2022) analysis, however, supplies a detail that complicates any straightforward reading of these tactics as evasion. Fan accounts, she observes, do not disable platforms as hacker collectives do; they drown out rival content by crowding it off the platform, operating "in cahoots with the platform's amplification of trending hashtags, and curtailing not their opponents' right to expression but their access to visibility" (Cho, 2022, p. 178). This is the crucial point for the present argument. Attention-jacking does not exit the mechanism described in this article; it satisfies its entry conditions with unusual precision. The content is engagement-optimized by design, moderation-compliant by construction, and algorithmically legible by intent. What is contested is who occupies the visibility the platform distributes—not the fact that visibility is distributed by engagement optimization. The tactic wins a position within the mechanism rather than altering the mechanism's operation.

Its ceiling follows from this. Cho documents that fan-activist formations arise sporadically and dissipate quickly: The #OpFanCam hashtag, which briefly recast routine fan posting as a coordinated, political operation, faded into obscurity even as the fancam posts themselves continued (Cho, 2022, p. 176). She acknowledges directly that flashpoints of fan activism occur sporadically without necessarily consolidating into a durable politics—though she argues, against the reading advanced here, that this is no ground for discounting such coalitions, since they envision political horizons beyond the nation-state and nonteleological notions of progress (Cho, 2022, p. 188). The disagreement is worth marking rather than smoothing over. Cho is assessing what fan coalitions make imaginable; the question pursued here is narrower and more pessimistic, concerning whether such coalitions alter the conditions under which oppositional content is absorbed. On that narrower question, her own account is telling: She closes by observing that the fandom returns to its customary work of promoting celebrity idols through platform manipulation in the service of industry profit (Cho, 2022, p. 189). The capacities mobilized against police surveillance are continuous with those mobilized for commercial promotion, and they return to it. The tactic is not outside the value chain; it is a temporary redirection within it.

One practice in Cho's (2022) account operates at a different level and deserves separate attention because it bears on the prosumer problem rather than on content. Fan anonymity (the refusal to attach platform activity to an identifiable, accumulating personal brand) is theorized by Cho as a mechanism for resisting the individuating mandate of social media technologies in favor of collective identity, such that eschewing the self-commodifying subjectivity of social media self-promotion becomes itself a political act (Cho, 2022, p. 183). This is a resistance located not in what is posted but in the structure of the posting subject. Where normalization works by inducing producers to optimize a persona whose visibility is its capital, anonymity withholds the individuated subject on which that optimization depends. It does not interrupt the circulation of content, and it does not prevent the commodification of content. What it withholds is the producer as an accumulating asset—which is, if the argument advanced here is correct, one of the three levels at which incorporation operates.

Two further repertoires can be named more briefly. Infrastructural retreat shifts the organizing functions of a movement onto channels that are not algorithmically curated (encrypted messengers, closed

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forums, mailing lists, in-person structures), constituting less an evasion of visibility than a division of labor, in which the commercial platform is used for recruitment and the nonamplified channel for the deliberative work normalization erodes. Its ceiling is scale and equity: such channels reach the already committed and reproduce the organizational barriers that Bennett and Segerberg (2013) showed lower connective actio. Deliberate illegibility—producing content that refuses the formal conditions of amplification—fails in its simple form, and the objection should be conceded: Complex, actionable content that no one encounters achieves nothing, and principled invisibility is indistinguishable in its effects from silence. Only a narrower version survives, one that abandons the assumption that the relevant audience is the maximal one and accepts that restricted circulation excludes mass persuasion.

The honest conclusion is that none of these repertoires alters the mechanism. Attention-jacking operates inside it with exceptional fluency; infrastructural retreat withdraws from it at the cost of reach; Anonymity denies it one of its three objects while leaving the other two intact. If incorporation is a structural property of engagement-optimized, advertising-funded curation, then it is that structure, and not the ingenuity of movements operating within it, that would have to change. This points the analysis toward objects it has not examined: algorithmic transparency and accountability regulation, the interoperability and data-portability requirements that would make platform-switching a credible threat rather than a sacrifice, and the noncommercial and federated infrastructures whose distribution logics are not governed by advertising revenue. Marcuse's (1964) own pessimism about immanent transformation is not vindicated by this conclusion, but neither is it simply refuted. What follows from the analysis is a redirection: The critical question is not how movements can outmaneuver the algorithm, but under what political conditions the algorithm's objective function could be made a matter of public determination rather than private optimization.

