

# Looking Backwards: A Feminist Revisits Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*

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*This paper reconsiders Marcuse's Eros and Civilization from the perspective of Gayle Rubin's classic article "The Traffic in Women." The primary goals of this comparison are to investigate the social and psychological mechanisms that perpetuate the archaic sex/gender system Rubin describes under current conditions of post-industrial capitalism; to open possible new avenues of analysis and liberatory praxis based on these authors' applications of Marxist insights to cultural interpretations of Freud's writings; and to make clearer the role sexual repression continues to play in all forms of oppression, even in a public world seemingly saturated with sex.*

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## INTRODUCTION

I consider Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" to be an essential text for my courses in feminist theory and feminist philosophy. One issue she raises there, almost in passing, often becomes of central concern for my students. First, she notes that her analysis "is by implication an argument that our sex/gender system is still organized by the principles [of kinship] outlined by Lévi-Strauss, despite the entirely nonmodern character of his data base" (Rubin 1997, 51). Then, she goes on to say that "The organization of sex and gender once had functions other than itself—it organized society. Now, it only organizes and reproduces itself" (52). Why then, my students want to know, does this sex/gender system still exist in the modern world? The best answer I have found to this question is in a book rarely referred to in contemporary feminist thought, Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*.

Judith Butler hints at a possible link between Rubin and Marcuse in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990), where the theories of both are contrasted with the work of Michel Foucault, but she does not explore the direct comparison. Nancy Chodorow also discusses both in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (Chodo-

row 1989), but, like Butler, she does not directly connect them. In fact, with these two exceptions, there are few explicit invocations of Marcuse in recent feminist literature, although articles that discuss Rubin's works will sometimes suggest his ideas indirectly (and perhaps inadvertently), as does the discussion of the link between repression and oppression in Emily Zakin's "Bridging the Social and the Symbolic" (Zakin 2000). Discussions of Marcuse's work appear more often in recent articles in lesbian and gay studies. Brad Epps and Jonathan Katz, for instance, invoke Marcuse in arguing that the work of Monique Wittig has deep connections to Frankfurt School critical theory in their introduction to a collection of essays in *GLQ* written in Wittig's memory, but they do not cite Rubin (Epps and Katz 2007). Conversely, Katherine Sender cites Rubin in an article in another issue of the same journal that discusses other Frankfurt School theorists, but does not explicitly refer to Marcuse (Sender 2003). What exists so far, then, is not yet a liaison between Rubin and Marcuse, but at most a mild flirtation.

This is surprising because the connection between the two is, in some ways, obvious. Both Rubin and Marcuse draw on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory at the social, rather than the individual, level, and both are concerned that "the radical implications of Freud's theory have been radically repressed" (Rubin 1997, 43). Their common Freudian heritage also results, according to Butler, in both remaining tied to an "original desire" (Butler 1990, 72, cf. 75) before the incest taboo, which may be related to the sometimes utopian flavor of their work. Chodorow argues that they both follow Freud in paying too little attention to "the organization of parenting, procreation, and babies" (Chodorow 1989, 234, cf. 139).

Both also draw heavily on Marxist theory, although Rubin's interest is more in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's work on women, Marcuse's on the analysis of alienated labor. They share a primary concern, however, with the Marxist mandate, in Butler's terms, "to expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity" (Butler 1990, 33). They both also see the link between Marx and Freud as a way, again in Butler's terms, "to describe those constraints on sexuality which seem more persistent than we can change through the transformation of social and kinship relations" (Rubin and Butler 1994, 68).

Although one could wonder, as Rubin does in her interview with Butler, "how much these social and kinship relations have actually been transformed" (68), Butler's statement of the problem echoes my students' response to "The Traffic in Women": why has not the oppressive sex/gender system Rubin describes died away in the modern world, since it no longer serves any obvious social purpose? To answer this question and to help us move beyond Rubin's early formulation of the issue, as many feminists are doing, it can be helpful to revisit Marcuse's book in order to broaden at least some aspects of Rubin's critique, while strengthening key dimensions of Marcuse's vision as well.

