

MARCUSE: THE DIALECTICS OF HOPELESSNESS

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BECAUSE Marcuse did not surface as a semi-popular social critic till the 1960s during the time of mounting and, for awhile, hopeful social protest, he is often assumed to be a spokesman for the protestors. Indeed, some of his writings in the sixties (most notably his *Essay on Liberation*) directly addressed the protest movement. Moreover, as protest in the U.S. subsided in the seventies, Marcuse became less prominent.¹ Yet the conclusions which Marcuse draws from his studies seem far more apt in the politically quiescent seventies (and, earlier, in the fifties) than the sixties. And if we look clearly at what Marcuse was saying, even in the sixties, it appears that he was always a pessimistic revolutionary. He generally spoke dourly to the fervent youth.

It is Marcuse's peculiar brand of pessimism which I will attempt to elucidate in this study. My focus will be on Marcuse's psychological theories — specifically, on some of his revisions of Freud's social-psychological theories. This narrow focus can only be maintained by deliberately ignoring related themes and theories that Marcuse has developed in his various writings. In particular I will not deal at any length with Marcuse's notion that art, the imagination and, more generally, the human intellectual capacity for negation of historical realities provides a basis for changing these realities. However I will indicate very briefly near the end of this paper why I think this Marcusean theme does not fundamentally challenge the outcome of my analysis. For, in my opinion, Marcuse, the post-Freudian, delivers pessimistic conclusions that neither Marcuse, the neo-Marxist, nor Marcuse, the upholder of the (current) "truth value" of the arts, can quite get around.²

TECHNOLOGICAL OPTIMISM, PSYCHOLOGICAL PESSIMISM

But before proceeding it is necessary to note why Marcuse is a revolutionary at all, to show the basis of such hopes as he had for changing and improving society. Briefly, Marcuse believes that the productive capacities of modern technology finally make it possible to eradicate scarcity and the misery it produces. (This is, of course, a conventional Marxist belief but one which is also held by many social theorists of whatever political orientation.) Even more optimistically, he believes that violence, ignorance and general ugliness can now be eliminated along with scarcity.³ In short, "All the material and intellectual forces which could be put to work for the realization of a free society are at hand."⁴ Or, as he likes to state it, *utopia* is at hand. The utopian wishes traditionally expressed in art, religion and other imaginative enterprises have become sober, scientific, technological estimates. "The utopian claims of imagination have become saturated with historical reality."⁵ We are fast approaching "... a stage where society's

¹ Certainly his latest book, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) is not as widely read as his *Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) which came out during the crest of the sixties protest.

² Marcuse speaks of the "truth value" of the imagination and the arts on pp. 130-43 in *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1955). My brief discussion of this position is seen below.

³ For a recent formulation see pp. 2-3, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*: "No longer condemned to compulsive aggressiveness and repression in the struggle for existence, individuals would be able to create a technical and natural environment which would no longer perpetuate violence, ugliness, ignorance, and brutality."

⁴ *Five Lectures* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 64.

⁵ *Eros and Civilization*, p. 141.

capacity to produce may be akin to the creative capacity of art, and the construction of the world of art akin to the reconstruction of the real world — union of liberating art and liberating technology.⁶

Where, in such views, is there room for pessimism? Though there are, in his estimate, no technological barriers to the establishment of a free society, Marcuse sees some other, very human, barriers. For one thing, current elites cannot be expected to abdicate willingly, even for the noble purpose of establishing a free society.⁷ (Needless to say, these elites generally will not see matters this way or, at least, admit to seeing things this way.)⁸ But, in addition, Marcuse does not see most of the citizens of the advanced technological societies pushing for the establishment of a free society. They do not even understand what a free society might be and pervasive psychological forces may perpetuate their ignorance and passivity.⁹

That Marcuse's pessimism grows primarily from his analysis of the psychological dispositions of his contemporaries is rather startling since one of his major intellectual projects has been a revision of the pessimistic social-psychological theories of Freud. But even in *Eros and Civilization*, his full-length retooling of Freudian theory, very conservative conclusions emerge. In the end, Marcuse seems to conclude that we contemporaries have wriggled out of the Freudian strait jacket only at the cost of breaking our limbs so that we can no longer move forward. Where Freud pictures for us robust humans shackled by social constraints, Marcuse shows us unshackled humans who are cripples. Either way the perpetuation of a repressive society seems guaranteed.

To illustrate this paradoxical conclusion to Marcuse's revision of Freud it will suffice to focus on Marcuse's critique of two fundamental Freudian propositions. First, Freud maintained that the human sexual instinct is socially disruptive and must be repressed if social order is to be maintained. Second, Freud argued that the necessary work for social living will not be performed spontaneously but must be based on a repressive diversion of sexual energies. Marcuse attempts to undo both theories. But his revisions seem strangely futile because they end in his own prediction of continuing sexual repression and exploitation of workers. That is not obvious, however, till one has traced to the end the main lines of Marcuse's argument and that is the task we must now begin.

