

[*Radical Philosophy Review*, volume 21, number 2 (2018): 271-298]

Marcuse: Reason, Imagination, and Utopia

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Abstract: Marcuse argues that society must be evaluated in terms of its unrealized potentialities. Potentialities are formulated by the imagination, which has an essential cognitive function in revealing what things might be. Utopian thinking, thinking that transcends the given facts toward their potentialities, is thus rational in Marcuse's view. His explanation for this claim draws on Hegel, Marx and phenomenology. With Freud Marcuse elaborates the historical limits and possibilities of the imagination as an expression of Eros. Utopia is the historical realization in a refashioned world of the rational contents of the imagination.

Introduction: The Concept of Reason

Marcuse wrote two remarkable books while living in the United States, *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*. These two books exemplify the utopian and dystopian moment in his thought and provide complementary material for interpreting it. In this introduction I will briefly discuss some of the basic concepts from these books that have inspired my interpretation. Later sections of this article will elaborate these concepts in more detail.

This article will attempt a reformulation of Marcuse's thought as an existential ontology. Marcuse's ontology depends on a quasi-phenomenological concept of experience, a Hegelian theory of contradiction and a Freudian theory of the imagination. The unifying theme is a unique understanding of reason, explained in *One-Dimensional Man*.

Reason operates with universal concepts. Concepts enable the ordering of the infinite flux of experience in a coherent world. Since Plato philosophy has known that the ordering work of reason is incomplete. Particulars fall short of the perfect realization of the concepts that identify them. No drawing of a triangle is actually a triangle, no white object can be perfectly white. But if that is so, concepts cannot be reduced to particulars. They contain a transcending content that is available to the experiencing subject as a sense of incompleteness or imperfection. That content must be attributed to the imagination rather than to immediate perception because only

the imagination has the power to project beyond the given toward an ideal form.

Marcuse argues that the imagination is an essential aspect of rationality since it directs the subject toward a real, if unrealized, dimension of the experienced world. He understands the tension between real and ideal in Hegelian terms, as the truth of the negative. The universal is not merely different from the particular, but “negates” it, condemns its imperfection and implicates the subject in striving for the ideal.

The imagination is a psychological faculty as well as a source of creative insight into reality. In attributing an essential cognitive role to the imagination, Marcuse binds ontology to psychology. Freud’s theory of the imagination is the bridge between the two. *Eros and Civilization* develops that connection.

Freud’s instinct theory gives the concept of the imagination a content Marcuse treats as ontologically significant. That content is erotic in a generalized sense as signifying the affirmation of life. Thus the transcending content of the universal is not a product of pure reason but is grounded in biology. But life is more than a biological category. Its structure, the manner in which it relates subject to object, appears in Hegel as an ontological key.

Like life, being is essentially process, development, and the gap between universal and particular is implicated in its becoming. Life is perpetually engaged in overcoming that gap as it labors to grow through absorbing the environment into the self. This is the concrete form in which the contradiction of concept and object is resolved. For Marcuse, the concept of life thus mediates between the biologically particular and the ontologically universal aspect of the imagination. Utopia is not the static resolution of the contradiction but its deployment under social conditions that permit the full development of human capacities.

These are the basic concepts developed in what follows. I will show how Marcuse employs them at several different levels: in his normative concept of society, in the concepts of world and essence, in his interpretation of Freud’s instinct theory, and in the reformulation of the concepts of sexuality, aesthetics, reason, being, and technology in a utopian alternative to capitalism.

The Logos of Life¹

This is how Marcuse began his lecture at the famous “Dialectics of Liberation” conference

¹ Portions of this section and the next were previously published in Herbert Marcuse, *Transvaluation of Values and Radical Social Change: Five New Lectures, 1966-1970*, eds. Peter-Erwin Jansen, Sarah Surak, Charles Reitz. Toronto: International Herbert Marcuse Society, 2017.

in London in July, 1967:

“I believe that all dialectic is liberation...and not only liberation in an intellectual sense, but liberation involving the mind and the body, liberation involving entire human existence.... Now in what sense is all dialectic liberation? It is liberation from the repressive, from a bad, a false system — be it an organic system, be it a social system, be it a mental or intellectual system: liberation by forces developing within such a system. That is a decisive point. And liberation by virtue of the contradiction generated by the system, precisely because it is a bad, a false system. I am intentionally using here moral, philosophical terms, values: ‘bad’, ‘false’. For without an objectively justifiable goal of a better, a free human existence, all liberation must remain meaningless — at best, progress in servitude. I believe that in Marx too socialism *ought* to be. This ‘ought’ belongs to the very essence of scientific socialism. It *ought* to be; it is, we may almost say, a biological, sociological and political necessity. It is a biological necessity in as much as a socialist society, according to Marx, would conform with the very *logos* of life, with the essential possibilities of a human existence, not only mentally, not only intellectually, but also organically.”²

Like many of Marcuse’s lectures in this period, the text must be read at two levels.

Superficially, the argument is one that any listener can understand: we live in a bad society that ought to be replaced by a better one. But at a deeper level there is a lot more going on. That is indicated by the phrases “false system,” “objectively justifiable,” “ought,” “*logos* of life.” In what sense can a “system” be not just bad but “false?” How can values be “objectively” justified? And what sense does it make to associate an “ought” with “scientific socialism” and with a “*logos*”?

Let’s begin with the question of objective values. Marcuse supports values which, with one exception, are banal: peace, love, freedom; the exceptional value is an emancipatory rationality capable of justifying resistance to oppression and building a society free from competitive strife. Who can dislike peace, love and freedom? And what has this concept of rationality to do with them? Critics point out that the bare statement of these values is insufficient, both practically and philosophically. If we don’t know how to realize them nor how to justify them philosophically we are not much advanced.

But is this unflattering evaluation of Marcuse’s program fair? I don’t think so. From very

² Herbert Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,” in *The Dialectics of Liberation* ed. David Cooper (Harmondsworth/Baltimore: Penguin, 1968, 175-6.)

early Marcuse intended an unusual ontological justification of values. In his 1966 inaugural lecture on “The Rationality of Philosophy,” delivered on his appointment to the University of California, Marcuse argues that philosophy arises from the problems and contradictions of the philosopher's *Lebenswelt*.³ This German word means literally the “world of life.” It was introduced into philosophy by one of Marcuse’s early teachers, Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological tradition. The *Lebenswelt* is the world of lived experience, what Marcuse calls “unpurged, unmutated experience,” in contrast with the restricted notion of experience that underlies the natural sciences.⁴ Experience in this sense includes more than the empirical facts. It is fraught with values that are sensed along with the given. Although he failed to develop an explicit phenomenological ontology, the reference to the *Lebenswelt* is not innocent; it indicates the continuing influence of phenomenology.⁵

