

On Herbert Marcuse and the Concept of Psychological Freedom

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IN the course of describing the history of freedom in the Western world, Harold Laski, the British political theorist, distinguishes two great periods since the Reformation. In the eighteenth century, the concern was with social, political, and religious freedom. In the nineteenth century, concern shifted to economic freedom.

I believe one may add to this a third period starting in the nineteenth century but coming to fruition in terms of mass social impact in the mid-twentieth century. In this period the concern has been with what I shall refer to as psychological freedom. Psychological freedom has been the concern of three major groups:

1. The existentialist writers starting with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and including among others Sartre, Heidegger, and Rilke, have most frequently voiced this concern in terms of the quest for authenticity, the shedding of the repressive "ready made"¹ life that society shackles us with in favor of true spontaneity, living in accordance with one's authentic self.

2. With the development of psychoanalysis, the damaging effects of excessive sexual repression were clinically documented. A new concern with all aspects of psychological development and maturation came into being. The formation

¹ "One comes along, one finds a life, ready-made, one only has to put it on," writes Rilke in *The Notes of Malte Laurids Brigge*, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1975), p. 135.

of a strong sense of self as an individual with one's own needs, qualities, and potentialities came to be perceived as a condition of the mature adult's mental health. Eventually among what has been dubbed the psychoanalytic left (Reich, Laing, Perls, etc.) this led to an extreme emphasis on self-realization accompanied by a call for liberation from almost all of society's rules, in particular those regulating sexual behavior.

3. The Hegelian Marxists (Lukacs, Korsch, members of the Frankfurt school, among them Herbert Marcuse) emphasized Marx's early writings on the alienation of the worker in capitalist society. They argued that only in a genuinely socialist society could human beings be free to realize their true nature.

Nietzsche, Marx, Freud

In the writings of Herbert Marcuse—in particular *Eros and Civilization*, published in 1955—these three movements came together. *Eros and Civilization* is invariably described as a synthesis of Marx and Freud, and it is predominantly an attempt at strengthening the Marxist concept of freedom from alienation by basing it on Freudian psychoanalytic theory. It should not be overlooked, however, that Marcuse studied with and wrote his doctoral thesis on Hegel under existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger. In “Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism,” the first article he published, Marcuse argued—using Heideggerian terminology—that Heidegger's concept of “authentic being” could be achieved only through Marxist revolution. In *Eros and Civilization* there is a discussion of Nietzsche, who is perceived as anticipating aspects of Marcuse's thought.

The publication of *Eros and Civilization* came at the dawn of a historical period in which significant segments of the population of the Western world, for a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, and medical reasons, were ready to abandon much of

their Judeo-Christian heritage and shift to a system of values based largely on the notion of psychological freedom as the ultimate value.

Nietzsche, in "The Gay Science," published in 1882, described the "Madman" who runs out to the marketplace and announces to all that "God is dead." "Must not we ourselves become Gods?" he asks, and then eventually concludes, "I come too early. . . . This tremendous event . . . has not yet reached the ears of man."² Nietzsche was capturing the fact that the awareness of the cultural and moral revolution necessitated by the breakdown of the Judeo-Christian tradition had not yet reached beyond a small group of intellectuals and artists. The masses continued to live by the traditional restrictive ethic. The accuracy of Nietzsche's perceptions can, among other sources, be verified by novelistic portrayals of nineteenth-century European society. For example, in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Consul Buddenbrooks writes to his daughter who does not want to marry the man her father has chosen for her:

My child, we are not born for that which . . . we reckon to be our own small personal happiness. . . . We are not free, separate, and independent entities, but like links in a chain. . . . you would not be . . . a worthy member of our own family, if you really have it in your heart, alone, wilfully, and light-heartedly to choose your own unregulated path.³

By the 1960s the pendulum had swung fully. Personal happiness and the right to choose one's own unregulated path had become basic moral values for large segments of the population. About 80 years after Nietzsche's Madman announced the news of God's death, it was duly reported on the cover of one of our largest national magazines. His question, "Must not we ourselves become Gods?" was answered by a large contingent of intellectuals from a variety of fields. Norman O. Brown in

² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³ Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 114.

literature, John Holt in education, Herbert Marcuse in philosophy, H. D. Laing and Friedrich Perls in psychology, to name a few, outlined a new set of values and a new way of life based on the concept of psychological freedom.