UBIQUITOUS SEX, DIFFUSE SEX AND SOCIAL ORDER

Of the various ideas and arguments Freud presented over the years his insistence of the prevalence of sexual behavior or sexually motivated behavior must have upset his contemporaries most. To a still somewhat puritanical society it

⁶ *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 48.

⁷ Marcuse seems ambiguous and wavering on the issue of the degree to which some kind of power elite consciously and selfishly orders society for its own ends. See George Kateb's discussion "The Political Thought of Herbert Marcuse" in James V. Downton and David K. Hart, eds., *Perspectives on Political Philosophy, Vol. III* (Hinsdale, Ill.: Dryden, 1973), pp. 416-19. See also the discussion below.

⁸ That U.S. society, among others, is dominated by elites is a proposition for which I can hardly take the time to argue in this paper. For what it is worth I believe that to be true.

⁹ Again, Marcuse does not seem to be completely consistent on this point but usually he stresses the crucial importance of the masses' realizing the difference between the established "false" needs which the present society satisfies and their "real" needs which would demand a new society. Consider the following passage, for example: "It is precisely the continuity of the needs developed and satisfied in a repressive society that reproduces this repressive society over and over again within the individuals themselves. Individuals reproduce repressive society in their needs, which persist even through revolution, and it is precisely this continuity which up to now has stood in the way of the leap from quantity into the quality of a free society." *Five Lectures*, p. 65. Note that here Marcuse is maintaining that even a successful revolution would come to naught if the masses did not understand what a free society really is and what their true needs are.

was bad enough that adults, particularly younger males, had rather strong heterosexual urges, for even such limited urges threatened a family structure based on monogamy. Freud's contention that sexual impulses not only went far beyond heterosexual urges, but strongly affected women and children as well as adult males, would seem to make sexual impulses even more dangerous to society.¹⁰

Only decades later Freud's insistence on the diversity and prevalence of sexual urges may not seem so frightening. After all, why should mere sexual urges disrupt society? But one must remember here the specific sexual inclinations (and their normal accompaniments) which Freud claimed to have discovered. The Oedipus complex, for example, included not only the strong sexual interest of the male child in his mother, but the child's wish to eliminate the father as a rival. Oedipus killed his father. Incest and murder are a heady mixture. Further, Freud illustrated the tendency for sexual impulses to fuse with sadistic and/or masochistic impulses. Such sexual alloys appear disruptive, to say the least. And, as we know, the sexual-sadist may be a powerful politician, not just a closet pervert.

Along such paths, sexuality, as portrayed by Freud, would lead directly (that is, if sexual urges were not repressed) to behavior quite beyond the pale even for sexual sophisticates. Conservatives and revolutionaries alike might well concur that an instinct of such a nature must be controlled. To call, then, for a repression-free society, as Marcuse does, seemingly entails revising extensively Freud's theory of sexuality.

Marcuse poses the question directly. "We have to ask whether the sex instincts, after the elimination of all surplus-repression, can develop a 'libidinal rationality' which is not only compatible with but even promotes progress toward higher forms of civilized freedoms."¹¹ He then proceeds to argue that sexuality is part of a "non-repressive instinctual order," and that this "most 'disorderly' of all instincts" is not really disorderly at all.¹²

Marcuse's first step toward proving the general tameness of sexuality may seem surprising. For he eagerly accepts Freud's statements about the prevalence and general massiveness of sexual behavior. Though Freud, in various ways, had enlarged the concept of sexuality, Marcuse would press him further noting, for example, that Freud's use of the term "Eros" in his later writings "... implies an enlargement of the meaning of sexuality itself."¹³

Now why should Marcuse encourage us to see even more sexuality than Freud does? If it is a troublesome instinct, aren't we just multiplying our troubles? Not at all, Marcuse maintains. In a deft reversal of the implications of Freud's discoveries about the prevalence of sex Marcuse (citing Freud, himself, heavily) notes how broadly gauged this massive instinct is. For once one sees how many outlets there are for the sexual impulses, it seems plausible that were this diffuse drive unleashed, nothing catastrophic would occur. Marcuse seems to be following a mechanical analogy. Just as a small charge will move a projectile with deadly speed down the "narrow focus" of a gun barrel, the release of all restraints on a narrowly focused sexual impulse might lead to a dangerous and destructive behavior. But a much larger amount of explosive ignited in an unconfined space may not be dangerous at all. You can make a "sparkler" out of gun powder.¹⁴ Similarly, multi-faceted and diffuse sexual urges might be relatively safe to release

¹⁰ Yet however radical and disturbing Freud's idea was, it bolstered the most traditional of social theories, at least in Freud's view. For it provided one more argument for the contention that the social order requires the careful control of its individual members.