Analytical Gains and Acknowledged Limitations

Algorithmic incorporation offers three analytical gains over its theoretical predecessors. First, it makes the mechanisms of incorporation traceable across distinct, observable phases, generating the falsifiable propositions specified in the case analysis above and moving the study of incorporation from structural description toward empirical testability. Second, it accounts for the prosumer's contradictory position—simultaneously normalized and complicit in normalization—which neither Marcuse's (1964) passive consumer nor Zuboff's (2019) data subject accommodates. Third, it locates the question of resistance at the level of the mechanism's conditions rather than at the system's external margins, which is what makes the preceding assessment of tactical limits possible at all.

Four limitations must be acknowledged with equal precision. The first concerns causal weight. In foregrounding algorithmic curation, this analysis brackets a great deal that is not constant: movement strategy and internal composition, the behavior of legacy media, state and police response, elite and party positioning, and the offline organizational infrastructures that determine whether attention converts into durable capacity. The case analysis above makes this concrete rather than abstract. On the outcome that matters most to the argument, the failure of the defunding demand, the best available evidence attributes the proximate causes to municipal institutional politics rather than to platform dynamics (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025), and the analysis defers to it. The claim defended here is the more modest one

that algorithmic curation constitutes a distinct mechanism with identifiable phases and observable signatures, and that it shapes the form in which demands reach the institutions that dispose of them—not that this mechanism is the master variable. Readers should treat the framework as isolating a mechanism, not as explaining a trajectory.

The second is that the model assumes a platform logic sufficiently unified to be captured in a single four-phase sequence. In practice, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter/X, and Instagram operate through meaningfully different engagement metrics and recommendation architectures; what constitutes the visibility phase differs across them. The third is that the analysis is grounded in cases drawn from the United States and China and does not address how incorporation operates where platform ownership, regulatory regimes, and movement resources differ—a limitation that Couldry and Mejias's (2019) account of asymmetric data relations makes especially pressing. The fourth is that the homogenization-fragmentation dynamic examined above, though situated here within the pseudo-individuation tradition, is not yet integrated into the four-phase model itself. Extending the model to account for how incorporation operates differently across fragmented micro-publics remains the principal theoretical task the analysis generates.

Conclusion

Marcuse's (1964) critical theory, rearticulated through the mechanisms of algorithmic curation, yields both a vindication and a challenge. The vindication is substantial: platform capitalism reproduces, in technically specified form, the dynamics Marcuse diagnosed: the engineering of false needs by recommendation systems that manufacture habitual desire; the incorporation of dissent by converting political content into engagement-optimized commodity; and the narrowing of critical distance through algorithmic governance of what can be expressed and seen.

The challenge is equally substantial. Marcuse's (1964) passive subject cannot account for the prosumer whose complicity in incorporation is structural and inseparable from the conditions of visibility. His Great Refusal cannot map platform-immanent resistance. His homogenization thesis requires supplementation by the pseudo-individuation tradition to account for the controlled diversity through which platforms simultaneously standardize and multiply identities.

Algorithmic incorporation names the process that stands at the intersection of these movements. It is distinguished from Marcuse's (1964) original incorporation by its mechanistic specificity; from Gramsci's *trasformismo* by its automaticity and agentlessness; from *Repressive Tolerance* by its provision of the operational account that the essay identifies as necessary but does not supply; and from surveillance capitalism by its focus on collective oppositional practices rather than individual behavioral data. The four-phase model structures an analysis of how opposition moves through platform infrastructure, and the entry conditions, subject levels, and testable propositions specified here give the concept analytical traction that purely structural accounts cannot.

The analysis also arrives at a conclusion it did not set out to reach. Because incorporation operates without a deciding agent, the tactics available to movements inside the system—adversarial amplification, infrastructural retreat, deliberate illegibility—can evade the mechanism locally but cannot alter it. The

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political question this raises is not how opposition might become more algorithmically adept, but whether the objective functions governing distribution can be made subject to public determination. That question exceeds the scope of a theoretical article, but it is the one the theory points toward, and it returns critical theory to the terrain Marcuse (1964) never abandoned: the conditions under which a technical order might be made to answer to something other than itself.

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