And while much of the population still professed some belief in God, their values and lives frequently came to be more affected by the cultural climate created by these writers than by church teachings. In fact, church teachings were in many cases changed to accommodate the new concern with psychological freedom.

The impassioned concern with authenticity and spontaneity which generations of college students had come in contact with in existentialist philosophical works, novels, plays, and poems, the sexual repression they had read about in Freud and other psychologists, had now become in the hands of these intellectuals vibrant issues to be dealt with in one's own life. And so in one of those historical periods in which intellectual activity and cultural practice become intimately linked, these writers, although they were often in ill repute among their academic colleagues, came to have enormous influence both on the population at large and in particular on a young generation of intellectuals. This influence, I shall argue shortly in the case of Marcuse, has had long-range effects within the academic world.

Several factors contributed to rendering Marcuse's work particularly influential. Most importantly, unlike most of the other writers concerned with psychological freedom, for Marcuse psychological freedom was not a personal, private goal but rather *the* goal of drastic social change. True liberation, he argued, could be achieved only by socialist revolution.

This combination was particularly attractive at a time when there was widespread disappointment with what appeared to many to be the unfulfilled promises of Western democracies. This was particularly true in the United States, where John Stuart Mill's liberal optimism, his belief that "all the grand sources . . . of human suffering are in a great degree, many of

them almost entirely conquerable by human care and effort,"⁴ had become something of a national credo. There was an increasing awareness that, while the evils of poverty, disease, and lack of education had for large segments of the population been eradicated or greatly alleviated, the happiness which was to follow had not been realized. Where poverty and illness were absent, many people's lives seemed to be anxiously dominated by an obsession with material goods and success. It became clear in a new and tangible way that one could enjoy economic, social, and political freedom and still not be genuinely free or happy if one's life was dominated by external values and attitudes which operated against one's real self-fulfillment.

Marcuse addressed himself to precisely this issue in *One Dimensional Man*. He argued that, while capitalist society was able to satisfy the material needs of most of the population, at the same time it held that population prisoner psychologically by enslaving it to false consumerist needs. And while he was pessimistic about the possibility of radical social change, he did hold out the promise that, if somehow a truly socialist society could be brought into existence, then human beings could achieve freedom and happiness. His descriptions of the supposed irrationalities of the present system were lent weight by the Vietnam War, the rash of assassinations in the United States and an increased awareness of the injustices suffered by racial minorities.

From within a Marxist context, Marcuse's writings were particularly important in that he affirmed the possibility of a humanistic Marxism against the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, and furnished a theory as to why the working class was no longer revolutionary.

It might be argued that, while Marcuse's work was a major influence on the general intellectual and cultural climate of the '60s and early '70s, in terms of the American philosophical

⁴ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), p. 15.

establishment his influence was nil. And certainly the fact that his name does not appear in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published in 1966 lends credence to the view that his existence was not even noticed by the mainstream of American philosophy. And yet I think it would be a mistake to say that Marcuse had no influence on American philosophy. If one considers that before the '60s there were virtually no philosophical journals addressing themselves to concrete social issues (there now exists an abundance of them), if one considers that highly respected philosophers in the analytic tradition today write on issues such as sexual perversions, love, homosexual rights, rights of the retarded, and a variety of other topics which would have been unthinkable twenty years ago, one cannot help but feel that the intellectual climate which Marcuse helped to create has had a significant influence on the kinds of issues that American philosophers now find it acceptable to deal with. One might also argue that the increasingly vociferous pluralist movement in philosophy, including the increased number of Marxist philosophers (and leftist philosophical publications), are an even more direct testimony to the Marcusean influence. For many of the pluralist professors of today were the undergraduate and graduate students of the '60s.

To better understand Marcuse's role in the development of the concept of psychological freedom, one must unravel the two major strands which he synthesized—the Marxist and the Freudian. In so doing, some of the shortcomings of his synthesis will become apparent. More generally the failure of Marcuse's efforts at formulating a viable concept of psychological freedom will point to some of the difficulties inherent in any attempt to define psychological freedom with any specificity, or to enforce it as certain forms of civil, political, and economic freedom have been enforced.