¹¹ *Eros and Civilization*, p. 182.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁴ Some such mechanical analogy is implied, I think, on p. 184 of *Eros and Civilization* where Marcuse writes of "a spread rather than an explosion of libido. . . ."

absolutely even if the totality of sexual drives is very large. Their diversity more than compensates for their magnitude.

But the argument must be more complicated than this, for Freud's discoveries about sexual variety do not lead immediately to the conclusion that the sexual drive is safely diffuse. Freud did argue that *over time* one's sexual goals or love objects would change substantially. We all progress through oral and anal stages, for example. Similarly, a homosexual orientation is quite to be expected at a certain period of life. But if we look at a person at any given time, his sexual energies will likely be narrowly focused. This will be the case for those whose sexual impulses develop in accordance with cultural norms as well as those with unusual sexual orientations. The pervert is as narrowly focused sexually as the "straight."

Perverse sexuality is as a rule exceedingly concentrated, its whole activity is directed to one — and mostly to only one — aim; one particular component-impulse is supreme; it is either the only one discernible or it has subjected the others to its own purposes. In this respect there is no difference between perverse and normal sexuality, except that the dominating component-impulse, and therefore the sexual aim, is a different one. Both of them constitute a well-organized tyranny; only that in one case one ruling family has usurped all the power, and in the other, another.¹⁵

If one follows a person's sexual case history, one might see it, then, as a series of perversions (oral, anal, . . .) culminating in the accredited adult perversion of genital supremacy. But if, at any given time, a person's sexual energies are so narrowly focused, then the sudden unrepression of sexual energies might trigger dangerous explosions of libido. Given the dominance of what might be called serial perversity the problems attending unrepression might be as great as if there were only one kind of narrowly focused sexuality.

Clearly Marcuse must go further than simply pointing to the variety of sex discovered by Freud. He must maintain that each person might pursue, simultaneously, different sexual goals. Marcuse envisages a sexuality beyond both genital sexuality and serial perversity. Real, natural sex, he argues, is yet something else. In fact our true erotic nature is much broader than anything we would call sexuality. "To the extent that erotic energy were really freed, it would cease to be mere sexuality and would become a force that determined the organism in all its modes of behavior, dimensions and goals."¹⁶ This is a risky hypothesis, it might appear, since we must "really free" erotic energies to see how broad they are. Of course, if Marcuse is right no catastrophe would result. ". . . the process just outlined involves not simply a release but a *transformation* of the libido: from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy to erotization of the entire personality. It is a spread rather than an explosion of libido. . . ."¹⁷ What Marcuse sees is the emergence of what might be called simultaneous perversity. Our unleashed erotic energies will go out and mix in with all our relations with the world. Eating, walking alone, meeting with friends, working — all will proceed erotically, so to speak. Under the right circumstances ". . . instinctual energies . . . , as Eros, would strive to universalize libidinous relationships and develop a libidinous civilization."¹⁸

While this broad a view of sexuality goes beyond Freud's most common formulations, Marcuse notes that Freud, himself, sometimes suggested very much the same thing. For example, Freud spoke of "polymorphous perversity" as the natural

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Pocket Books, 1952), p. 332.

¹⁶ *Five Lectures*, p. 40.

¹⁷ *Eros and Civilization*, p. 184.

¹⁸ *Five Lectures*, p. 22.

sexual disposition in childhood.¹⁹ Freud's notion of "primary narcissism" is taken by Marcuse as similarly supporting his views.²⁰ The conclusion that the sexual instincts are diffuse enough to be harmless is made within the general framework of Freud's analysis.

This, then, is the main line of argument with which Marcuse attempts to undo the conservative implications of Freud's view of the sexual instinct. It seems a plausible argument but I am not really concerned with how convincing it is. Rather I would draw the reader's attention to how favorably and optimistically Marcuse views the sexual instinct. Here are no dark worries about aggressive or destructive urges so often associated with sex. Even Erich Fromm, no mean optimist, himself, talks of a polarity in basic human inclinations which accounts for some people pursuing neurotic and destructive behavior, sexually and otherwise, though, Fromm argues, no one must follow such discouraging paths.²¹ But Marcuse is all sweetness and light. There seems no source here for Marcuse's pessimism.

But we have been considering only the possible effect of direct sexual behavior. Marcuse, with Freud, believes that the sexual energies are mobilized for other than sexual purposes—specifically they are transformed into motivations for work. Freud argues that this linkage is inevitable, that the work necessary to maintain society can only be done by harnessing repressed and diverted sexual energies. If that is true, of course, Marcuse's conclusion that unrepressed sexual impulses are not destructive of social order would be irrelevant.²² Marcuse does not accept Freud's formulation of the necessary connection between sex and work. But Marcuse does believe that, historically, work and sex have been connected very much as Freud described. And the influence of this contingent reality, following Marcuse's analysis, seems to be permanently discouraging.