This interpretation of Marcuse’s deeper thought is implicit in his idea of a *logos* of life. The *logos* pertains to an experienced world which, Marcuse argues, consists not only in facts but also in the valuative potentials that drive its historical development. But what has the *logos* to do with life? The Greek concept of the *logos* signifies discourse, reason, but also the rationale of human activity, especially technical activity. In Plato’s *Gorgias*, for example, the authentic craftsman is said to be guided by a *logos*, a meaning or purpose. The doctor is guided by the *logos* in the form of health, and so on. The *logos* is not simply an extrinsic end of a neutral means but shapes the means internally. Every tool and gesture of the craftsman is inhabited by a purpose that belongs to the nature of the craft. Neutral means indifferent to any proper end are employed by fakers, such as orators and make-up artists, who profit from simulacra of the achievements of moral legislation and healthy exercise.⁶

On this understanding of the *logos*, it is a normative principle, an “ought,” that transcends the given facts. Marcuse describes this relation between “is” and “ought” with his concept of a two dimensional ontology, a first dimension of empirical facts and a second valuative dimension

³ Herbert Marcuse, “The Rationality of Philosophy,” in *Transvaluation of Values and Radical Social Change*, eds. Peter-Erwin Jansen, Sarah Surak, and Charles Reitz. (International Herbert Marcuse Society, 2017), 2. This interesting lecture was a justification of philosophy to a new faculty that was predominantly scientific.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ Marcuse’s most explicit discussion of phenomenology is in Herbert Marcuse, “On Science and Phenomenology,” in *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 2, 1965, 279-290. He summarizes approvingly *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, especially Husserl’s critique of the naturalistic ontology based on the natural sciences, but objects that Husserl’s transcendental subjectivity abstracts from history and the role of action in the *Lebenswelt*. The “constituent subjectivity” of modern capitalist society is not transcendental but all too material (289).

⁶ Plato, *Gorgias*. W.C. Helmbold, trans. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952).

of potentialities. Scientific-technical rationality strips the experienced world of much of its contents, the “secondary qualities.” Empiricism accepts this stripped down version of the world as ontologically fundamental. The concepts through which the world is understood are similarly restricted, treated as a simple sum or average of particulars. Marcuse rejects this “one-dimensional” ontology. Experience, as it is understood phenomenologically, has a rich content lost in the scientific reduction. That content includes the gap between values and facts.

The transcendence of the second valuative dimension is not absolute; rather, the “ought” is to be understood as a achievable potential of the given facts. The original model of such a potential is organic growth. Living things realize a potential contained within themselves as they develop. That potential is real even before it is realized. In this sense potential can be said to be objective. In a traditional culture, the *logos* of life underlies technical activity. Craft is regulated by culturally secured models, taken to be objective. The realization of a design resembles growth aided by human intervention. In a modern society, potential is neither natural nor traditional but must be projected by the collective imagination.

The projection animates the struggle for a better world. Human beings are unique in that their development is contingent to some extent on their own efforts. The realization of human potential is not simply spontaneous but implies a practice that can be exercised more or less skillfully. The human being must realize its own essence through its practice. That practice is inherently social; its consequences are called “history.”

But historical practice is not a craft with a fixed goal, a *logos* as Plato understood the term. What sense does it make then to think of human life as moving toward an objective end of some sort? What distinguishes “potential” from any old change, including changes everyone would condemn? These are the truly difficult questions that arise from Marcuse’s ontological approach. To answer them, we need a better idea of what he means by the dialectics of life.

World and Essence

In his early work Marcuse offered a phenomenological interpretation of the basic thesis of historical materialism, later supplemented by a largely compatible reading of Hegel and Freud. Here is a particularly rich statement of Marx’s thesis: “The mode of production must not be viewed simply as reproduction of the physical existence of individuals. Rather it is a definite form of their activity, a definite way of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life*. As

individuals express their life, so they are.”⁷ Such ideas are usually interpreted deterministically, as showing the causal dependence of social life on the means of production. But Marcuse sensed that Marx was trying to make a philosophically more interesting argument concerning the nature of what phenomenologists call “world.”

Human beings belong *essentially* to a world through their interactions with nature in production. This essential belonging is not only causal and material but also existential. It involves the meaning of what it is to be human, to participate in a certain way of being.⁸ The inseparable bond between human being and world contradicts the Cartesian assumptions of modern philosophy and opens philosophical reflection to the ontological alternatives proposed by Hegel and Heidegger. In that framework, value appear as a dimension of being rather than as merely subjective. Marcuse’s various discussions of Hegel explain this idea.

Hegel revolutionized the inherited Aristotelian conception of essence. In Aristotle the essence of each thing lies behind its appearances in some unexplained way as its *telos*. The essence preserves the thing in contact with an environment to which it relates only externally, accidentally. In the case of living things, it contains the potential for which the thing must strive as it develops.

Hegel rejects Aristotle’s metaphysical postulate of an internal essence behind appearances. Instead, he seeks an explanation in the relations between aspects of the thing—its “appearances”—and its relation to its milieu, its world, which it must assimilate to itself to persist in being. The structure of these appearances and relations must yield the essence through tensions and gaps that both enable the thing to reproduce itself while undergoing accidental changes, and also give rise to internal sources of essential development.⁹

Hegel thus saves Aristotle’s central idea: according to their concept of essence, potential is not an extrinsic goal imposed by a subject but belongs to the nature of things. But there is a difference: Hegel binds the thing to its appearances and its environment, and thus overthrows the

⁷ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, eds. Lloyd Easton and Kurt Guddat. (New York, Doubleday, 1967), 409.

⁸ This unusual interpretation of historical materialism is explicitly developed in Marcuse’s early essay on Dilthey. Herbert Marcuse, “Der Problem der geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit,” in *Herbert Marcuse: Der deutsche Künstlerroman Frühe Aufsätze*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 480 n7, 483-485).

⁹ These ideas are presented in both Marcuse’s books on Hegel: Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1963); Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, trans. Seyla Benhabib, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987). See Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger & Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*. (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Aristotelian concept of the thing as a “substance” with an inner essence that is only accidentally related to its appearances and other things.¹⁰

Before his break with Heidegger, Marcuse interprets Hegel’s concept of essence in terms of Heidegger’s concept of “being-in-the-world.” Phenomenologically considered, worlds are meaningful wholes and as such the essential object of interpretive understanding; they are not indifferent to subjectivity but on the contrary essentially joined to it. Just as meaning and the understanding of meaning belong together and make no sense when separated, so the subject and object of world in this phenomenological sense belong together.

Worlds include aspects of reality from which science normally abstracts. These aspects are meaning, value and mood. Many philosophers would argue that these are simply subjective posits, but Heidegger rejects that notion. In his phenomenological language, human existence “discloses” or “reveals” a world under these aspects. Meanings, values, and moods are not imposed on the facts but illuminate them. It is perhaps easiest to understand this idea through the notion of perspective. A perspective doesn't create what is disclosed, it enables an aspect of reality to be perceived. Heidegger extended such a notion to all our relations to the world and denied the existence of a knowledge capable of explaining perspectives from the outside, from a god-like “view from nowhere.”