First the Marxist strand: In the *1844 Manuscripts* as well as in some passages of *Kapital* and the *Grundrisse*, Marx had exhibited a deep concern with human alienation. His indict-

ment of capitalism included the fact that “work is external to the worker, that he does not fulfill himself in his work . . . does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased.”⁵ In *Kapital* he argued that “beyond it [labor] begins the development of human potentiality for its own sake, the true realm of freedom.”⁶

It was not until the 1930s with the Soviet publication of the *1844 Manuscripts* (the *Grundrisse* was not published until 1941) that Marxist thinkers developed a serious interest in this aspect of Marx’s thought. Nowhere was this more true than among the members of the Frankfurt School, who were committed to the development of an undogmatic and humanistic Marxism. Among its members most concerned with reemphasizing Marx’s concern with alienation were Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse.

For Marcuse the concept of the “development of human potentiality for its own sake” became *the* ultimate socialist value. He equated it with happiness and freedom—“happiness, as the fulfillment of all the potentialities of the individual presupposes freedom, at root it is freedom.”⁷ His task became to show how capitalist society was preventing this development. Marcuse as a Marxist accepted as a given that only in a classless socialist society could people realize this potential. In such a rationally organized society the realization of this potential would become the determinant of the society, thus reversing Marx’s economic determinism.

That the “development of human potentiality for its own sake” became so crucial to Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School is not surprising. The working class in the Western world was not exhibiting the revolutionary spirit which Marx had forecast. With improved economic and social

⁵ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in T. B. Bottomore, ed., *Karl Marx, Early Writings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), pp. 124–125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Negations* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), p. 180.

conditions, workers seemed by and large content with their lot or certainly not discontent enough to engage in any revolutionary activities. If the justification for a socialist revolution was largely economic (as it had become for Soviet dialectical materialism and Communist trade unions in the West) then it became difficult to justify the need for such a revolution. If, however, it could be shown that while workers were enjoying a great degree of economic and political freedom they were still alienated from their true nature, and if freedom from alienation was the true goal of socialist revolution, then the need for a socialist society was justified.

Building on the writings of Georg Lukacs, Marcuse and other Frankfurt School members developed a theory of domination in advanced capitalist society. Lukacs had rejected a Marxism deterministically tied to the economic situation of the working class and developed the theory of reification to explain the lack of revolutionary class consciousness among the working class. While the concept of reification perceived the false consciousness of the working class which kept them from developing class consciousness as part of a conscious system of fictions intended to mystify the reality of class exploitation, the Frankfurt School went a step further. Their theory of domination postulated that, by accepting and participating in the capitalist consumption process, by allowing themselves to become enslaved to false consumerist needs, the working class had unwittingly inflicted alienation on itself.

The theory of domination led to the need for a theory of human nature. For if the working class was *willingly* accepting consumerism as a way of life, then on what grounds could one argue that it was alienated? Alienated from what? Marx had not provided a theory of human nature that could serve as an adequate criterion of what is and what is not alienating, or that could enable one to distinguish between true and false needs. While his writings on alienation were perhaps sufficient for his purposes given the abhorrent working and living conditions of the working class at the time he was writing, they were not

adequate at a time when workers enjoyed highly improved working and living conditions, a considerable amount of leisure, money to enjoy that leisure, and moreover frequently claimed to be satisfied.

Marcuse had attempted to formulate a distinction between true and false needs, particularly in his essay "On Hedonism." However, the criteria for the distinction were never clearly enunciated. While true needs were described as being "of such a sort that their gratification can fulfill the subjective and objective potentialities of individuals,"⁸ the question of how one establishes what these potentialities are remained largely unanswered. One's true potentialities could be known through the use of reason (in the German idealist tradition of *Vernunft*), Marcuse stated. But as Martin Jay points out, "what was meant by reason . . . critical theory never attempted to define explicitly."⁹

And so Marcuse, in order to address himself to the question of the content of this human potentiality, the development of which was the goal of socialism, and to show why the consumerist desires of the working class could be dismissed as false needs, borrowed from Freud. Doing so enabled him to show how highly repressive of biological needs capitalist society is.