THE WORK-SEX NEXUS

Freud assumes the necessity for work and flatly maintains that most people will not willingly face this necessity. The necessary labor must be a forced labor. "It seems . . . that every civilization must be built up on coercion and renunciation of instinct; it does not even seem certain that if coercion were to cease the majority of human beings would be prepared to undertake to perform the work necessary for acquiring new wealth."²³ This tentativeness about the willingness to work soon disappears. ". . . the regulations of civilization can only be maintained by a certain degree of coercion," because ". . . men are not spontaneously fond of work and . . . arguments are of no avail against their passions."²⁴ The coerced labor is linked to a diversion of instinctual energies, sexual energies in particular. Freud writes of ". . . the tendency on the part of civilization to restrict sexual life . . ." arguing that "civilization is obeying the laws of economic necessity, since a large amount of the psychical energy which it uses for its own purposes has to be withdrawn from sexuality."²⁵ Thus, even if Marcuse is correct in arguing that the direct effects of sexual unrepression are no threat to society and even if such unrepression would

¹⁹ See, for example, Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, pp. 329-35. For an extended discussion of "polymorphous perversity" see Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), ch. 3.

²⁰ *Eros and Civilization*, pp. 152-56. Marcuse cites passages from Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* and *The Ego and the Id*.

²¹ See *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Avon, 1965), pp. 161-62.

²² Irrelevant, that is, to all who wish to see necessary work proceed. Of course, ultimately, social order will dissolve if necessary work is not performed. At the extreme the two issues are not separate.

²³ *The Future of an Illusion in The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 21* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁵ *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1962) p. 51.

lead to the establishment of a "libidinous civilization," it must be shown that in this new society the necessary work will be performed. Diffuse, unrepressed sexuality must stimulate or at least be compatible with work. After all, we do not want to starve to death, however libidinally. But as an introduction to analyzing Marcuse's position on the work-sex nexus and showing how he would answer Freud we would do well to examine some temptingly weak links in Freud's own theory about the connection between sex and work.

For example, work resulting from the diversion of sexual instincts would presumably fall under the heading of sublimation.²⁶ But Freud contended that "many people possess the capacity of sublimation only in a slight degree."²⁷ Why, then, is nearly everyone working?

Freud sometimes argued that most people had to be repressed directly and from the outside by those people who had greater capacity to repress themselves. He views men, for example, as more adept at sublimation than women.

The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men, it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimation of which women are little capable. Since a man does not have unlimited quantities of psychical energy at his disposal, he has to accomplish his tasks by making an expedient distribution of his libido. What he employs for cultural aims he to a great extent withdraws from women and sexual life.²⁸

That men ought to direct women, then, follows as matter of course. Similarly, Freud saw many great leaders as champions of self-repression and thus fit to direct the destinies of others.²⁹

Needless to say there are difficulties here. One is based on countless observations that many leaders (and more men) are simply not notably self-denying. The Spartan oligarchy, some highly placed Puritans and the Chinese revolutionary leaders might fit the type, but many Athenian leaders, seventeenth and eighteenth century monarchs, American presidents and Soviet leaders do not appear terribly ascetic.

Moreover, following Freud's own theories such self-denying leaders as might happen upon the scene will have problems of their own. Personally they will be more prone to debilitating neuroses than their less repressed underlings.³⁰ Such an unstable leader may remain in power, of course, but, everything else equal, such instability hardly seems a leadership asset. Yet numerous ascetic leaders, preferably personally stable, seem just what is needed because they must work against a ubiquitous and obdurate foe. The sexual instincts are hardy and recalcitrant. In comparing them to what he calls the self-preservative instincts Freud writes:

The sexual instincts are less easily moulded; for in the beginning they do not know any lack of objects. Since they are connected parasitically, as it were, with the other physical functions and at the same time can be autoerotically gratified on their own body, they are at first isolated from the

²⁶ Freud defines sublimation as follows in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, p. 354. "It consists in the abandonment, on the part of the sexual impulse, of an aim previously found either in the gratification incidental to reproduction, and the adoption of a new aim — which aim, though genetically related to the first, can no longer be regarded as sexual, but must be called social in character. We call this process SUBLIMATION, by which we subscribe to the general standard which estimates social aims above sexual (ultimately selfish) aims."

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

²⁸ *Civilization and its Discontents*, pp. 50–51.

²⁹ On the role of great leaders, cultural as well as political, see, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

³⁰ See, for example, the story of the rich girl and the caretaker's daughter in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, pp. 361–63.

educative influence of real necessity; and in most people they retain throughout life, in some respect or other, this character of obstinacy and inaccessibility to influence which we call "unreasonableness."³¹

Presumably it is no easy matter for even the most skillful leadership to divert such impulses into regular, productive labor. Yet we know of numerous lackluster but long-lived leaders. Finally, since productive labor is, in fact, commonplace, one begins to wonder about Freud's theories about the connection between work and sex.