“THE TRAFFIC IN WOMEN”

Rubin herself situates “The Traffic in Women” in the context of an early second-wave feminism that was deeply immersed in Marxism because “Marxism enabled people to pose a whole set of [feminist] questions that Marxism could not satisfactorily answer” (Rubin and Butler 1994, 63). She agrees that her early article was, like much radical discourse of that period (including, of course, Marcuse’s), “a utopian vision of sorts” (66). At the same time, she reports writing it, in part, in reaction to Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis: “I was concerned with the totalizing tendencies in Lacan, and the non-social qualities of his concept of the symbolic” (68). She adds the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss to the “proto-pomo” (66) mix of Freud and Marx to make her key theoretical advance: the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender that meet in a sex/gender system. As noted above, Butler (Butler 1990, 74) and others now question our ability to talk about biology as such, since it is always mediated through some social context. They argue that it is, as some say, “gender all the way down.” Still, the particular ways in which gender is structured in a specific “/gender system” remain an important site of feminist analysis.

This importance stems from the fact that, as Rubin explains, “If Lévi-Strauss is correct in seeing the exchange of women as a fundamental principle of kinship, the subordination of women can be seen as a product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and produced” (Rubin 1997, 39). She argues further that, if the oppression of women is a result of, rather than a fundamental basis for, social life, then alternative ways of organizing the relationships that produce gender could create a society in which women are not oppressed. A key element for Rubin is the Marxist insight that “Sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product” (32). Given Lévi-Strauss’s model, where kinship systems are structured to enable the exchange of women between social groups, women must be socially produced in such a way that they are seen, and see themselves, as available for men to exchange and “in no position to give themselves away” (37). Thus, according to Rubin, Lévi-Strauss “constructs an implicit theory of sex oppression” (35).

For Rubin, the social construction of gender, that is, a division of the sexes into two fixed kinds of people identified as (potential) wives and wife-exchangers, involves “the suppression of natural similarities” between men and women to facilitate the heterosexual pair-bonding that sister-exchange and the resulting social relationships require. This means, for example, that if men are the kind of people who hunt, women can only be the kind of people who gather. She notes that if human pair-bonding were as natural as society tells us it is, the elaborate structure we call gender would be unnecessary. In fact,

powerful social forces are needed to create these mutually exclusive categories of masculinity and femininity. Moreover, the gendered division of labor means that, even where heterosexual pair-bonding is not the only socially sanctioned access to sexual gratification, the mutually exclusive skills of men and women require a heterosexual pair to create an economically viable domestic unit. Given the incest taboo, this not only facilitates but requires the sister-exchange that binds social groups together (39).

If Marx can be articulated with Lévi-Strauss by understanding women not as subjects, but as objects to be exchanged along with other commodities between kinship groups,<sup>1</sup> Freud tells us how such subject/objects are created. For Rubin, “Psychoanalysis describes the residue left within individuals by their confrontation with the rules and regulations of sexuality of the societies to which they are born” (Rubin 1997, 42). To create the gendered individuals described above, society must not only create fixed gender identities, but also forbid, and exact guilt for, sexual desires, needs, and acts that exist outside the normalized male/female dyad. Thus, to make the women gendered in this way available for sister-exchange, society must also bar not only incest, but also the two more primary taboos Rubin argues that it presupposes—the ones against masturbation and homosexuality (40).

The shaping of gender identity to fit within this system goes on at the family level, through parental injunction and approval, as well as at the level of law, religion, and other institutions of social enforcement, from witch-burning to Barbie and Ken. As noted above, however, as changes come about at the social level, they are not necessarily reflected at the family level or, if they are, they are often transformed to match the pre-existing structures of identity formation. “Sweet sixteen” parties among the privileged may have ceased to be opportunities to identify potential marriage partners and have become occasions for ostentatious displays of wealth, but the vision remains of the elite young women so “honored” as themselves one of the material goods on display. This conservatism in the underlying psychodynamics is why, in spite of the fact that “[t]he sex/gender system is not immutably oppressive and has lost much of its traditional function,” as Rubin tells us, “it will not wither away in the absence of opposition” (54). Without a fuller understanding of why these remnants of earlier stages of social development continue to control our lives, however, it is hard not only to fully understand them, but also to oppose them in politically and personally effective ways. This is where Marcuse’s analysis can be productively articulated with Rubin’s argument.