Heidegger operates with a clear distinction between meaning and causality, made possible by the development of German philosophy in the late 19th century. Dilthey and the neo-Kantians contrasted scientific models of explanation with hermeneutic interpretation. Heidegger’s concept of “world” is a hermeneutic construction, not a collection of facts, but a structure of meaning. The subject, Heidegger argues, cannot be conceived along Cartesian lines as a pure consciousness, ontologically independent of material reality. It is essentially engaged with the objects in its world, which Heidegger describes as a system of references–meanings. He gives the example of the carpenter’s workshop which contains a multitude of interrelated tools each of which “refers” to others and to the subject realizing its existence in action. In contrast with the neo-Kantians, Heidegger interpreted these meanings as lived, enacted in practice, rather than as purely cognitive contents. In this way he transformed the distinction between subjective meaning and objective reality by introducing a third “existential” term: the acting subject-object of lived

¹⁰ Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology*, 98-99.

experience.¹¹

The unity implied in “being-in-the-world” includes the subject and object in a larger whole. Note that the subject and object in question are not the sense organs and things. As material, their relations are causal and therefore contingent. Material subjects and the objects can perfectly well get along without each other. For Heidegger, on the contrary, the subjective and objective phases of the world belong together in an essential relation. That relation holds between enacted meaning and understanding. The carpenter who picks up a hammer enacts the meaning of the tool—the objective phase—through an understanding of that meaning—the subjective phase. That correlation is what makes the unity of subject and object in being-in-the-world intelligible. Causally related things stand in accidental relations, but understanding and meaning require each other.

Marcuse interprets Hegel’s concept of essence in these phenomenological terms. I will follow him by using the concept of “world” he derived from Heidegger in his own Hegelian declension.¹² According to Marcuse, Hegel treats life as a general ontological model. Life fulfills the demand of classical German philosophy for the unity of subject and object. The living thing cannot be adequately understood without reference to its world. The human being, for example, and the object, its milieu, are essentially joined together by labor in a complex that is necessary to both. The relation is not accidental, as we usually conceive the relation between physical objects, but internal, implicating the existence of the related terms in each other.

Life thus has a structure similar to the phenomenological concept of world. It exists as a unity of subject and object, organism and environment, constructed around the subject. Marcuse offers a tree as an example: “It is the tree *itself* (what we want to designate as its substantiality) which moves itself across the range of its conditions and not the conditions which move themselves *around* the tree.”¹³ This description conforms with Heidegger’s notion of life, based on his ontological revision of Jacob von Uexküll’s famous distinction between “*Umwelt*” and “*Umgebung*.” “The organism is not something independent in its own right which then adapts itself. On the contrary, the organism adapts a particular environment *into* it[self] in each case, so

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), 175.

¹² For my interpretation of the relation between Marcuse and Heidegger, see Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse* and Andrew Feenberg, “Heidegger and Marcuse: On Reification and Concrete Philosophy,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, eds. Francois Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson. (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

¹³ Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology*, 99.

to speak. The organism can adapt a particular environment into itself only insofar as openness for... belongs to its essence....”¹⁴

In Hegel, Marcuse argues, the subject and its objects are not things in the usual sense but are “bifurcations” in a unifying activity that encompasses them both. Marcuse concludes that this “original unity... first makes this world into the world, and... allows it to happen as the world.”¹⁵ Essence describes this self-reproducing unity which preserves itself through change by realizing its potentials and in so doing “appears,” that is constitutes itself as objective, meaningful.

Existential Marxism

All this is quite abstract, but it becomes concrete when Marcuse has the opportunity to read and reflect on Marx’s *Manuscripts* of 1844. Already Hegel’s theory of labor suggests a more concrete version of being-in-the-world than Heidegger’s phenomenological description. With Marx a new element is added: need. The subject and object stand in a relation of need to its satisfactions. This relation, Marx says, is “ontological,” “essential.” “Man’s feelings, passions, etc., are not merely anthropological characteristics in the narrower sense, but are true *ontological* affirmations of being (nature).”¹⁶ The unity of subject and object is now mediated by the concrete motive force of the production and reproduction of the “mode of life.”

But how does Marx hold together the two phases unified in his version of “world?” Don’t human beings and their needs stand in a purely accidental relation to nature, the means of satisfaction? What is the *essential* connection between labor and raw materials?

This unity only makes sense where need and satisfaction are interpreted on the model of existential understanding. Need discloses that which in the world can satisfy it. It is thus a particular way of understanding the world, and not a mere physiological disposition. Sensation is the means through which the laboring human being encounters things as objects of labor. That encounter too is more than physical. The senses are “theoreticians in practice,” by which Marx

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William A. MacNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 264. Von Uexküll’s innovation was to consider the organism and its niche as essentially related. The organism does not adapt to the natural environment in general but rather selects its environment, its world, from the infinite stuff of nature.

¹⁵ Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology*, 13.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. and ed. Tom B. Bottomore, (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 189).

seems to mean that they are able to extract meaning from their objects.¹⁷ Indeed, meaning is implied in the fact of labor, which encounters the world not immediately but through its potential to satisfy needs once transformed. Marx argues further that the world revealed to the senses of liberated human beings will be a richer and more beautiful world than the one available to the alienated participants in the capitalist system.

For Marx the necessary mutual dependency of human beings and their world is not just a speculative proposition. He is not satisfied with the mere theoretical correlation of need and satisfaction. What good is the philosophical argument when in reality so many needs go unsatisfied? The unity of need and satisfaction must be established practically as well as theoretically. Subject-object unity implies a norm because the relation can be more or less fulfilled. Where the relation is fully realized, the human being will be able to express its potential, its essence. But under capitalism that is not possible. Alienation blocks that realization by distorting the relation of human beings to nature and to their own nature. In an alienated society the human being is mutilated as are those dimensions of its milieu that depend on it.

In claiming that the senses disclose meaning, Marx anticipates phenomenology. Indeed, he needs a phenomenological distinction between existential meaning, meaning as it is encountered and enacted, and objective existence, but no such distinction can be formulated in the philosophy of his time. In his 1932 review of Marx's *Manuscripts* Marcuse offers an unusual interpretation of Marx's concept of "species being" that supplies the distinction implied but not explicitly formulated by Marx in 1844. Marcuse writes that human beings are species beings insofar as they can recognize the "species" of beings, that is, insofar as they are capable of formulating universal concepts. "*Labor*, as the specifically human 'life activity,' has its roots in this 'species being' of man; it presupposes man's ability to relate to the 'general' aspects of objects and to the possibilities contained therein."¹⁸ This is what it means to call the senses "practical theoreticians": the universal as well as the particular, the given as well as the possible, is first revealed to sensation.

In the lecture on "The Rationality of Philosophy," Marcuse formulates these ideas through the exoteric concept of man as a rational animal. He writes that philosophy pursues a "*truth* [that] is the right theory of man and nature as the *theory of the human universe*...[T]he

¹⁷ Ibid., 160.

¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, "New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism," in *Herbert Marcuse, Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit. (Lincoln and London: University Nebraska Press, 2005), 96.

philosophical quest is for the conditions under which man can *best fulfill his specifically human faculties* and aspirations. These conditions are *objective* ones because there is such a thing as ‘man’ being a (potentially) rational animal finding himself under circumstances...which allow the development of general concepts with *general validity*.”¹⁹ In sum, man and world form a unified whole which in its optimal configuration would permit the realization of man’s rational essence, his (and her!) capacity to formulate universals and thereby to relate to “possibilities,” potentialities, both human and material.

