

## The Return of the Un-Repressed

*Eros and Civilization; A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud,*  
by Herbert Marcuse. Beacon Press.

by

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There are those, both in and out of psychoanalytic circles, who worry that psychoanalysis, in gaining membership among the recognized forces that shape our ethics, is becoming cowed and domesticated, and itself entirely too “ethical.” If the voice of Freud comes to lose its irritance in transmission over generations, so the foreboding goes, who is to speak for the fantasied futures that may lie forgotten beneath repressed pasts?

For whatever else may be said of him Freud was an effective needler. When he was not making us squirm he was making us itch. Itching, he seemed to believe, was good for a man because it led to scratching, and scratching to awareness of the skin—and eventually to that which the skin contained. His germinal thesis, it might be said, was nothing less than a sensualization of the formula: God is man. . . It is good to know God . . . Therefore, know thyself.

To secularize such a thesis was to formulate a strategy for ethical revolution such as western civilization had never before to face. To enlist *medical science* in the cause of implementing such a strategy was political genius. In one move did Freud thus put the needle, as it were, in the hands of those who could most aim it with impunity. However, by the very finesse of this approach through “science” Freud disavailed himself of what for Marx was his Sunday punch:

the historical dialectic. Freud's was the approach of empirical reason; tied, albeit unblushingly, to the "reality" of his day. Marx appealed to the violent *act* by which "reality" was to be overthrown, and a social utopia somehow inevitably to be forthcoming. Freud, on the other hand, appealed to the stifled *urge to act* by which an individual, properly indoctrinated, might *privately* exact the greatest possible quantum of personal freedom from a society considered incurably sick. The *inner* chains were to be thrown off by learning to perceive the essential harmony that was the apparent bedlam inside one's own head. But one was not to "act out." To challenge those "realistic" limits that led society to think of jails was outside the scope of psychoanalysis. Thus Freud's armed truce with normality: the so-called "reality principle," which pronounced civilized cultures and the free development of human instincts to be incompatible. In no other way might one expect admission to the psychoanalytic utopia of "genitality" but by first "realistically" trimming one's instincts to genital proportions — no further, but thus far.

On closer inspection, then, the Freudian prescription contains a potent antidote against itself. It comes in the form of an addendum to "know thyself," which says, ". . . but be careful what you do with it." Many of today's analytically emancipated are secretly known to come acropper on this subtlety in the prescription — a point which someone more qualified than this reviewer ought really to develop in detail.

Fortunately, however, for those who insist it is better not to have itched at all than not to have itched and freely scratched, psychoanalysis has re-asserted its birthright in the hands of Professor Herbert Marcuse, who removes the anti-irritant with some deft surgery on the Freudian heart of civilization: the reality principle. In so doing he equips Freud with the dialectic that might have displaced the pessimism of "Civilization and its Discontents."

Marcuse is a new kind of psychoanalytic spokesman: the mature historian-philosopher-political scientist who has apparently studied, until he understood it, everything that Freud ever said. Although not, himself, an analyst, his grasp of the

sensitively counterbalanced inner tickings of orthodox psychoanalytic theory is unassailable. And while, as he says, the book aims to contribute not to psychoanalysis itself but to its philosophy, the Analytic Institutes will undoubtedly acclaim its technical clarities. For all this the book is beamed to the generally knowledgeable reader, although to be sure it is no addition to the how-to-find-yourself series, nor is it likely to deplete the ranks of Erich Fromm's readers.

High civilization, as it has shot up around us, says Marcuse, consists of people submitting to hierarchically dominating and dominated patterns of relating to one another, in order to gear their lives to precisioned performances in pursuit of a goal that has already been reached. The goal was the attainment of the economic pre-conditions for instinctual freedom, i.e., for the transformation of sexuality, and its repressive subordination to reproductive functions (actual or 'as if'), back into the spiritual-biological Eros, and wherever that might lead us as beings in pursuit of whole body-mind pleasure. Marcuse leaves us to our fantasies at this juncture, but it is at least refreshing to see a psychoanalytic theoretician putting "genitality" *into* perspective, rather than, as is usually the case, deriving all perspective from that admittedly treasurable condition. In perspective, then, genital Eros is a lame thing, an historical artifact, itself a residuum of repression. "Analysis," from this point of view, is indeed interminable, albeit the workshop for the "well analyzed" is no longer his own past but the imperfect present, which is his poorly institutionalized community.

