

[Talk delivered at the Marxism and Psychoanalysis conference, Simon Fraser University, 2018]

Marcuse's Concept of Eros

Andrew Feenberg

Herbert Marcuse's synthesis of Marx and Freud is the most famous and influential version of Freudo-Marxism. In this talk I will primarily discuss his 1955 book, *Eros and Civilization*, and also briefly *An Essay on Liberation*, published in 1969. These texts extract a social theory and an ontology from Freud's metapsychology. This involves Marcuse in some elaborate reconstructions of the Freudian instinct theory. He must somehow introduce Marxist historical considerations into the relation between what Freud calls "eternal Eros" and "his equally immortal adversary," Thanatos. He must also devise an ontology, that is, a theory of being, starting out from Freud's psychology. This last operation is both complicated and obscure. It posits the fundamental drives as aspects of reality, not just the psyche.

Marcuse does not attempt to achieve this with an old-fashioned metaphysics in which, for example, the desire for God would move all things. Instead, he draws implicitly on his background in phenomenology to avoid that embarrassing outcome. Phenomenology allows him to treat what he calls "uncorrupted, unmutated experience" as a fundamental ontological realm. Within that realm it is not absurd to posit an essential connection between desire and its objects. This move elides Freud's own naturalistic assumptions, based on a scientific worldview. But because of Marcuse's split with his early teacher Martin Heidegger, he cannot make explicit the assumptions behind this phenomenological ontology. As a result most commentators ignore this aspect of Marcuse's Freudo-Marxism. They turn him into a social psychologist when in fact he always identified as a philosopher. I will try to respect his own sense of what he was doing despite the obstacles he encountered presenting his argument.

Now, let me begin with some essential background to the unlikely reconciliation of Freud and Marx.

We in the West have been telling ourselves a certain story since the Enlightenment. It's the story of progress. According to this story advances in science and technology support moral progress, progress in freedom and democracy, which still continues to this day and promises to go on for the indefinite future. This story circulated at the end of the 18th century but it really caught on only at the end of the 19th century when liberalism became a kind of orthodoxy among educated people. Of course not everyone believed the story. The two greatest dissenters were Marx and Freud. They told different stories, different both from the liberal tale and from each other. In this talk I'm going to explain how Marcuse reconciled their differences. His Freudo-Marxism required major adjustments in both stories. The result is an astonishing synthesis.

So, what are the stories of Freud and Marx? 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 beings of Freud's own day. Ultimately this is what Freud hoped to explain: 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, 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 a destructive instinct. 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, and familial love. Meanwhile, Eros enlists Thanatos in its service and directs its destructive energies toward nature. This is the basis of technical progress. But technology makes the competition between Eros and Thanatos for control of the psyche ever more dangerous. Freud's conclusion was therefore rather pessimistic in contrast with liberal optimism.

Marx's story could not be more different. In the beginning human beings lived in tribal societies characterized by cooperation and sharing among their members. There was neither private property nor competition for scarce resources. But with the coming of agriculture and the organization of large-scale societies a pattern of exploitation emerged in which a ruling class monopolized the fruits of the labor of the great majority. This made possible social and technical progress, culminating in modern capitalism. As cooperation declined individuality developed, culminating in the modern individual free from superstition and conscious of real interests.

With the industrial revolution capitalism produced such individuals in a proletariat engaged in cooperative labor. This is the first working class capable of understanding and resisting 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 development 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 cooperation with individuality.

Freud's story culminates in the present, in a world moving rapidly toward the extreme violence of World War II. Marx's story concludes in a distant communist future in which social and national conflict will have been resolved. 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 First International supported mobilization for war except in Russia. This was a disturbing indication that nationalism was a more powerful force in the working class 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. Marxists searched for an explanation. They could no longer deny the yawning gap between the existing proletariat and the ideal of a revolutionary proletariat. 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. 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 had 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.

There were several attempts to perform this operation. The most famous were due to Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse. Slavoj Žižek might be mentioned as a contemporary successor. As I mentioned earlier I will focus on Marcuse's attempt in the remainder of this talk.

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 as Douglas Kellner points out, Marcuse was aware that human beings live not only by need, but also by desire. The 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 principal 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. Marcuse argues that the reality to which the ego must adapt is radically different in different historical eras. The real is very 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. The historicizing of 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 repression, both internal and external, required to maintain civil order is accordingly high. Advanced capitalism has produced such a plethora of goods that scarcity is no longer the primary reason for repression. Marcuse therefore distinguishes what he calls the performance principal from Freud's reality principle. The performance principal 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 principal, 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 performance principle.