#### EROS AND CIVILIZATION

Although the vision Marcuse outlines in *Eros and Civilization* might not be a feminist one, the critical analysis on which it is based is open, I would argue,

to other projections into a less oppressive future. Combining his ideas with Rubin's yields a more precise vision of how the mechanisms of repression and oppression interact in Marcuse, and a clearer understanding of how we might begin to answer both the "why" question about the persistence of our oppressive /gender system in the modern world and the "how" question about ways in which to move beyond it.

Marcuse begins his book by stating his belief that "psychological categories . . . have become political categories" or, as we used to say, that the personal is the political. His project, like Rubin's, is "to develop the political and sociological substance of the psychological notions" (Marcuse 1951, xvii). His starting point is *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where Freud uses history to argue that repression of instinctual, especially sexual, drives is required for the creation and preservation of "civilization." This is done, as in Rubin's account, by prohibiting masturbation, homosexuality, and incest; creating a normalized male/female dyad; and so on. Here Marcuse asks a key question, based on Marx's view of history:

Does the interrelation between freedom and repression, productivity, domination and progress, really constitute the principle of civilization? Or does this interrelation result only from a specific historical organization of human existence? (4)

The point Marcuse, like Rubin, makes is that "[r]epression is an historical phenomenon. The effective subjugation of the instincts to repressive controls is imposed not by nature but by man" (15).

This is not to suggest that Marcuse thinks repression can be done away with—even Chodorow, who is quite critical of his interpretation of Freud, acknowledges that he "implies that some repression is necessary" (Chodorow 1989, 118). Rather, Marcuse wants to draw attention to the historical and political nature of any specific configuration of what Emily Zakin describes as the "reciprocity between the structures of oppression and those of repression" (Zakin 2000, 22). For Marcuse, this reciprocity is generated through a developmental process in which "the unfree individual introjects his masters and their commands into his own mental apparatus" as a response to the "reality principle," that is, the need to repress instinctual drives in order to survive. This process would be much like the one in Rubin's account summarized above: parents teach children to delay or redirect (sexual) gratification until the taboos against masturbation and so on become part of the child's identity. As the child matures, she "introjects" or incorporates into her understanding of who she is the more complex forms of delayed gratification (the rules governing virginity, cleanliness, and so on) that are demanded by her specific social context.

For Freud, the "reality principle" that mandates this is forced upon us by scarcity, which "teaches men that they cannot freely gratify their instinctual

impulses" (Marcuse 1951, 16). People must work to feed themselves, and work harder and in more complexly organized ways as population and scarcity increase. The introduction of the economic concept of scarcity into the psychoanalytic account, however, opens the door to a Marxist revisioning of Freud's conclusion that "a non-repressive civilization is impossible" (16). Marcuse argues that "the Freudian terms which do not adequately differentiate between the biological *and* the socio-historical . . ." must be rethought because "the *distribution* of scarcity as well as the effort of overcoming it, the mode of work, have been *imposed* by individuals—first by mere violence, subsequently by a more rational utilization of power" (32–33; his emphasis). This is, for Marcuse, the key to the hidden radical potential in Freud's thought.

The central idea in Marcuse's Marxist rereading of Freud is that

domination is exercised by a particular group of individuals in order [for them] to sustain and enhance [themselves] in a privileged position. Such domination does not exclude technical, material, and intellectual progress, but only as an unavoidable by-product while preserving irrational scarcity, want, and constraint. (33–34)

This domination creates what Marcuse calls "surplus repression," that is, limits on instinctual drives beyond the level necessary for society to survive under a given level of natural scarcity. Lévi-Strauss, for instance, notes that polygamy creates an artificial scarcity of women that privileges more powerful males in the social group and limits lower-status men's access to wives (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 37). This excess deprivation exacted to benefit privileged groups does not announce itself as such, but as the natural response to (manufactured) scarcity.