There is another kind of problem with Freud's theories about the connection between sex and work. He apparently assumed a continuing scarcity of the labor-produced goods which a society must have to keep functioning. Self-denying labor was necessary because the world yielded up its fruits grudgingly. But this denies the reality of the growing wealth of at least some societies.³² How much repression is really needed when annual per capita income has reached, say, \$5,000? Certainly society does not need such wealth. Could we, then, ease up on the repression and sink back blissfully to a mere \$2,500 per capita income (with half the painful work)? Or, alternatively, could we use all increases in productivity to decrease work time? Why aren't there very strong demands to move in these directions at least from the majority of us who have never been convinced that we should trade off sex for work?

Marcuse's revision of Freud's theory of the connection between work and sex seems in many respects far more plausible. At least the difficulties noted above are largely overcome. In addition, Marcuse's theory appears, initially, to hold out hopes that it is possible to design a non-repressive society.

Marcuse begins by portraying the sexual impulses as generally flexible. Indeed, Marcuse maintains that "all human needs, including sexuality, lie beyond the animal world. They are historically determined and historically mutable."³³ Such a loosely held sexual instinct might be mastered even by us plain folks.³⁴ Thus, in Marcuse's theory there is no need for great political leaders whose heroic stature is based on stalwart self-repression. Accordingly, those of us who fail to note such characteristics among rulers need not immediately challenge Marcuse's theory. Marcuse also takes note of the increase of wealth in the technologically advanced societies. Indeed he makes this increased wealth the very cornerstone for his proposals for the future. As noted earlier he speaks of the possibility of realizing most of our utopian dreams, of closing the gap between imagination and reality.

In reversing these two basic tenets of Freud's treatment of the work-sex nexus it might seem that Marcuse has found a way to escape Freud's conservative conclusions. But a stubborn bit of reality remains to be explained away. There are still all these people working. We may be happy to throw out Freud's argument that the survival of society requires work and that a self-denying elite must impose this requirement. But if Freud is wrong, then we need some other explanation for the prevalent role of work, especially in those societies which have long since overcome scarcity.

Marcuse, in fact, is concerned to offer us an explanation. Essentially he gives us Freud's explanation seemingly without its deterministic trappings. Marcuse, too, views work, at least work as performed in the technologically developed capitalist countries, as fueled by the diversion of sexual energies. But in Marcuse's

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

³² To say nothing of the apparent ease with which some hunting and food gathering populations live and lived. See the discussion in Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds., *Man the Hunter* (Chicago: Aldine, 1968), pp. 83-95.

³³ *Five Lectures*, p. 65.

³⁴ But this picture of the sexual instincts undermines Marcuse's argument elsewhere. See below.

account we are caught by a particular history, not iron necessity. The repression of sex for work is not an inescapable requirement for living in any society. It is simply a dominant feature in the history of our society. Thus establishing a truly liberated society in which people spontaneously and humanely take care of each other's needs without the goad of repression is a real possibility because historical change is a real possibility — seemingly.

Not only is repression not an absolute requirement of civilized life, but the form which repression presently takes in the wealthy capitalist nations would seem to be relatively mild. The repression is very broad, Marcuse maintains, extending beyond the working place to family life and general social interaction and even into the realm of entertainment and intellectual endeavor.³⁵ But it is not a harsh repression. We are handled with velvet gloves.

Certain developments have paved the way for the smooth, ubiquitous repression or sublimation that has settled in on the economically advanced capitalist societies. Not surprisingly Marcuse points to the impact of industry and technology on our lives to explain the present ties between sex and work. But his analysis here follows an interesting new path. For while many others have stressed the impact of industrialization on work, Marcuse draws our attention to its impact on our erotic lives. He clearly recognizes that most people believe that our society has become more permissive sexually.³⁶ But Marcuse disagrees and sets out to show how industrialization has insidiously created an environment increasingly inhospitable to our erotic impulses. A long quote gives the flavor of this rather unusual position.

Mechanization has also "saved" libido, the energy of the Life Instincts — that is, has barred it from previous modes of realization. This is the kernel of truth in the romantic contrast between the modern traveler and the wandering poet or artisan, between assembly line and handicraft, town and city, factory-produced bread and the home-made loaf, the sailboat and the outboard motor, etc. True, this romantic pre-technical world was permeated with misery, toil, and filth, and these in turn were the background of all pleasure and joy. Still, there was a "landscape," a medium of libidinal experience which no longer exists.

