

CRITICAL STUDIES

EROS AND UTOPIA

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LARGELY generated by Freud's ideas, the notion of a civilization free from sexual repression has lingered in the background of recent Western thought. Influential as it has been, the idea of such a Utopia, and the assumptions and standards implicit therein, had not been organized into a systematic philosophy of Eros until the appearance recently of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*.¹

It is especially appropriate for Marcuse to develop his central theme—a “non-repressive” civilization—in the specific form of an extension and critique of Freud's theory of man. The issues are thus squarely faced. We are enabled to consider the theme in terms of its historical root and of its psychological authenticity.

The motivating spirit of Marcuse's approach is expressed most clearly in the earlier pages of his book. Here Marcuse refers with approval to the “concept of a non-repressive civilization” (p. 5), and to the “gradual abolition of repression” (loc. cit.). He speaks of rejecting Freud's “identification of civilization with repression” (p. 4), and of using Freud's own conceptions to establish the “historical possibility of a non-repressive civilization” (p. 5). Marcuse's fundamental opposition to repression—at least in the spirit of the work—is clearly implicit in his thesis that “if absence from repression is the archetype of freedom, then civilization is the struggle against this freedom” (p. 5).

On the other hand, the course which Marcuse defends and the ideal he advocates is clearly indicated in his assertion that “the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle is the great traumatic event in the development of man . . .” (loc. cit.). Marcuse favors a kind of pan-Eroticism.

The extreme position suggested by these early remarks is

¹ (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

more evident when we note that Marcuse explicitly uses the term "repression" to include all kinds of "restraint, constraint, and suppression" (p. 8). (This usage of "repression" involves a drastic shift in meaning as compared with strict psychoanalytic usage. We shall have occasion again to take note of this shift.)

As Marcuse proceeds with the details of his exposition, however, his opposition to repression is expressed with important and increasing qualifications. We are soon informed that a core of "basic" repression is, after all, essential because "any form of the reality principle (i.e., of adjustment to reality) demands a considerable degree and scope of repressive control over the instincts" (p. 37).

Marcuse contrasts this essential, "basic" repression with "surplus" repression, which, in this more detailed formulation, is the true object of his criticism. Surplus repression is any repression which is over and above the essentials for civilized survival (p. 35). It is repression imposed as a result of social organization based on domination and exploitation.

Marcuse uses this distinction between the two kinds of repression as the basis for one of his principal theses. He asserts that civilization has in fact *always* been organized on the basis of domination. It follows that "in the history of civilization, basic repression and surplus repression have been inextricably intertwined" (p. 38). Freud's great mistake, we are told, was to take this historical fact and treat it as a biological necessity (pp. 34-35).

It is appropriate to contrast Marcuse's account of the matter with Freud's own words. In 1927, Freud wrote:

So one gets the impression that culture is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority that understood how to possess itself of the means of power and coercion. Of course it stands to reason that these difficulties are not inherent in the nature of culture itself, but are conditioned by the imperfections of the cultural forms that have so far been developed.²

² Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York, 1953), p. 10.

In the context from which the preceding quotation is drawn, the very word "surplus" is used, and its use is substantially the same as Marcuse's. Freud then goes on to say that he doubts whether a culture could ever be developed which would eliminate inner conflict. Instead of such a goal, he suggests the quest for the minimal core of essential repression in any possible culture.

The critical question [says Freud] is whether and to what extent one can succeed . . . in diminishing the burden of instinctual sacrifice imposed upon man. . . . (p. 12)

Contrary to the suggestions of Marcuse and others, Freud is not a thorough pessimist as to the possible success of such a quest. Freud discusses the possibility of a "golden age" of a rationally organized culture. After expressing some misgivings, he states:

But one cannot deny the grandeur of this project and its significance for the future of human culture. It is securely based on a piece of psychological insight, on the fact that man is equipped with the most varied instinctual predispositions, the ultimate course of which is determined by the experiences of early childhood. (p. 14)

Thus far, then, Marcuse is presenting, contrary to his claims, analyses and conclusions already worked out and accepted by Freud three decades ago.

There is, however, another light in which Marcuse's views on repression appear, and a further development of his argument ensues. Generalized opposition to repression and mere tolerance of basic repression are more and more overshadowed by an exposition implying positive welcome of basic repression. The theme developed is that "the power to restrain and guide instinctual drives, to make biological necessities into individual needs and desires, *increases* rather than reduces gratification" (Marcuse, p. 38, *Italics added*).

This statement, still consistent with Freud's views, establishes the role of certain forms of instinctual restraint as creative rather than as merely unavoidable. It now appears that, due to these restraints, the gratifications of instinct are no longer direct and therefore animal-like pleasures; instead, we are reminded, man's gratifications are humanized and intensified by restraints.

It is after this point in the argument that Marcuse begins

to develop a genuinely distinctive and fundamental suggestion. This suggestion is designed to retain the notion of repression as humanizing and yet to retain the spirit of antagonism to the repression of sexuality. Marcuse introduces the notion of the "rationality of gratification" (p. 224), of "sensuous rationality" (ibid., p. 228).