Here we have the ultimate ontological basis of Marcuse’s rejection of a “false system” in the interests of an “objectively justifiable” “ought.” It is reason itself which is at issue and this is why truth and objective value enter into the evaluation of societies. The configuration of the unified whole, the “system” in which human beings encounter nature, either favors or obstructs the spread of rationality as the highest human potential.

Why is rationality so important? Not because Marcuse entertains an intellectual’s love of pure thought, but because rationality is the name given by the philosophical tradition to the free encounter with the essence of things. That encounter transcends the subject’s instinctive reactions as well as the limits of the object grasped as a simple matter of fact. This is the deepest implication of the concept of world: access to universal concepts allows the subject to encounter its world freely and as a whole. Thus “Reason and Freedom are identical.”²⁰

Marcuse argues that the defense of reason belongs to “the existential meaning of truth.”²¹ Truth is not simply a cognitive fact but engages the subject of knowledge morally, existentially. To the extent that the system blocks potentialities for progress in rationality which could be realized on the basis of its own achievements, it can be judged bad, “false” at this existential level. This is the case with advanced capitalism. It arbitrarily restricts human development long after the elimination of the scarcities that at one time made the full flowering of rationality the exclusive property of a small elite. A radical change in the configuration of the whole is imperatively required to realize its potentialities.

Marcuse’s politics follows directly from his normative conception of essence. The normativity appears in the very structure of experience. Potential is not just a theoretical

¹⁹ Marcuse, “The Rationality of Philosophy,” 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²¹ Herbert Marcuse, “On Concrete Philosophy,” in *Herbert Marcuse, Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit, (Lincoln and London: University Nebraska Press, 2005), 51.

construct but appears negatively in revulsion at violence and destruction and positively in solidarity and utopian hopes. Experience is thus more than apprehension of the given facts, the so-called “primary qualities.” The “unpurged” everyday experience of the *Lebenswelt* makes no such distinction. Value and fact are merged in everyday perception, not sharply separated as in the scientific reconstruction of experience for the purpose of research. Accordingly, the philosophical *logos* “is theoretical and practical Reason in one.”²²

Freudo-Marxism

To complete the story we must consider the later Marcuse’s Freudian reinterpretation of Marx’s concept of need and Hegel’s concept of life. In *Eros and Civilization* he extracts a social theory based on Marxism from the relation between what Freud calls “eternal Eros” and “his equally immortal adversary,” Thanatos.²³ Marcuse’s argument concerns not only the economic but also the psychological conditions of a radical transformation of civilization. Just as Marx enlarged the concept of the political to include the economy, so Marcuse enlarges it to include the psychic dimension explored by Freud. The abstract ontology discussed in the previous sections acquires concrete social and psychological content.

Marcuse’s synthesis of Marx and Freud is the most famous and influential version of Freudo-Marxism. Earlier versions in the work of Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm suggested the potential of the synthesis but Marcuse carried it further by incorporating it into his phenomenological version of Marxism. In this section I will explain the background to the synthesis in the philosophies of history of Marx and Freud, followed in the next section by an account of the consequences for Marcuse’s ontology.

Both Freud and Marx dissented from the Enlightenment grand narrative of progress, but their alternative stories could not be more different. Freud proposed that the human race was originally organized in small familial groups dominated by a father who monopolized the women for his own pleasure. Eventually the deprived brothers rebelled, killed the father, and gained access to the pleasures formally denied them. But they experienced guilt and internalized the repression that had been imposed on them by the father. This internalized guilt became the basis on which civilized life was built, culminating in the ever more repressed and neurotic human

²² Marcuse, “The Rationality of Philosophy,” 11.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York, Norton: 1961), 92.

beings of Freud's own day. This is Freud's explanation for the return of the repressed in the form of psychological misery and violence on a civilizational scale.

A structural foundation underlies Freud's story. He argued that there are two basic drives, a life instinct and a death instinct, Eros and Thanatos. Eros aspires to create larger unities out of the fragments of the social world. Thanatos aims to return to inorganic matter and is therefore destructive. Sexuality is an aspect of Eros but Eros includes much else besides, essentially all the life-affirming impulses of the human being. The ever intensifying repression associated with the progress of civilization sublimates the erotic energy and gives it expression in domains such as art, religion, friendship and non-sexual love.

Eros and Thanatos interact in the Freudian psyche. Eros strives to master Thanatos in order to use its destructive energies for life. It directs those energies toward the superego and nature. This is the basis of morality and technology. But as technology develops, the competition between Eros and Thanatos for control of the psyche becomes ever more dangerous. Eros is not always in control as World War II was to demonstrate. Freud's story is apocalyptic in contrast with the liberal optimism inherited from the Enlightenment. But his loyalty to the scientific worldview caused him to miss the radical implications of his own concept of Eros.

Marx's story begins with human beings living in tribal societies characterized by cooperation and sharing among their members. Such societies knew neither private property nor competition for scarce resources. But the level of individuality was necessarily low in these impoverished and tight knit communities. With the coming of agriculture and large scale social organization, cooperation declined and individuality developed, culminating in the modern individual free from superstition and conscious of real interests. But at first only a small minority enjoyed the full development of individuality. It constituted a ruling class which monopolized the fruits of the labor of the great majority. This made possible social and technical progress, culminating in modern capitalism.

The industrial revolution produced a proletariat engaged in cooperative labor and able to develop a high level of individuality. This is the first working class capable not only of resisting but of understanding its exploitation. Capitalism is thus the last class society, soon to be superseded by a new form of social organization based again on cooperation rather than competition but at a high level of individual development. The condition for this outcome is the enrichment of society by capitalism itself. The pattern of progress in Marx is dialectical:

cooperation without individuality is succeeded by individuality without cooperation, and finally communism combines the virtues of both earlier forms of life in a society based on cooperative individuality.

Freud's story culminates in the present, in a world moving rapidly toward the World War II. Marx's story concludes in a distant communist future that will have resolved social and national conflict. Freud's story is based on psychology, Marx's on economics. Both contest the liberal idea of continuous progress under the democratic capitalist regime, but they diverge in fundamental ways. How can they be reconciled, and why would anyone even try to reconcile such different worldviews?

The answer to these questions is to be found in the peculiar situation of Marxist theory in the wake of World War I. The great socialist parties of the Second International supported mobilization for war except in Russia. Nationalism was evidently a more powerful force, even for workers, than proletarian class consciousness. The revolution Marx had predicted failed to occur in the rich capitalist West and instead took place in the most backward country in Europe.²⁴ Marxists searched for an explanation. They could no longer deny the yawning gap between the existing proletariat and their ideal agent of revolution. What could explain this gap?

Marx had assumed that the condition of the working class would enable it to rationally understand its situation and to respond accordingly.²⁵ This assumption was clearly derived from the old liberal story of progress, adapted only slightly in Marx's version by the introduction of a revolutionary break. But in reality the rising rationality of the working class Marx predicted was overcome by an irrational enthusiasm for violence against imaginary enemies. Clearly, as Freud argued, a psychological explanation would be required. But Freud's own explanation foreclosed the future and left little reason to hope. Adapting Freud's explanation to Marxism would require major surgery.