With its disappearance (itself a prerequisite of progress), a whole dimension of human activity and passivity has been de-eroticized. The environment from which the individual could obtain pleasure — which he could cathect as gratifying almost as an extended zone of the body — has been rigidly reduced. Consequently, the "universe" of libidinous cathexis is likewise reduced. The effect is a localization and contraction of libido, the reduction of erotic to sexual experience and satisfaction.

For example, compare love-making in a meadow and in an automobile, on a lovers' walk outside the town walls and on a Manhattan street. In the former cases, the environment partakes of and invites libidinal cathexis and tends to be eroticized. Libido transcends beyond the immediate erotogenic zones — a process of nonrepressive sublimation. In contrast, a mechanized environment seems to block such self-transcendence of libido. Impelled in the striving to extend the field of erotic gratification, libido becomes less "polymorphous," less capable of eroticism beyond localized sexuality, and the *latter* is intensified.³⁷

Eros must have its field to play in. One cannot love the unlovely. So by simply changing the environment one can, in effect, repress the erotic instincts and make

³⁵ See, for example, Marcuse's chapter on "The Closing of the Universe of Discourse" in *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

³⁶ For example, he remarks, "It has often been noted that advanced industrial civilization operates with a greater degree of sexual freedom. . . ." *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 74. See also John David Ober, "On Sexuality and Politics in the Work of Herbert Marcuse" in Paul Breines, ed., *Critical Interruptions* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

³⁷ *One-Dimensional Man*, pp. 72-73.

all that energy available for other purposes. Fence in the village green, put the population in cramped row houses, send them to the factories rather than the fields, do all this long enough and Eros begins to wither.³⁸ Then there will no longer be a struggle between erotic yearnings and the work requirement. The latter begins to win out by default. People may not go whistling off to work. They may not even stop grumbling about work. But they will no longer know what they are grumbling about or, rather, they will no longer know much about the activities which would set them to grinning instead of grumbling.

Marcuse's analysis of the withering away of Eros might seem questionable on several grounds. Presumably not everyone would subscribe to his assertions about the unwholeness of industrial or technological society, though they seem to me accurate. But beyond that there would be even more contention about the extent to which erotic interests have contracted. But, clearly, Marcuse's argument is not refuted by pointing to any increased permissiveness regarding sexual behavior. On the contrary, Marcuse cites such trends as support for his theory.

First, he argues that the increasing prominence of sexuality is quite compatible with a narrowing of erotic life. Indeed the emphasis on *mere* sexuality may distract one from broader erotic concerns. Walking through a park should be a full erotic experience but the presence of secretaries in short skirts may so rivet some males' attentions that the smell of the grass, the outline of trees against the sky, . . . are no longer experienced. Industrialization left us with human bodies to admire but little else. So if we admire human bodies more than ever, it may be out of our poverty of erotic experience. "Inasmuch as the greater liberty involves a contraction rather than extension and development of instinctual needs, it works *for* rather than *against* the status quo of general repression. . . ."³⁹

Second, much of the seeming liberalization of mere sexuality is, in fact, very controlled because it is displayed in a public setting where rather strict rules forbidding physical contact obtain. "The sexy office and sales girls, the handsome, virile junior executive and floor walker . . ." bring sexuality into our working and shopping.⁴⁰ But this display is meant to be visual only (and, often, only guardedly visual). No one is to touch the Playboy bunnies. Sexual display is for the well behaved. And, in Marcuse's words, "Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission."⁴¹

Finally, these trends reinforce each other. The liberalization of mere sexuality tends to distract us from the realization that other beautiful things are being destroyed. While urbanization and industrialization progress, as technology is introduced into nearly all spheres of our lives, we may be boasting smugly of the new sexual freedoms without ever realizing that this sexuality is just the pitiful remnant of Eros left to us in our glass and concrete habitations.

What Marcuse is talking about, then, are historical developments in which erotic opportunities have been steadily trimmed down. Work is there to take up the slack, to feed on the frustrated erotic energies. It is not crucial to Marcuse's theory whether the narrowing of erotic life preceded the burgeoning of work during industrialization or whether a high work output was imposed on the populace thereby narrowing their erotic lives. The long-run consequences are the same. Our historical legacy is a labor force whose considerable energy and pliability is geared to a stunted erotic life.

³⁸ Sebastian De Grazia, from a quite different political perspective, makes much the same point. See especially chs. 1, 2 and 6 in *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* (New York: Doubleday, 1962).

³⁹ *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

But now the irony of the situation emerges. In previous ages such willing workers were desperately needed. But the advanced technological societies of the mid-twentieth century no longer require high work output, in Marcuse's view. Just as we are beginning to need workers less and less we have perfected persons who are ready to work almost full time. Just as we could finally afford to tell people to relax and enjoy themselves we find a breed incapable of enjoyment. We have perfected an economic and sexual dinosaur in the modern laborer. He works excessively and he is a lousy dancer.