Marcuse means to indicate with these phrases that in a life of "sensuous rationality," surplus repression is absent. More than this, *all* barriers and restraints upon gratification are in effect libidinal elements since they all intensify gratifications. All conflict, all life is thus infused with the quality and purpose of libidinal gratifications.

The crucial problem which remains for Marcuse is to show how it is that the restraints upon Eros in such a life would always be dominated by sexual aims. Lacking such a demonstration, we would have to conclude that "sensuous rationality" refers simply to one of the familiar dualities of Freudian theory; we should be back to the conflict of external reality *versus* Eros, a conflict between two relatively independent forces. Since these forces are independent, the possibility would always remain that the restraints of external reality would genuinely inhibit, distort, and frustrate the demands of Eros. Enhancement of gratifications would be a mere hope.

Marcuse proposes as his solution the idea of "self-sublimation of sexuality" (p. 204): the "obstructions and limitations" upon libido are "set and accepted by the instinct itself" (p. 276). He cites in support of his view Freud's comment that there may be "something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself [which] is unfavorable to the achievement of absolute [i.e., direct and complete] gratification."³

But Freud never means by this comment to indicate that instincts erect their own barriers. As he says almost immediately after the words quoted by Marcuse, it is the requirements of culture, of *any* culture, which constitute barriers to instinctual gratification. These barriers arise because of the "nature of the sexual instinct" *relative to culture*.

³ Sigmund Freud, "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life," in *Collected Papers*, IV (London, 1950), p. 214.

It is essential to the concept of instinct that we think of the instincts as highly unspecific forms of energy, as having a biological source, and as constantly seeking their own gratification. ⁴ It is this remarkable flexibility as to the means of biological gratification which makes possible the educability of man. The specifically Marcusean notion of sensuous rationality, of instinct as that which erects its own restraints, leads to the collapse of the entire Freudian theory of personality. Its unacknowledged implication is that man cannot genuinely adapt by learning.

Certain other features of Marcuse's exposition now appear in clearer light. Ordinarily, one might have expected an extensive treatment of such a problem as that of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex in a non-exploitative society. The matter is discussed and dismissed by Marcuse in less than a page. Marcuse, in effect, merely notes that the Oedipus complex passes away "naturally" (Marcuse, p. 204). Yet, for Freud, the Oedipal situation is the central crisis in the development of the instincts and, indeed, of the entire personality. One of his great achievements was to have shown in detail how the normal passing of the Oedipus complex depends upon the repressive effects of physical and social realities. But such realities are inadmissible on theoretical grounds in an Erotic utopia, for they are realities which arise in a large measure independently of the child's instincts. Furthermore, they leave in their wake permanent psychic representatives, the superego and the ego.

Consistently with this outlook, Marcuse minimizes and deprecates the developments in Freudian and in neo-Freudian ego-psychology when presenting his own views. Indeed, his use of "repression" as a catch-all to cover suppression, sublimation, repression proper, and restraint works to obscure the very distinctions by means of which the import of ego-psychology is reflected in Freud's instinct-psychology.

The central issue posed by Marcuse's book—an issue not met by the philosophic and mythic commentaries interspersed throughout the book—is an issue admittedly rooted in Freud's specifically psychoanalytic approach. The crux of the matter is this:

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," *ibid.*, p. 65.

What did Freud assert with regard to the role of repression in "taming the instincts?" Is there evidence that Freud was basically wrong in this matter?

As regards Freud's assertions, the foregoing discussion is designed to indicate some ways in which Marcuse's treatment is fundamentally inadequate.

As for evidence: attempts made to educate children with minimal restraint upon instinctual expression have eventuated in tragic failure.⁵ These children, as they "matured," had little ability to persevere at tasks, little curiosity, inadequate control of bodily functions, inadequate ability to concentrate. They were asocial, irrationally rebellious, unhygienic, prone to infantile day-dreaming and evanescent bouts of emotion. Irritability, lack of spontaneity, and other symptoms of considerable concealed anxiety were evident.

Such children would be "maladjusted" in no matter what culture, provided that the culture had the degree of social organization and technology needed for a high level of material production. Furthermore, Marcuse holds that high material productivity is essential for the new, non-exploitative society (pp. 216-17).

The gist of the matter is that an attempt at a one-dimensional, instinctual view of man is doomed to practical and theoretical failure. The Utopia of Eros is a fantasy-Utopia.

The conflict inherent in a world where instinct operates but does not dominate is a conflict evocative of creative tension. It is a tension which drives the human animal forward to new and characteristically human dimensions of experience. Such a viewpoint was implicit in Freud's earliest psychological writings and was explicitly and systematically developed in his subsequent writings. Such a viewpoint is consistent with the clinical evidence. It is therefore an essential basis for any theory of man which is to be compatible either with the tenor of Freud's ideas or with subsequent developments in psychoanalysis.

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⁵ W. Hoffer, "Psychoanalytic Education," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* (New York, 1945), pp. 302-303.