Marx's rationalistic vision of the proletariat depends on his notion that people are ultimately moved by material needs. The needs of the proletariat cannot be satisfied within the framework of capitalism and it is the realization of this fact that was supposed to motivate the revolution. But Marcuse was aware that human beings live not only by need, but also by desire. The

²⁴ Gramsci expressed the shock of his generation of revolutionaries in an article published in 1917 entitled, "Una rivoluzione contro il "Capitale"?" <https://digilander.libero.it/moses/gramsci05.html>, accessed Sept. 3, 2018.

²⁵ See the remarkable texts of Engels: Frederick Engels, "The Peasant Question in France and Germany," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*. (New York: International Publishers, 1969); Frederick Engels, *The Housing Question* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970).

structure of desire is more complex and less susceptible to a rationalistic explanation. Freud's account serves Marcuse as a starting point, but to it he adds a historical perspective derived from Marx.

Recall that in Freud the infants' pursuit of pleasure is modified by the encounter with an unyielding reality. The libidinal energy devoted to the pursuit of pleasure is inhibited and an ego constructed capable of adapting to reality. The pleasure principle is subordinated to the reality principle. This is the condition of the possibility of civilization. It has many consequences. Genital sexuality prevails as the body is desexualized and suited to productive and social tasks. Moral limitations on the pursuit of pleasure sublimate libidinal energy and build larger social units and cultural achievements. This is what it means for the human psyche to adapt to reality.

But Marcuse asks, what is reality? Is it essentially the same for all time? Not according to Marxist theory. The reality to which the ego must adapt is radically different for class society as compared with the primitive communism of the tribe and the future communism of the rich society built on the basis of the achievements of capitalism. Freud does not appreciate these discontinuities and transformations in the substance of the real. Of course he is aware of material progress, but he fails to see that beyond a certain point social change will bring about a qualitative change in the relation of the pleasure principle to the reality principle. These differences in social development correlate with different structures of the psyche, not just with different degrees of repression. Historicizing Freud's reality principle is the key to Marcuse's synthesis.

Marcuse agrees with Freud that civilization requires repression. The question is how much. The answer depends on the degree of scarcity. In poor class societies the individuals must restrain their desires because the means of satisfaction are generally lacking. The degree of internal and external repression required to maintain civil order is accordingly high. Advanced capitalism has produced such a plethora of goods that absolute scarcity is no longer the primary reason for repression. Instead a relative scarcity produced by the social organization requires a continuation of repressive structures long after they have become technologically obsolete. Marcuse therefore distinguishes what he calls the performance principle from Freud's reality principle. The latter identifies natural constraints on pleasure that only technological advance can overcome, while the former describes socially constructed constraints that might be removed by social change. The performance principle adjusts the individuals to the artificial scarcities

created by advanced capitalism.

Corresponding to the difference between the minimum renunciation of desire required by the reality principle and the excess imposed by the performance principle, Marcuse distinguishes between necessary repression and surplus repression. The excess represented by surplus repression can be dispensed with without threatening the survival of civilization. Now the revolution can be reconceptualized in Freudian terms as the end of surplus repression and the associated performance principle. This new concept of the revolution requires a deeper probe of the psyche under capitalism and its possible future under socialism.

Imagination

The central issue has to do with the nature of fantasy or imagination. In class society fantasy is associated with perverse sexuality and art. From a Freudian standpoint both are expressions of Eros that lie outside contemporary "reality" as the object of adjustment. The ego must discipline fantasy in order to remain in touch with the conditions of survival in the real world. With the abolition of scarcity reality opens up to embrace these excluded aspects.

It is important to avoid a simplistic reduction of this notion to some sort of orgasmic mush. This is the error of many critics who see only regression in Marcuse's Freudo-Marxism. In fact he is repeating in the domain of personality structures the same dialectical pattern of development Marx introduced in his philosophy of history. There is no return to infancy but rather a recapitulation of certain positive aspects of the early stage of development at the level of civilized adult personality. Nor does Marcuse reduce freedom to sexual freedom. He recognizes that civilized life involves much besides. The triumph of Eros would not only liberate sexuality but it would go beyond sexuality to affect work, technology, creative activity, and human relations.

There are four different formulations of this remarkable hypothesis in *Eros and Civilization*.

–The revolution will release the body from its desexualized dedication to labor. The whole surface of the body will be eroticized and the perverse forms of sexual behavior condemned in class society de-stigmatized.

–The exclusion of art and therefore of the imagination from the technical relation to reality will also be overcome in a socialist society.

–A new concept of reason incorporating the imagination will accompany the social and

economic changes brought about by the revolution. This new concept of reason will recognize as "real" the beauty of nature and human and social potentialities.

–Being itself will be transformed. The world, "reality," will be present as an aesthetic object to an eroticized perception.

In what follows I will review these four utopian consequences of Marcuse's concept of the revolution.

Sexuality. Sexuality in the infant is not specialized but involves the whole body. This polymorphous sexuality conflicts with the reality principle. Genital sexuality emerges in the adult as an acceptable channel for desire while releasing the body for work. The working body goes along with the privilege of genital sexuality and the monogamous family under paternal authority. These structures are historically contingent, dependent on the adjustment of the psyche and society to conditions of scarcity and class rule. Once those conditions are eliminated their consequences can also be overcome. Thus the revolution will affect not only social and economic life but also the way the individuals understand and live their bodily existence.

Marcuse interprets this change in what can only be described as a double provocation for the times in which he was writing. *One-Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization* offer a critique of sexual liberation as an adjunct of consumer society and a positive reevaluation of sexual perversion.

In the post World War II period, a shift occurs from a society that valued work and renunciation to a consumer society that reveled in expenditure while releasing sexuality to some extent from the bonds of the old morality. Yet the release from repression was blocked far short of general social emancipation by the focus on individual consumption and genital sexuality. These limitations enabled capitalism to instrumentalize the change, binding the individuals ever more tightly to the system through their libidinal investments. In *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse called this "repressive desublimation," the partial return of libidinal energies to their normal channels of satisfaction under conditions that stabilize the existing society.

The argument of *Eros and Civilization* is still more iconoclastic. For Freud, the perversions must for the most part be confined to fantasy or pursued in secrecy. Perverse manifestations of sexuality bearing no connection to reproduction and to the requirements of family life and work conflict with civilized life. But Marcuse argues that with the transformation of the reality principle, the original polymorphous sexuality can return and the fantasies be realized.

Remarkably for 1955, Marcuse offers a reasoned defense of sadomasochism. Here is the passage in question:

The term perversions covers sexual phenomena of essentially different origin. The same taboo is placed on instinctual manifestations incompatible with civilization and on those incompatible with repressive civilization, especially with monogamic genital supremacy.... A similar difference prevails within one and the same perversion: the function of sadism is not the same in a free libidinal relation and in the activities of SS troops. The inhuman, compulsive, coercive, and destructive forms of these perversions seem to be linked with the general perversion of human existence in a repressive culture, but the perversions have an instinctual substance distinct from these forms; and this substance may well express itself in other forms compatible with normality in high civilization.²⁶

Today we easily make the distinction for which Marcuse argues in this passage. The stigma attached to unconventional sexual behavior has receded to the point where advertisements now routinely exhibit subtle or not-so-subtle references to sado-masochistic activities that were unmentionable in polite company in 1955. The spirit of San Francisco has spread widely in recent years and resulted in the legalization of nearly all forms of sexuality. But Marcuse's argument is not about civil rights or tolerance which must have seemed out of the question at the time. He addresses a fundamental philosophical issue, namely, the mode of existence implied in various forms of sexual expression, what it is to be human and to have a body.