If scarcity is not an irreducible given, but can be, and is, manipulated by those in power, this "would imply that the *free* Eros does not preclude lasting civilized societal relationships—that it repels only the supra-repressive organization of societal relationships . . ." (Marcuse 1951, 39; his emphasis). Like Rubin, Marcuse notes that some less sexually repressive "modes of societal organization not merely prevailed in [nonmodern] cultures but also survived into the modern period" (41). He also argues that surplus repression exaggerates the effects of the performance principle (i.e., the recognition that, due to scarcity, we cannot live lives of perpetual pleasure) and creates the conditions necessary for alienated labor.

Under the rule of the performance principle, body and mind are made into instruments of alienated labor; they can function as such instruments only if they renounce the freedom of the libidinal subject-object which the human organism primarily is and desires. (42)

There are two levels of oppression here, a sexual one mandated by scarcity and exaggerated by domination, and an economic-political one built on this base that is necessary for the growth of industrial capitalism.

This is where Rubin's account can augment Marcuse by suggesting that the underlying mechanism of surplus repression can be found in the /gender system. On this reading, the production of alienated labor begins with the psycho-social processes she describes: the redirection of libidinal energy from immediate objects (taboos against masturbation, homosexuality, and incest) and the creation of "'men' and 'women,' each an incomplete half which can only find wholeness when united with the other" (Rubin 1997, 40). This process is the psychological counterpart of the need created on the economic level by the sexual division of labor that requires at least one person of each gender in order to have a sustainable household. Desire is largely, if not exclusively, displaced to genital heterosexuality for reproduction, displaced again by scarcity to the work of maintaining a family, and then further displaced by artificial scarcity to generate the surplus repression needed for wealth accumulation by the elite.

What Marcuse brings to Freud from Marx, as already noted, is the insight that scarcity, and hence repression, are not irreducible givens. What he and Rubin bring to Marx from Freud is the insight that economic and political oppression is built on the basis of sexual repression. In industrial capitalism, artificial scarcity (e.g., the English enclosure laws) is used to replace the already displaced libidinal gratification of productive work with alienated labor. The prototypical worker no longer hunts, fishes, or farms, but does boring, physically damaging labor as a cog in an assembly line or white-collar cubicle. This transfers all gratification to the workers' "free time," in which Eros is still channeled "into one libidinal object of the opposite sex . . ." (Marcuse 1951, 44). Incomplete, gendered selves no longer need to bond to form economically viable family units, but they increasingly bond, if not solely for erotic gratification, at least on the basis of an eroticized gender duality that constitutes the only socially accepted outlet for sexual desire.

#### PROGRESS AND PERVERSION

One of the main points of Marcuse's book is that this limitation on Eros results in the creation of what he terms "perversions," that is, libidinal energy diverted into violent and destructive avenues.<sup>2</sup> He argues that "the very progress of civilization leads to the release of increasingly destructive forces" (49). As productivity increases so that the actual need to work declines, the same level of alienated labor to sustain wealth and domination actually constitutes an increase in "surplus repression," that is, more labor is performed solely to benefit privileged groups. Since this requires the same or a greater level of constraint

on sexual desire within the normalized male/female dyad, even though it is no longer justified by scarcity, Marcuse argues that it leads to an increase in destructive “perversions,” which, using Freud’s “hydraulic” model of the human psyche, he sees as an inevitable response to the increased repression.

He traces these destructive perversions to an ever-increasing guilt that perpetuates the psychological structures that underpin the development of “civilization.”

And as the father is multiplied, supplemented, and replaced by the authorities of society, as prohibitions and inhibitions spread, so do the aggressive impulse and its objects. And with it grows, on the part of society, the need for strengthening the defenses—the need for reinforcing the sense of guilt . . . (Marcuse 1951, 72–73)