Upon recognition of having overshot the mark, without having exercised the claim to which it entitled us, there attends much feeling of futility and despair. In avoidance of these the performances, once begun as realistic means to promised ends, are now continued as unquestioned ends in themselves, justified by long suffering allusions to "reality." From here the visions of man, once temporarily harnessed in the more urgently realistic interests of survival come under permanent constraints; the performer becomes more and more disciplined; the performances more and more empty.

Moreover, such is the tenacity with which we are taught to cling to “well-adjustment,” we have forgotten how to remember our visions. And so, by means of entertainment industries we take to sublimating our sublimations. The promised deep freedom becomes a deep freedom. Social controls instead of being relaxed are strengthened, “not so much over the instincts as over consciousness, which if left free might recognize the work of repression in the bigger and better satisfaction of ‘needs.’” “The individuals who relax in this uniformly controlled reality recall, not the dream but the day. . . In their erotic relations they ‘keep their appointments’ — with charm, with romance, with their favorite commercials.” “The aggressive impulse plunges into a void — or rather the hate encounters smiling colleagues, busy competitors, obedient officials, helpful social workers who are all doing their duty and who are all innocent victims. . .”

The heart of the matter is to be seen in the persistent dependence of existing social institutions on “alienated labor,” i.e., unpleasant work — this, again, in the name of economic “necessities” that are no longer real; our economy having already developed from conditions of psychological deprivation to conditions of psychological plenty, during a long history of alienated labors. The human capacity to perform alienated labor is made possible by repressive government — both personal and political. The child will not otherwise learn how to do it. A surplus of repression (that amount necessary to develop the capacity for alienated labor) is *realistic* up to a certain level of economic development (roughly, the beginnings of automation). If, under conditions of less than psychological sufficiency, the reality principle that requires “surplus repression” is a long or even unending detour it is nevertheless a necessary and worthwhile detour. *Under such conditions* departures from such a principle would lead to extinction of social living in the ensuing competition over an insufficient supply. This is what led Freud to become resigned and obese in the pessimism of his “Civilization and its Discontents.”

But what if we have already developed, or are on the

verge of developing, economic conditions of psychological plenty? What then can we say of governments that cannot dispense with alienated labor? What can we say of educational philosophies that uphold the teaching of repression under the illusion that the "performance principle" still represents reality? With the demise of a realistic call for "surplus-repression" in our personal development shall we degenerate into societies of sensuous ogres, or shall we emerge as unbound Prometheans free at last to enjoy for its own sake what our masochism has thus far mutely preserved? Are man's raw instincts inherently degenerate; and do they attain humane-ness only in sublimated forms? Or do they *become* degenerate in the impatient momentum of overcoming surplus-repression; and what if an economic sophistication could support their less-repressed development from birth?

Marcuse leaves us to our scratching on these matters, but within the fabric of Freudian theory he does establish a beach-head: as he calls it, "the hidden trend in psychoanalysis":

The notion that a non-repressive civilization is impossible [was] a cornerstone of Freudian theory. However, [the] theory contains elements that break through this rationalization; they shatter the predominant tradition of Western thought, and even suggest its reversal. His work is characterized by an uncompromising insistence on showing up the repressive content of the highest values and achievements of culture. In so far as he [succeeds in] this he denies the equation of reason with repression on which the ideology of culture is built. Freud's metapsychology is an ever-renewed attempt to uncover, and to question, the terrible necessity of the inner connection between civilization and barbarism, progress and suffering, freedom and unhappiness. . .

Moreover :

. . . the equation of freedom and happiness tabooed by the conscious is upheld by the unconscious. Its truth, although repelled by consciousness, continues to haunt the mind. It preserves the memory of past stages of individual development at which integral gratification is obtained. And the past

continues to claim the future: it generates the wish that the paradise be re-created on the basis of the achievements of civilization. . .

Psychoanalytic theory removes [fantasy] from the non-committal sphere of daydreaming and fiction and recaptures [its] strict truths. . . The weight of these discoveries must eventually shatter the framework in which they were made and confined. The liberation of the past does not end in its reconciliation with the present.

Marcuse is not the first to have challenged Freud on a point of ethnocentrism. He is not on that account, however, to be included among the Neo-Freudians. Indeed, he leaves the Revisionists only the bone of possible therapeutic expediency to explain what he sees as a too enthusiastic allegiance to existing social "realities." He, on the other hand, starts with the proposition that "no therapeutic argument should hamper the development of a theoretical construction which aims, not at curing individual sickness, but at diagnosing the general disorder."

In spelling out his diagnosis Marcuse departs from Freud only to enunciate his point of contention, proceeding then to weave it carefully back into orthodox psychoanalytic theory. The result is an improved theory.

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