FLEXIBLE INSTINCTS, STAGNANT SOCIETY

In the end modern industrial society, as described by Marcuse, seems far less susceptible to change than the conflicted, more clearly repressed society pictured by Freud.⁴³ Technological society, at least the capitalist variety, has entered a cul-de-sac.

Capitalist progress thus not only reduces the environment of freedom, the "open space" of the human existence, but also the "longing," the need for such an environment. And in doing so, quantitative progress militates against qualitative change even if the institutional barriers against radical education and action are surmounted. This is the vicious circle: the rupture with the self-propelling conservative continuum of needs must precede the revolution which is to usher in a free society, but such rupture itself can be envisaged only in a revolution. . . .⁴³

Again, in a question period following a lecture Marcuse remarked:

... for new, revolutionary needs to develop, the mechanisms that reproduce the old needs must be abolished. In order for the mechanisms to be abolished, there must first be a need to abolish them. That is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not know how to get out of it.⁴⁴

But what is most interesting to note is how Marcuse arrived at such dour conclusions. Freud portrayed the sexual instincts as insistent and forceful. Social authority had to concentrate on just keeping these troublesome instincts under control. Social institutions had to be inflexibly repressive because the sexual instincts were inflexibly disruptive. Marcuse's analysis changes both terms in the equation. He argues that the sexual instincts, completely unrepressed, do not threaten to disrupt society and would not, at least in the wealthier societies, prevent the necessary work from being done. This being the case all sorts of social arrangements, including unrepressive ones, become possible. We seem to have, if anything, a superfluity of possibilities for Marcuse depicts sexuality itself as a flexible instinct shaped, perhaps entirely, by the social environment. But then comes the bad news. It is too late. That flexible sexual instinct has already been shaped in such a way as to make the vast majority of the people submissive to a repressive society. And, in such a situation, one can expect no major push to reshape sexuality into more attractive forms. The wealth produced by technological society creates the possibility of an unrepressive society, but the technological landscape is erotically stultifying and we no longer can push to use that wealth to free us from repression. It would take a veritable *deus ex machina* to lift us into utopia, but Marcuse doesn't believe in God and, anyway, by his own analysis, the machinery has frozen up.

⁴³ Granted insofar as Freud's society was dynamic it was, one might say, hopelessly dynamic. That is, though there was the possibility of change, there was no possibility of change for the better.

⁴⁴ *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Five Lectures*, p. 80.

Were sexuality the hardy, stubborn instinct of Freud's description one would not arrive at such an impasse. Then our relative inflexibility would have saved us from domestication. In this case the alternative to being driven from within by instincts was being driven from without by machinery.

A revolutionary-elitist interpretation of Marcuse attempts to milk a little more hope out of this analysis. After all, one might argue, the machinery is under human control and a revolution which replaces the current repression-minded controllers with a new batch of benevolent, erotically minded controllers might usher in the "libidinous civilization" Marcuse wishes for us. But though Marcuse sometimes encourages such conclusions, they seem to me to run counter to his conclusions expressed in passages like the following:

The capitalist bosses and owners are losing their identity as responsible agents; they are assuming the function of bureaucrats in a corporate machine.⁴⁶

... as reification tends to become totalitarian by virtue of its technological form, the organizers and administrators themselves become increasingly dependent on the machinery which they organize and administer. And this mutual dependence is no longer the dialectical relationship between Master and Servant, which has been broken in the struggle for mutual recognition, but rather a vicious circle which encloses both the Master and the Servant.⁴⁶

There are not even any rascals to throw out. In such evolved societies there seems little to hope for at the hands of some revolutionary elite. The machinery drives everyone.

FLEXIBLE INSTINCTS, LIMP CRITICISM

There is another way in which Marcuse's argument for the flexibility of the sexual instincts undermines his general critique of contemporary society. The very basis from which he criticizes contemporary society is eroded.

How, after all, does one maintain that a society is basically flawed? Well, that society's own standards might be turned against it. For example, Marx's critique of capitalism is based in large part on its inherent contradictions, its inability to achieve its own proclaimed goals. But Marcuse, unlike Marx, usually maintains that capitalist society is capable of dealing with and to a large extent overcoming the problems it generates.⁴⁷ Again, one might hold up the standards and achievements of one society as a challenge to another. But such critiques are so often merely chauvinistic that they generally come under heavy suspicion. Anyway Marcuse cannot find much in the way of advanced technological societies to point to in implied criticism of the United States, for example.⁴⁸ Alternatively, one might point to a society in some other historical epoch as a standard for one's own society.⁴⁹ But Marcuse, here following the Marxist tradition, generally adjures such tactics. Thus, as noted earlier, he reminds us that the "romantic pre-technical world was permeated with misery, toil, and filth": which he is clearly not prepared to accept for all its pleasurable and joyful accompaniments.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the discussion in *One-Dimensional Man*, pp. 34-35 and 247-57. For a later discussion of the same topic see *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, pp. 129-34.