Marcuse's 1948 review of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* anticipates this conclusion. He notes that in sexual desire the person is no longer forced into the radically separate roles of reifying consciousness and reified object. The gap between subject and object is overcome in the caress which strips the body of its engagements in the instrumental systems of the social world and reveals it as pure "flesh." "The '*attitude désirante*' thus reveals (the possibility of) a world in which the individual is in complete harmony with the whole...."²⁷ Sexuality is an emblem of a freedom excluded in principle by Sartre's ontology, but, Marcuse argues, realizable through the revolution.

Aesthetics. Marcuse notes that the concept of the aesthetic is ambiguous, crossing the line between perception and artistic expression. Art presents sensuous objects in their ideal form,

²⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 203.

²⁷ Herbert Marcuse, "Sartre's Existentialism," in *The Essential Marcuse: Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critic Herbert Marcuse*, eds. Andrew Feenberg and William Leiss. (Boston, Beacon: 2007), 150.

stripped of contingent features that contradict their essence. In this sense aesthetics is a cognitive faculty. It offers “a synthesis, reassembling the bits and fragments which can be found in distorted humanity and nature. This recollected material has become the domain of the imagination, it has been sanctioned by the repressive societies in art.”²⁸ Marcuse argues that in a non-repressive society a rationality no longer confined to adjustment and survival can realize aesthetics in reality. This becomes a central theme in his projection of a reconstructed science and technology under socialism.

In 1969 in *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse returned to this idea in his considerations on the New Left. He argued that the New Left was not simply advocating alternative policies on the basis of radical political opinions but rather prefigured a different existential relationship to the world that privileged Eros. An aesthetic *Lebenswelt* appeared as a critical alternative to a violent reality. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx similarly introduced aesthetic considerations into the technological base, writing that unlike the animals whose relation to nature is determined entirely by need, “Man constructs also in accordance with the laws of beauty.”²⁹ Marcuse did not expect the New Left to make the revolution but rather viewed it as the living proof of the possibility of a world that obeyed “the laws of beauty” rather than those of profit.

Rationality. Marcuse's defense of art and sexual freedom is not a rejection of rationality but rather the projection of a new form of “libidinal rationality” no longer bound to the performance principle. “Eros redefines reason in his own terms.”³⁰ Marcuse suggests an enlargement of the concept of reason beyond observing and analyzing the empirical facts. The new concept of reason would have an imaginative aspect that would identify the second dimension, the potentialities inherent in things. “Eros awakens and liberates potentialities that are real in things animate and inanimate, in organic and inorganic nature—real but in the un-erotic reality suppressed.”³¹

As discussed above, the imaginative grasp of potentialities is not arbitrary but responds to a conception of growth modeled on life. Life has a direction of development and flourishes where it can fulfill its potentials. Reason constructs an idea of potential from examples and indications

²⁸ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, 70.

²⁹ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 128.

³⁰ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 224.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 165-166.

it finds amidst the facts. In the case of biology, this not problematic. Criteria such as health or maturation enable an objective selection of facts supporting a concept of potential. The historical case is more complicated. What qualifies as a potential of democracy, education, communication, family life? The answer again depends on a concept of development, but what are the criteria? The notion of life affirmation is too vague to decide difficult controversies. Marcuse proposes that philosophy and art can provide guidance, and where historical struggles are engaged criteria of progress are presupposed. But in the end history does not yield a consensus as does biology. This is why the final word on historical potential must be left up to democratic decision.

Marcuse's discussion of potential draws on the Hegelian reconstruction of the idea of essence, while arguing that the projection of potentialities depends on the imagination. Thus insofar as essence is an object of rational consideration, reason itself must incorporate the imaginative faculty. But in his Freudian conception of the psyche, imagination is rooted in Eros. A new concept of reason will evaluate social arrangements and technology on the basis of the second dimension of human beings and nature. A "libidinal rationality" combining imagination and reason will disclose an erotic reality, a reality that presents itself in the forms of beauty and as containing potentials awaiting realization. This would be a less aggressive and destructive form of rationality, but a form of rationality nevertheless.

Being. Our common sense tells us that reality is a sum of facts, the things we perceive in the world in their independent reality. We do not count our attitude toward these things as an aspect of their being but attribute it rather to the state of our psyche. Being is independent of subjectivity. This common sense view is compatible with the scientific attitude but it leaves out a great deal of the content of experience, including the objective correlates of the Freudian categories of Eros and Thanatos. According to Marcuse, these are not merely subjective drives but reflect aspects of being itself.

And just as he ontologizes Marx's social theory, so Freud's metapsychology becomes the basis for an ontology. Marcuse claims that being is at stake in history.³² He introduces a historicized notion of biological drives into something like a "being-in-the-world."³³ This operation is both complicated and obscure. It posits the fundamental drives as aspects of reality,

³² For an account of the role of this "absolute historicism" in Western Marxism, see Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, (London: Verso, 2017).

³³ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 10 n.1.

not just the psyche. He writes that “Eros transforms being.”³⁴

Marcuse explicitly draws Freud into his own quasi-phenomenological approach, arguing that “it seems permissible to give [Freud's] conception a general ontological meaning.”³⁵ He considers the erotic relation to reality as a primordial disclosure. It privileges the imagination over the merely given facts. Nature now appears as a realm of possibilities corresponding essentially to the human need for beauty, peace and love. And, following Marx's example in his discussion of need, Marcuse grants these values the form and meaning of an enlarged concept of rationality. This new concept of reason contains an implicit normative aspect. To the extent that the configuration of the subject-object relation supports the fulfillment of human needs, it is valid, “true,” as he explained in his contribution to the conference on the *Dialectics of Liberation*.

Freud might have objected that human needs have no such privilege in defining the nature of reality. On the contrary! Reality, as defined by natural science, is indifferent to humanity. Marcuse's emphasis on the ontological role of experience appears to dissolve reality into consciousness. But this is not Marcuse's argument. Rather, he follows Husserl's demonstration that the structure and concepts of natural science incorporate aspects of the *Lebenswelt*. It is not reality that is dissolved into consciousness, but consciousness that was always already there in what we use for reality, in the basic categories and types that define the world as science understands it.³⁶ Although being as understood by scientific naturalism is supposedly independent of consciousness, it still presupposes consciousness. Physical reality is thus intertwined with subjectivity and does not transcend history. Marcuse writes, “The two layers or aspects of objectivity (physical and historical) are interrelated in such a way that they cannot be insulated from each other; the historical aspect can never be eliminated so radically that only the ‘absolute’ physical layer remains.”³⁷

Treating as mere illusions all those aspects of experience that do not conform to its scientific representation is thus unjustified. Science itself is grounded on something more fundamental and

³⁴ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 171.

³⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 125.

³⁶ Marcuse, “On Science and Phenomenology.”

³⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 218. Heidegger writes, “The independence of things at hand from humans is not altered by the fact that this very independence as such is possible only if humans exist. The being in themselves of things not only becomes unexplainable without the existence of humans, it becomes utterly meaningless; but this does not mean that the things themselves are dependent upon humans.” Martin Heidegger and Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 173-174. Marcuse would have to make a similar claim.

so cannot define being. Instead, Marcuse looks to a different source in Freud. His ontology is based on Freud's theory of primary narcissism, however he goes beyond Freud in implicating being itself in the workings of the instinctual drives. The experience of the infant at first “engulfs the 'environment,' integrating the narcissistic ego with the objective world.”³⁸ This notion, which in Freud describes a primitive psychological state, becomes the clue for Marcuse that the metapsychology hides an ontology waiting to be developed. Eros would reveal the world in its beauty as essentially correlated with human desire.

Narcissism may contain the germ of a different reality principle: the libidinal cathexis of the ego ... may become the source and reservoir for a new libidinal cathexis of the objective world—transforming this world into a new mode of being.³⁹

A new basic experience of being would change human existence in its entirety.⁴⁰

Being is experienced as gratification, which unites man and nature so that the fulfillment of man is at the same time the fulfillment, without violence, of nature.⁴¹

Marcuse's challenge is to reconcile the extended concept of narcissism with “human existence in its entirety,” that is, with civilized life. Eros must be empowered to aim at higher cultural ends under non-repressive conditions. Marcuse calls this the “self-sublimation of Eros.” He believes he can find support for this notion in a brief remark in which Freud suggested that sublimation involves an initial redirection of libidinal energy toward the ego before it is attached to the new object. Whether or not this is a correct interpretation of Freud, Marcuse needs such a concept in order to argue for a “non-repressive mode of sublimation which results from an extension rather than from a constraining deflection of libido.”⁴² This hypothesis allows him to reconstruct the conditions of civilization without surplus repression. It also explains the psychological conditions of the erotic ontology he proposes.⁴³

Marcuse's position is thoroughly counterintuitive. *Eros and Civilization* offers remarkably little argument for this transmutation of psychology into ontology. At one point he simply states

³⁸ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 168.

³⁹ Ibid., 169.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 158.

⁴¹ Ibid., 165-166.

⁴² Ibid., 169-170.

⁴³ For critical discussions of this hypothesis, see Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chapter 6, especially 183-187; Edward Hyman, “Eros and Freedom: The Critical Psychology of Herbert Marcuse,” in *Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia*, eds. Andrew Feenberg, Robert Pippin, Charles Webel. (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Press, 1988).

that since the primary instincts pertain to both organic and inorganic matter, they imply an ontology.⁴⁴ To me the non sequitur seems too obvious to be accidental. Marcuse may have decided at some point in the composition of his book to simply leap over the objection that psychology has no necessary ontological implications. In this he followed Marx who made a similar claim in 1844, writing that feelings and passions “are true *ontological* affirmations of being (nature).”⁴⁵

The leap has its sources and its justification in the meta-critical reconstruction of the abstract categories of philosophy in social reality. This project begins with Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts*, is revived by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*, and continues in the Frankfurt School. Marcuse’s argument from narcissism addresses the “antinomy of subject and object” which classical German philosophy attempted to overcome at the purely theoretical level. Marcuse brings the concepts of subject and object down to earth with resources he finds in Freud, while continuing to treat their split as a philosophical problem to be overcome.⁴⁶

Marcuse projects this split and its resolution onto the Freudian drives. Eros now enters the world as a structuring principle of reality, not just of the psyche, and the same is true of Thanatos. Beauty, as manifested in the objects of experience is the objective correlate of the erotic drive, which plays the role of philosophical subject. The achievement of a life-affirming social world is thus not just normatively justified, but also resolves the fundamental antinomy of philosophy. Marcuse goes so far as to suggest that Kant should have considered a form of intuition of beauty alongside the intuitions of space and time.⁴⁷ In the next section I will consider the role technology plays as the correlate of Thanatos.

Technology

Although he does not describe an object of the death drive corresponding to the role beauty plays as the object of the life instinct, destruction and violence would surely qualify as correlates. But there is a more surprising correlate suggested by the notion that technology responds to the destructive instinct. This notion once again is linked to Marcuse’s response to Heidegger.

⁴⁴ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 107.

⁴⁵ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 189.

⁴⁶ For an account of this concept of meta-critique, see Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 11-15.

⁴⁷ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 32.

In his later work Heidegger describes the mode of revealing in modern times as "technology." By this he means that the world presents itself as a vast sum of technical resources. Marcuse's view of advanced capitalism is quite similar. In *One-Dimensional Man* he writes, "When technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality—a 'world.'"⁴⁸ But unlike Heidegger with his rather rarefied conception of the "enframing" as a stage in the history of being, Marcuse sees this condition as an expression of the death instinct. He calls on Freud for help in explaining the mode of existence of the subjects of technological aggression and violence. A simple obsession with instrumental control is insufficient to explain a world in which so many die in meaningless wars and in which the peace is kept by a strategy of mutually assured destruction. Instrumental control is inseparable from Thanatos and must be mastered by a powerful erotic commitment to life to serve human flourishing.⁴⁹

An Essay on Liberation was written in the shadow of the May Events of 1968 in France. The Events, like the New Left, prefigured the consciousness of freedom. The Events advocated "*L'imagination au pouvoir*," a slogan that could not be closer to Marcuse's preoccupations. It was as though the world's youth had become his disciples, although in reality there was not so much an influence as a coincidence of responses to the dystopian implications of advanced capitalism. Marcuse now developed his old arguments for a less repressive civilization with greater specificity. He argued that a "new sensibility" had emerged that related to the world aesthetically rather than instrumentally. Note that this is not a simple matter of opinion but concerns a structure of sentiments and practices, an existential politics. The generalization of this politics, were it to occur, would lead to a revolution more profound than anything hitherto imagined.

At the core of his position is the idea of a transformation of the mode of production under the influence of Eros. The idea is not, of course, to engage in a Franciscan colloquy with the birds, as Habermas once claimed, but to seek a more harmonious relation to the potentialities of nature that favor human life. "Science and technology would have to change their present direction and goals; they would have to be reconstructed in accord with a new sensibility—the demands of the life instincts. Then one could speak of a technology of liberation, product of a

⁴⁸ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 154 This comment appears in a discussion provoked by Heidegger's philosophy of technology.

⁴⁹ Habermas recognizes this surreptitious connection between Freud and Heidegger in Marcuse's thought. Jürgen Habermas, *Antworten auf Herbert Marcuse*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 10-11).

scientific imagination free to project and design the forms of a human universe without exploitation and toil.”⁵⁰

The synthesis of Marx and Freud culminates in the focus on technological design as an expression of the instincts. Toward the end of his life Marcuse recognized the power of Eros in the environmental movement, which he interpreted as a resurgence of the life instinct against the destructive instinct embodied in the existing technology.