Marcuse argues that the degree of repression has declined to some extent as societies have gotten richer. The post World War II period was characterized by a shift from a society that valued work to a consumer society that reveled in expenditure and even released sexuality to some extent from the bonds of traditional morality. Yet the lowering of the repressive bar was blocked by the focus on individual consumption and genital sexuality. The partial release of libidinal energy enabled capitalism to enlist the population in a competitive struggle for existence long after it had been made obsolete by the extraordinary productivity of labor in a technologically advanced economy. Marcuse called this adjustment "repressive desublimation," the return of libidinal energies to their normal channels of satisfaction under conditions that bind the individuals ever more tightly to an unjust society.

Thus contrary to Foucault's uninformed quip, Marcuse was well aware that sex is favored by capitalist society, at least in recent times. This qualification of the theory requires a deeper probe of the psyche under capitalism and its possible future under socialism. We must return to the question of the nature of the reality to which the ego must adjust. That question is not as simple as it seems.

By reality Freud means the world as it presents itself to the individuals. Freud seems concerned only with the quantity of goods available in that world. The insufficiency of means of satisfaction requires repression. But repressive desublimation shows that beyond a certain quantity of goods qualitative differences appear in what presents itself as a world and therefore in the relation of the pleasure principal and the reality principle. These differences correlate with different structures of the psyche, not just with different degrees of repression.

Here Marcuse makes several daring leaps beyond Freud, inspired by his own conception of sexuality and his philosophical background in Hegel and phenomenology. The central point of divergence has to do with the nature of fantasy or imagination as it is called in philosophy. In class society fantasy is associated with perverse sexuality and art. These associations are not strange from a Freudian standpoint given that both are expressions of Eros that lie outside "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.

But Marcuse claims that with the abolition of scarcity reality opens up to embrace these excluded aspects. It is important to avoid a simplistic reduction of this projection to some sort of orgasmic mush. This is the error of many critics who see only regression in Marcuse's theory. But in fact he is repeating the dialectical pattern of development Marx introduced in his philosophy of history, this time in the domain of personality structures. There is no return to infantile structures but rather a recapitulation of certain positive aspects of the early stage of development at the level of civilized adult personality.

There are four different formulations of this remarkable hypothesis in Marcuse's writings.

–First, he argues that 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.

–A new concept of reason incorporating imagination will accompany the social and economic changes brought about by the revolution. This new concept of reason will recognize the potentialities of things as "real".

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

–Finally, and perhaps most strangely in what is by all accounts a very strange theory, being itself will be transformed. The world, "reality," will be present as an aesthetic object to an eroticized perception.

In what follows I will go over 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. The specialization of the body for work 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 provocation for the time in which he was writing. *Eros and Civilization* contains a positive reevaluation of sexual perversion. For Freud, the perversions must be for the most part confined to fantasy. Perverse manifestations of sexuality bearing no connection to reproduction and to the requirements of family life and work are incompatible 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."

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 activities that were unmentionable in 1955. The spirit of San Francisco has spread widely in recent years. 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.

Rationality. Marcuse's defense of perversion and art is not a rejection of rationality but rather the projection of a new form of "libidinal rationality" no longer bound to the performance principle. 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 what Marcuse calls a "second dimension." This second dimension is 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." 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 imaginatively constructs an idea of potential from examples and indications it finds amidst the facts. In so doing it does not abandon rationality but enhances and enriches it.

Aristotle and Hegel lie in the background of this enriched conception of rationality. The idea of potentiality enters philosophy through Aristotle's concept of essence. According to Aristotle the essence of things is that which persists through changes in their appearance. At the same time essence consists in their highest potential. Aristotle posited his essences as real attributes of things. This is a teleological conception of being incompatible with the modern scientific view. Marcuse relies on Hegel's revision of the concept of essence for a modern alternative to Aristotle's metaphysics. Hegel argued that the essence of things is constituted by the relations between their appearances and their context. Thus essential potentiality is not a mysterious metaphysical entity but an explainable aspect of the phenomena. Like Hegel Marcuse retained Aristotle's essential point, namely, that the empirical existence of things is not their whole reality because they contain developmental potential that "negates" or goes beyond their current state.

Marcuse drew on this 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. Hence his notion of a "libidinal rationality." This new concept of reason would approach social arrangements and the technical control of nature on the basis of an understanding of the potentialities of human beings and natural things. This would be a less aggressive and destructive form of rationality, but a form of rationality nevertheless.

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, 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." 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 reconstruction of science and technology under socialism.

In 1968 Marcuse returned to this ontology 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* prevailed as a critical alternative to a violent reality. Marcuse did not expect the new left to make the revolution but rather viewed it as the living proof of the possibility of a different world. 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.

Being. Our common sense tells us that being consists simply in the facts, the things we perceive in the world. 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 would be independent of subjectivity. This common sense view is compatible with the scientific attitude but it leaves out a great deal. Experience is far more complex than the bare facts. Marcuse contests the common sense view and argues that the Freudian categories of Eros and Thanatos are not merely subjective drives but reflect the nature of being itself.