⁴⁹ In particular, the Soviet Union is not held up as a model to emulate though Marcuse often argues that there is more *potential* for building a liberated society in the Soviet Union than in, say, the United States. See *One-Dimensional Man*, pp. 39-45.

⁵⁰ The heavy usage of ancient Greece as, in some respects, a sociopolitical ideal is particularly notable. A wide range of contemporary social critics, from Hannah Arendt to Sebastian De Grazia to Leo Strauss . . . , use ancient Greece as a critical reference point.

⁵⁰ *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 72.

How then does Marcuse criticize contemporary technological society? For the most part he seems to fall back on the concept of human nature, assuming that society should provide a healthy home for human beings.⁵¹ If basic human urges are frustrated by a society, especially if such a frustration is unnecessary (if it is, for example, a "surplus repression"), that society deserves criticism. But here we find that Marcuse has been chipping away steadily at his own critical foundations by maintaining that "all human needs, including sexuality, lie beyond the animal world. They are historically determined and historically mutable."⁵² So if people living in an advanced technological society proclaim fulfillment with their accumulation of appliances and gadgets, if they stoutly maintain their preference for fast foods and supervised, narrow-gauged sex, how can Marcuse criticize the society which doles out such rewards?

Perhaps there is a part of human nature more resisting than the sphere of needs, sexual or otherwise. Marcuse sometimes treats the human intellect or at least some human intellects as a possible springboard for revolutionary protest. In *Eros and Civilization* he maintains with Freud that "phantasy (imagination) retains the structure and tendencies of the psyche prior to its organization by the reality, . . ."⁵³ and that phantasy, "insists that it must and can become real. . . ."⁵⁴ But the basic content of these phantasies is political, it is a demand for freedom, the desire to live under the rule of the "pleasure principle." Art has given form to these phantasies and "there is no genuine work of art that does not reveal the archetypal content: the negation of unfreedom."⁵⁵ Thus our artistic heritage (as well as our primordial psyches) would seem to supply a springboard for revolt. Again, philosophy, at least early Greek philosophy, is seen by Marcuse as having rather revolutionary commitments. "The philosophic quest proceeds from the finite world to the construction of a reality which is not subject to the painful difference between potentiality and actuality, which has mastered its negativity and is complete and independent in itself — *free*."⁵⁶ Could it be that in art and philosophy we have the obdurate core of a revolutionary movement? Could it be that where sexual instincts bend and wither, the intellect holds fast?

This possibility opens up questions that there is simply no space to pursue here but I would like to note some difficulties. First, this takes one so far in the direction of an idealistic conception of history that it must raise serious doubts about the Marxist elements of Marcuse's thinking. At the very least one would have to re-examine all of Marcuse's seemingly Marxist analyses in a whole new light. Second, Marcuse has often maintained intellectual processes are just as easy to subvert, sublimate or dominate as more libidinal processes. In *One-Dimensional Man*, particularly chapters 4 through 7, Marcuse describes how various trends, from the "functionalization of language"⁵⁷ to the "linguistic analysis" of Wittgenstein⁵⁸ have sapped critical ability. Later he notes that "imagination has not remained immune to the process of reification"⁵⁹ and speaks of how "the thorough

⁵¹ The recurring emphasis on distinguishing between "true" and "false" needs, the insistence on establishing autonomy for each individual, both presuppose that the health of the individual human being is to be taken as the criterion by which the society is to be judged. See, for example, the discussion in *One-Dimensional Man*, pp. 1-8.

⁵² *Five Lectures*, p. 65. Some other leftist social critics — Erich Fromm is a notable example — are much more careful to preserve the concept of human nature for use as the basis for their critique of contemporary society.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵⁶ *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 127.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

assimilation of mind with fact, of thought with required behavior, of aspirations with reality, militate against the emergence of a new Subject"⁶⁰ who might lead us in revolutionary protest. Finally, there seems no plausible reason to separate out critical intelligence from the rest of the human being. Making "all human needs" historical and mutable seems tantamount to making human nature mutable but this is to undermine the very concept of human nature. Without a firm concept of human nature it seems no more likely that we will find some champions of the spirit than champions of the flesh.

The concept of human nature is one of the critical platforms from which one might plausibly indulge in social criticism, but, in the end, instead of building and strengthening that platform, Marcuse helps tear it down. Ironically, it is the staunchly instinctual Freudian human whom one can envisage rising up to full height and crying forth some "Great Refusal."⁶¹ The less instinctual, more historical human which Marcuse describes seems little more capable of a "Great Refusal" than a well-bred Hereford.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 252.

⁶¹ "The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative. Thus it wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal." *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 257.