The unity of humanity and nature is not only philosophically validated in experience, but scientifically validated by ecology. The aggressive struggle to dominate nature destroys “forces in nature which have been distorted and suppressed—forces which could support and enhance the liberation of man.”⁵¹ Theoretical and practical reason are truly united in the struggle to save the environment as a human *Lebenswelt*. “Violation and suppression [of nature] then means that human action against nature, man's interrelation with nature, offends against certain objective qualities of nature—qualities which are essential to the enhancement and fulfillment of life. And it is on such objective grounds that the liberation for man to his own humane faculties is linked to the liberation of nature—that ‘truth’ is attributable to nature not only in a mathematical but also in an existential sense. The emancipation of man involves the recognition of such truth in things, in nature.”⁵²

Conclusion: The Function of Utopia

Marcuse’s remarkable synthesis of Marx and Freud has been harshly criticized. Many of the critics complain that he was unfaithful to the true Marxist or Freudian doctrine. But there is a more fundamental critique to which I will respond in conclusion. This is the implausibility of the utopian projection of a non-repressive society. Doesn’t such a conception presuppose at best an overly optimistic view of human nature, at worst a premature homogenization of society around a false pretense of unity?

It is true that Marcuse’s imagined non-repressive society appears as a provocation and calls forth precisely such objections. He willfully defies sober assessment of human potential.

⁵⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon, 1972), 69. I exaggerate, but Habermas did claim that Marcuse belonged to a generation of thinkers who entertained the “secret hope” of establishing a communicative relation to nature. Jürgen Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” in *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 87-88.

⁵¹ Marcuse *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69

Marcuse believed he was living in a sick society. He would certainly have subscribed to Freud's observation, "may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become neurotic?"⁵³ The problem of communicating the diagnosis could be solved in only two ways and Marcuse explored them both: the dystopian exaggeration of the symptoms or the depiction of a utopian state of health by which to judge the present condition. Marcuse aimed to convince, of course, but he seems to have believed it equally important to shock his readers out of their complacency. However, his rhetorical strategy should not distract us from the strong and often sensible arguments that support his position.

Marcuse is perfectly aware of the elementary objections to his position. To counter them he needs to affirm the possibility of individuality and conflict in a non-repressive society. Furthermore, he must postulate a learning process in which the population makes progress toward such a society. The last chapter of *Eros and Civilization* contains persuasive reflections on these matters.

To some extent the issue is one of degree. It is obvious that a return to the infantile pleasure principle is incompatible with civilized life, indeed with life itself. But Marcuse is not calling for a return to the womb nor to the condition of the infant united with the mother. These are straw man arguments that do not hit the mark. He explicitly excludes such an interpretation of the concept of a non-repressive society. In that sense, his non-repressive society belongs on a continuum with the existing repressive society and should perhaps have been called the "less repressive society."

This modest version of his thesis is obscured by his frequent invocation of a total revolutionary break. But that break would lead only to a drastic reduction in the level of repression, not its abolition. Aggression would not disappear but would be better controlled by Eros, with which it is essentially entangled in both Freud's and Marcuse's theories. Although this interpretation of Marcuse brings him closer to Freud, there is an important difference: Marcuse's revolutionary break changes personality structure in such a way as to diminish aggression while also diminishing repression. Freud thinks this is impossible.⁵⁴ He argues that the progress of civilization is necessarily associated with increased repression, hence also with the spread of the

⁵³ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 91.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 90.

neurotic plague.

Marcuse recognizes that the very fact of human individuality requires some degree of repression. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud notes that the abolition of private property might be desirable—Marcuse would certainly agree—but would not eliminate conflict over sexual choices.⁵⁵ Marcuse takes up this point which he relates to the ineradicable differences between the individuals and the resulting conflicts between them. In a free society, he writes, “Men would really exist as individuals, each shaping his own life; they would face each other with truly different needs and truly different modes of satisfaction...The ascendancy of the pleasure principle would thus engender antagonisms, pains, and frustrations—individual conflicts in the striving for gratification.”⁵⁶

Is this concession incompatible with Marcuse’s hopeful vision? In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno distinguish human pleasure from animal satisfaction by the presence of prohibitions and their overcoming.⁵⁷ The underlying Hegelian point is that human pleasure results from the satisfaction of desires that have been conceived as such, that are “reflected” rather than reflexive. Marcuse agrees and adds that the struggle with obstacles is itself an aspect of “the rationality of gratification.”⁵⁸ He suggests the possibility of a “libidinal morality” based not on the introjection of external repression, the superego, but on the very requirements of the pursuit of pleasure.

This is a seemingly strange notion. Marcuse’s quasi-Freudian justification of it is hardly convincing but there is a common sense core to what he calls libidinal morality: the satisfaction of desire is all the greater where obstacles are overcome and the worth of the object and the virtue of the subject thereby confirmed. This is especially true of personal relations. Challenge is of the essence and is implied in respect for the other. But this creates a risk of failure and requires the individual to accept the contingency of satisfaction even in the most non-repressive society. In such a society coming to terms with this fact would not provoke violence or struggle for domination. “A society without conflicts would be a utopian idea, but the idea of a society in which conflicts evidently exist but can be resolved without oppression and cruelty is in my

⁵⁵ Ibid., 90, 60-61.

⁵⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 227-228.

⁵⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. trans. Gunzelin S. Noerr, ed., Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), 82.

⁵⁸ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 228.

opinion not a utopian idea.”⁵⁹

Finally, the question remains of how individuals in “the affluent society” might come to understand their situation. This is the dilemma of the first generation that already preoccupied the philosophers of the Enlightenment, especially Rousseau. He wondered how a population corrupted by aristocratic governance could learn to display the virtues of citizenship required by a free society. Marcuse’s formulation of the dilemma revolves around the equally problematic role of need in the transition between forms of society. The revolution in the “affluent society” must be motivated by new needs that cannot be satisfied by the existing repressive system, but only a non-repressive society seems capable of instituting such needs.

In *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse notes that educational dictatorship was a reasonable response to this dilemma in earlier times, but no longer today. “The answer has become obsolete: knowledge of the available means for creating a humane existence for all is no longer confined to a privileged elite....The distinction between rational and irrational authority, between repression and surplus repression, can be made and verified by the individuals themselves.”⁶⁰ But the process is blocked by the manipulation of needs to which the population is subjected. Nevertheless, at least in principle a process of trial and error engaging the population could arrive at better priorities and rational alternatives to the existing society.

Later the emergence of the New Left gave political substance to this hopeful projection. And a further generation of political struggles around issues such as the rights of women and environmentalism confirm the possibility in principle of such a learning process. Marcuse would argue that these movements represent Eros on the rise. However melodramatic this vision may seem, politics is ultimately a life and death struggle. The illusion that it is a matter of rational disagreement is periodically smashed by a brutal return to the reality of human destructiveness. The West is living such a shock today, but no doubt observers in less fortunate regions mock those who require a reminder. Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* proposed a theoretical explanation of this reality. Marcuse attempted to do Freud’s theory justice while finding grounds for struggle for a better world. He is truly one of the most important theorists of that struggle.

⁵⁹ Herbert Marcuse, “The End of Utopia,” in *Five Lectures*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro and Sherry Weber. (Boston, Beacon: 1970), 79. In this text, exceptionally, Marcuse distinguishes between impractical utopias and progressive social change. The point, however, is clear.

⁶⁰ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 225.