The increasing number and pervasiveness of intrusions into people’s lives—through law enforcement and surveillance, but also through medical and therapeutic interventions, rapidly changing social mores, and ever more invasive technologies—create an oppositional response that takes on both destructive forms (e.g., rape) and benignly non-normative forms (e.g., promiscuity). Since society fails to distinguish adequately between these (e.g., in rape trials), the growth in the destructive forms produces more repression (e.g., limiting women’s presence in public space), more intrusions, and more guilt about even non-destructive sexual desire outside the norm, despite the “liberating” proliferation of sexuality in the media and the material culture.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the utopian import of this argument hinges on the difference between Freud’s use of “perversion” as a label for any non-normative sexual desire and the distinction Marcuse makes between violent, non-normative, sexual desires and other non-normative sexual desires or activity such as homosexuality.<sup>4</sup> By “free” Eros, Marcuse does not mean either, as Chodorow argues, “exclusive focus on one’s own body” (Chodorow 1989, 128) or, as noted earlier, a total lack of repression. He means, rather, desire that is limited only to the extent necessary to respect the needs and desires of others, in lieu of our current complex structure of license and taboo with an “exclusive focus” on heteronormativity that fails to differentiate, at some level, between the “sin” of homosexuality and the true sin of child sexual abuse. Without this distinction between non-normative sexual desire and true perversion, Marcuse suggests, we would be required to agree with Freud that the survival of civilization requires ever-increasing repression of instinctual sexual drives.

For Marcuse, however, since “surplus-repression” is “that proportion [of the repressed personality] which is the result of specific societal conditions sustained in the specific interest of domination,” changed social relations—“material and intellectual progress . . .” (Marcuse 1951, 80–81)—create the possibility of less repression and fewer of the violent perversions repression

creates. Modern societies no longer need to unify social groups through sister-exchange; industrialization undermines the need for a gendered division of labor; and reproductive technologies have eliminated whatever need there might once have been for the taboos against masturbation and homosexuality that Rubin sees as the preconditions of heterosexual pair-bonding. Rather than disappearing, however, homophobia and related forms of oppression have been “repurposed” to maintain the power of dominant groups. The psycho-social process that creates incomplete selves searching for an impossible completion, bound less and less in contemporary, first-world societies by the decreasing “surface tension” of true scarcity, boils up as a consumer culture where scarcity is manufactured in the psychological realm even as, in Marcuse’s view, it disappears on the material level.

This explains the paradoxical coexistence of repression and license in the service of post-industrial capitalism, because “domination no longer merely or primarily sustains specific privileges but also sustains society as a whole on an expanding scale” (Marcuse 1951, 83). The conflict over same-sex marriage, for example, would not exist if homosexuality were not more accepted by some segments of society than in the past. At the same time, it provides a focal point for political debate that deflects public concern from economic and other class issues to a social “problem” that many have been led to believe puts society itself at risk. These people then see their interests to be identical with those of the economically powerful who voice, sincerely or not, anti-gay political positions, even while the profit margins of this same elite are fed on a daily basis by the manipulation of homoerotic desire in advertising and the media.

Ultimately, the very productivity of modernity “must be turned *against* the individuals; it becomes itself an instrument of universal control” (85; his emphasis) both, as suggested above, by increased intervention into and surveillance of sexual activity, and by media exploitation of previously forbidden sexualities to promote excess consumption of consumer goods and the resulting need to engage in otherwise unnecessary alienated labor to purchase those goods. Even in 1951, Marcuse saw that

The promotion of thoughtless leisure activities, the triumph of anti-intellectual ideologies, exemplify the trend. This extension of controls to formerly free regions of consciousness and leisure permits a relaxation of sexual taboos. . . . [S]exual liberty is harmonized with profitable conformity. (Marcuse 1951, 86)

Foreshadowing Foucault, he adds that “all domination assumes the form of administration.” So, people

have innumerable choices, innumerable gadgets which are all of the same sort and keep them occupied and divert their attention

from the real issue—which is the awareness that they could both work less and determine their own needs and satisfaction.  
(91)

What Rubin's /gender system does under these circumstances is to explain how the psycho-sexual structures that initially led to sister-exchange and so on add the full weight of libidinal energy and guilt to the constant media command that we buy "gadgets." The vast productivity of modern society produces both excess (of consumer goods in the global north) and scarcity (of basic human needs elsewhere), but even the excess is perceived as scarcity because, as the partial sexual beings that Rubin describes, those of us in the global north can never buy "enough" to make ourselves whole again. As those sexual taboos that undermine profit margins loosen their hold on us, we can see very clearly our society's failure to distinguish between "perversions" in Freud's sense and Marcuse's narrower focus on non-normative sexuality that is violent and destructive. Have gay men become the arbiters of style? Embrace the "queer eye," and sell it in the media alongside homophobic preachers. At the same time, men's and women's magazines are full of the sexualized images of very young women, and even girls, posed with a view, it would seem, less to selling goods than to selling themselves, or rather to selling themselves as and along with consumer goods.