Marcuse's 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. Marcuse finds hints of this in Freud's theory. The experience of the infant at first "engulfs the 'environment,' integrating the narcissistic ego with the objective world." 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. "Narcissism," Marcuse writes, "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." "A new basic experience of being would change human existence in its entirety." "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." This experience would reveal the world in its beauty and as essentially correlated with human desire.

There is no question here of simply reducing gratification to sexual acts. Marcuse recognizes that civilized life involves much besides. The triumph of Eros would not only activate the perversions but it would go beyond sexuality to affect work, technology, creative activity, and human relations. Eros would 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." This hypothesis allows him to reconstruct the conditions of civilization without surplus repression.

Marcuse's conclusion is thoroughly counterintuitive. *Eros and Civilization* offers remarkably little argument for this transmutation of psychology into ontology. At one point he simply states that since the primary instincts pertain to both organic and inorganic matter, they imply an ontology. The non sequitur is too obvious to be accidental. Marcuse must have decided at some point in the composition of his book to simply leap over the objection that psychology has no necessary ontological implications.

The leap has its sources and its justification in Marcuse's implicit phenomenology. The failure to acknowledge this philosophical source makes it seem as though the revolutionary ontology is regressive. But Marcuse is not calling for a return to the womb nor even the condition of the infant united with the mother. These are straw man arguments against Marcuse that do not hit the mark. More relevant is the transcendence of the split between subject and object in the philosophical tradition to which Marcuse's work belongs.

In this respect Marcuse is under the influence of his early teachers, Husserl and Heidegger. It is true that Marcuse rejected Heidegger in 1933 after he declared his Nazi sympathies, but as we will see a subterranean Heideggerian stream subsists in Marcuse's Freudo-Marxism. This will require some explanation of what Heidegger meant by his concepts of "world" and "being-in-the-world."

The phenomenological concept of world is a context or environment oriented by a fundamental project of some sort. For example, we could call the university a world in this sense. All the things and people we encounter in the framework of the university are connected by a mission or project intended by the participants in the institution. Those participants encounter the university as a system of meaningful entities, not as raw facts in the scientific sense of the term. Of course the facts do exist and can be used by experts to design buildings or count students. But obviously the most important aspects of the university are lost in such activities.

Considered as a meaningful whole the university is the essential object of an interpretive understanding; it is not indifferent to subjectivity but on the contrary essentially joined to it. Heidegger argues that subject and object in general belong to a unified "being-in-the-world" that includes aspects of reality from which science normally abstracts. These aspects include meaning, value and mood. In Heideggerian terms one would say that the world is disclosed or revealed to the subject under these aspects rather than that the subject imposes its meanings, values, or moods on the facts. 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 "view from nowhere."

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 to a subject that understands it as such. Marcuse's view of advanced capitalism is quite similar, but he sees in this condition an expression of the death instinct. Perhaps a simple obsession with instrumental control seemed insufficient to explain a world in which war has just killed 40 million and the peace is kept by a strategy of mutually assured destruction. Marcuse calls on Freud to explain the mode of existence of the subjects of a world of such extreme technological aggression and violence.

Does this make any sense from a Marxist standpoint? There is a way in which it elucidates an aspect of Marxist thought from an original angle. Consider the following passage from Marx. "The mode of production must not be viewed simply as reproduction of the physical existence of the 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." This passage is usually interpreted by Marxists in a deterministic vein. They argue that Marx is saying here that the production process is the causal basis of a social life form.

But we could also interpret this passage phenomenologically as a description of an existential world. In that sense Marx would be saying that the economic level, the mode of production, is more than economic because it is the expression of a certain way of being in the world. This phenomenological understanding of Marx's concept of the mode of production as a world reappears in Marcuse's book *One-dimensional Man*. In that book

he describes advanced capitalism as a specific "form of life" based on technology. He writes, "When technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality, a world." The concluding chapters of the book describe socialism as an alternative world characterized by different technology and a different form of life.

In 1969 Marcuse published *An Essay on Liberation*. This book was written in the shadow of the May Events of 1968 in France. 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 Marcuse's disciples, although in reality there was not so much an influence as a coincidence of responses to 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 claimed, but to seek a more harmonious relation to the potentialities of nature that favor human life. Toward the end of his life Marcuse recognized this impulse in the environmental movement, which he interpreted as a resurgence of the life instinct against the destructive instinct embodied in the existing technology. The synthesis of Marx and Freud culminates in the focus on technological design as an expression of the instincts.

I will conclude with a passage in which Marcuse explains his most utopian vision of socialism. "If this idea of a radical transformation is to be more than idle speculation, it must have an objective foundation in the production process of advanced industrial society. In its technical capabilities and their use. For freedom indeed depends largely on technical progress, on the advancement of science. But this fact easily obscures the essential precondition: in order to become vehicles of freedom, 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 scientific imagination free to project and design the forms of a human universe without exploitation and toil. But this *gaya scienza* is conceivable only after the historical break in the continuum of domination--as expressive of the needs of a new type of man."