The one constant in all these contradictory media manifestations is the message inherited from our ancestors that we are incomplete in ourselves and must find someone, or something, to make us whole. Lifelong, heterosexual pair-bonding, however, is not enough to do this anymore, because a whole array of libidinal needs and urges are fostered in us by the media, which insist that only something, or someone, new and more exciting will satisfy us. When that person or thing does not, which they cannot, we must find someone or something else. And every time we change "style," job, or partner, we must buy new "gadgets," expending often huge amounts of money just to recreate the situation we left behind. This creates hyper-sexualized commodities that become not only fetishes, but the god itself, our only source of hope and comfort, the only salvation for the shattered, truncated selves created by ancient sexual taboos that no longer serve the purpose of pair-bonding, but serve post-industrial capitalism instead.

#### LOOKING FORWARD

What alternative do Marcuse and Rubin offer? Their common starting point is the claim that Freud mistakes "a specific historical *form* of civilization [for] the *nature* of civilization" when, on Freud's own premises, "it does not follow that another form of civilization under another reality principle is impossible" (Marcuse 1951, 133; his emphasis). For Marcuse, the root of a less repressive form of civilization lies in sexuality. "Non-repressive order is possible only if the

sex instincts can, by virtue of their own dynamic and under changed existential and social conditions, generate lasting erotic relations among mature individuals” (181–82). Without artificial scarcity and the surplus repression it creates to generate the alienated labor needed to maintain domination, sexuality could develop outside the rigid /gender system Rubin describes. “No longer used as a full-time instrument of labor, the body would be resexualized” by becoming “a thing to be enjoyed—an instrument of pleasure.” This is not “sexual liberation,” not “a release but a *transformation* of the libido” because only destructive desires would be repressed, whereas currently “[t]he same taboo is placed on [violent] instinctual manifestations incompatible with [any] civilization and on those [that are only] incompatible with repressive civilization” (184–85; his emphasis).

A society so transformed might also be, as Rubin suggests, one where women are not oppressed. It could be, instead, one where a range of body shapes and sizes among adult individuals love and interact sexually with other adults based on mutual desire rather than fixed social definitions. To produce such individuals, the organization of parenthood and child-rearing, freed from a rigid male/female dyad, would be a complete break from the current way gender identities are created, which requires that only women raise children, as Chodorow explains in *The Reproduction of Mothering*. In fact, despite her criticisms of Rubin and Marcuse, the future I believe they would bring about might be one in which reproduction is organized much in the way Chodorow herself envisions.

Several questions remain. Chodorow, for instance, asks how the change Marcuse envisions can come about when

Marcuse’s social theory and account of individual development paint a picture of total domination, of repression both external and internal, conscious and unconscious. At the same time, the way out is through the instincts, which give us both principles opposed to civilization and a vision of liberation. (Chodorow 1989, 132)

This ignores, however, the distinction he makes between destructive perversions and other forms of non-normative sexuality. Only destructive instincts are “opposed to civilization,” while freer exercise of the non-destructive instincts provides the basis for his “vision of liberation.” Furthermore, she herself says that “the total domination pictured by Marcuse is impossible” (148). Marcuse clearly recognizes that the instincts are in constant tension with repression, so domination is always only partial. This is why increased surplus repression increases perversions. Social change is possible for Marcuse because, under conditions of modernity, instinctual drives can be freed from unnecessary constraint and expressed in ways that foster, and allow, a less repressive society.

Another major issue is how the work of the society Marcuse hopes for will get done without the above structure of artificial scarcity, repressed

sexuality, and guilt to drive the machine of alienated labor. To answer this, Marcuse begins with a point he thinks Freud overlooked: “there is a mode of work which offers a high degree of libidinal satisfaction, which is pleasurable in its execution,” although “the bulk of the work relations on which civilization rests is of a very different kind” (Marcuse 1951, 77). This means work is not intrinsically oppressive, so that the level of repression demanded by the “reality principle,” that is, required simply to maintain society, is not only lower than that demanded by current social conditions, but may continue to decrease due to technological innovation (e.g., fully mechanized assembly lines) and scientific progress (e.g., the ability to provide everyone with a diet that has sufficient protein without anyone having to work in a slaughterhouse). A more equitable distribution of what irreducible amount of alienated labor might remain across the world’s population would also allow its negative effects on individuals’ lives to be minimized.

Moreover, Marcuse reminds us that even for Freud, “societal relations (‘community’ in civilization) are founded on *unsublimated* as well as sublimated libidinous ties. . . .” This happens where “the organism exists not as an instrument of alienated labor but as a subject of self-realization—in other words, if socially useful work is at the same time the transparent satisfaction of an individual need” (Marcuse 1951, 189–92; his emphasis). Such a possibility is not hard for academics, artists, or parents to imagine, since I believe it captures quite well both the quasi-erotic quality and the intrinsic self-fulfillment of our work. At the same time, this provides a more realistic vision of an alternative future than Marx’s suggestion that we might “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, breed cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner . . .” (Marx 1994, 119). Marcuse notes that “there can be ‘pleasure’ in alienated labor too” (Marcuse 1951, 201), even under present conditions. If the way we organize our lives could be transformed as he suggests, the unnecessary repression and pain created by the current organization of both sex and work might be, if not eliminated, significantly reduced.

Another question, however, directs attention to his view of modernity. Although scarcity may not have seemed to be an irreducible given when Marcuse wrote his book, the limits of the world’s supply of food, water, energy, and even clean air are now all too obvious.<sup>5</sup> This would imply that more repression, psychological and political, may be as necessary in our future as it was in our past. Marcuse’s emphasis, however, is on how scarcity is distributed. I am not enough of an optimist to think that if we redistribute the goods of the world more fairly, there will necessarily be enough to go around, but I am enough of a skeptic to think that we cannot know the effects of a more just distribution of those goods so long as a relatively small number of people in the global north continue to consume a hugely disproportionate share of them. Creating a less repressive organization of society might be a necessary first step toward the reduction of

scarcity. If it fails at that, it will at least re-establish the link between repression and natural scarcity that “civilization” has ruptured. This may, in turn, minimize people’s impulse to blame the residual necessary repression they suffer on each other, and so minimize the redirection of repressed libidinal energies into violence, political and otherwise.

The final question is the most obvious. Why bring Rubin and Marcuse into conversation at all? Chodorow suggests one reason: “[Marcuse] never indicates the mechanism by which economic domination might lead to repression, nor how patriarchal domination in the family . . . becomes renunciation for labor” (Chodorow 1989, 134). Rubin’s account of the /gender system helps us “understand the way in which certain forms of repression can help maintain forms of oppression, and also the way in which relations of social power maintain forms of psychological reality” (Zakin 2000, 32). But what does Marcuse bring to Rubin? The answer lies in the question with which I began. The persistence of the /gender system, when it no longer plays its traditional role, can be explained through his account of how psycho-sexual repression is enlisted in the service of political and economic domination in post-industrial capitalism.

This suggests, in turn, at least two areas for further feminist analysis: the role that the manipulation of scarcity and “surplus repression” play in contemporary systems of oppression; and the link between the displaced libidinal needs created by the /gender system and the excesses of consumer fetishism. Thus, a liaison between Rubin and Marcuse can help us to generate a clearer vision of a less oppressive future, and also provides a possible starting point for how we might begin, politically and personally, to move from here to there.

## NOTES

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1. Compare Irigaray 1985, especially “Commodities among Themselves.”
2. The Cold War context of Marcuse’s book gives the concept of “destructive perversions” a slightly different twist than is elaborated here, but I believe his text supports both interpretations.
3. Compare Foucault 1978, especially part two.
4. This aspect of Marcuse’s thought may be why his work is more often cited in the gay and lesbian literature than in feminist theory.
5. This was brought to my attention by Thomas McCarthy.

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