Freud had argued that "the goal towards which the pleasure principle impels us—of becoming happy—is not attainable"¹⁰ because "civilization is built up on renunciation of instinctual gratification."¹¹ Marcuse, using critical theory—that is, showing how conditions which are taken to be natural or necessary are in fact the creation of a particular socioeconomic structure—argued that happiness at this historical juncture *is* attainable. The repression of the instincts which Freud thought to be a condition of civilization was no longer a neces-

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁹ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 63.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Hogarth, 1955), p. 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

sity. Advances in technology had made it possible to produce all necessary goods and commodities in a fraction of the time it used to take. It was no longer necessary for human beings to repress their natural desires in order to devote most of their time to providing for the necessities of life. The continued surplus repression in capitalist society was due to the fact that the economic monopolies which dominate advanced capitalist society—to increase their gains and maintain their position—had created through advertisement and the mass media a series of false consumerist needs, the satisfaction of which required continued toil and repression.

Readers of *Eros and Civilization* might well find themselves wondering why, in order to argue his point about the surplus repression of capitalist society, Marcuse chose to identify himself with the most controversial part of Freud. For it is the Freud of the death instinct, the desire to return to inanimate matter, the Freud of the primal horde, of the killing of the primal father, that Marcuse takes as the basis of his argument. Freud himself had admitted in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that “what follows now is speculation, speculation often far-fetched.”¹² Nor was Marcuse unaware of the highly speculative nature of the material he was using. In particular he states in the course of discussing Freud’s theory of the killing of the primal father that

if Freud’s hypothesis is not corroborated by any anthropological evidence, it would have to be discarded altogether except for the fact that it telescopes, in a sequence of catastrophic events, the historic dialectic of domination and thereby elucidates aspects of civilization hitherto unexplained. We use Freud’s anthropological speculation only in this sense: for its *symbolic* value.¹³

This acknowledgment points the way to understanding Marcuse’s choice of the most speculative part of Freud. Since

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in John Rickman, ed., *A General Selection From the Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), p. 150.

¹³ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), p. 60.

Marcuse, as a Marxist, was looking for an indictment of late-capitalist society as scathing as Marx's indictment of the economic deprivation of early capitalism, he was most attracted to that part of Freud which depicts with the greatest intensity the conflict between basic untamed biological drives and a civilization which demands the repression of these drives at the cost of human happiness. As Martin Jay points out, "not only Freud's thought, but its most extreme and outrageous aspects were most useful."¹⁴ Hence instead of, as one might expect of a Marxist thinker, looking to the revisionist cultural psychologists such as Fromm, Horney, and Sullivan for an interpretation of Freud which includes a socioeconomic perspective on his writings, Marcuse devotes the entire last chapter of *Eros and Civilization* to a vehement attack on them, especially Fromm, his former colleague at the Frankfurt Institute. Marcuse argued that, by playing down the importance of the Oedipus complex and other biological drives and emphasizing ego psychology, the culturalists had mitigated the conflict between the individual and society:

Freud had established a substantive link between human freedom and happiness on the one hand and sexuality on the other: the latter provided the primary source for the former and at the same time the ground for their necessary restriction in civilization. The revisionist solution of the conflict through spiritualization of freedom and happiness demanded the weakening of this link.¹⁵

And: "The revisionist mutilation of the instinct theory leads to the traditional devaluation of the sphere of material [i.e., sexual] needs in favor of spiritual needs."¹⁶

The revisionists are the social democrats of psychology—by downplaying the depth of the conflict between biological urges and the repressions necessitated by capitalist society, they pave

¹⁴ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. 105.

¹⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 268.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

the way for adjustment to a society which for Marcuse remains irredeemably alienating.

Understanding Marcuse

One might easily get the impression from reading Marcuse's scathing indictment of the revisionists' downplaying of the sexual drives that in the socialist society he advocates unrepressed sexuality will be the key element in "the development of human potentiality." Other passages in *Eros and Civilization* reinforce this impression. For example, Marcuse tells us that in capitalist society, in the interest of domination,

the gratification of the partial instincts and of non-procreative genitality are, according to the degree of their independence, tabooed as perversions, sublimated, or transformed into subsidiaries of procreative sexuality. Moreover the latter is in most civilizations channeled into monogamic institutions. This organization results in a quantitative and qualitative restriction of sexuality.¹⁷

By contrast, in a liberated socialist society,

the body would be resexualized. The regression involved in this spread of the libido would first manifest itself in a reactivation of all erotogenic zones and consequently, in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and in a decline of genital supremacy. The body in its entirety would become an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed—an instrument of pleasure. This change in the value and scope of libidinal relations would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family.¹⁸

Such passages and other similar ones leave one with the impression that in Marcuse's liberated society human beings would be forever indulging in oral, anal, homosexual, group,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

incestuous, and perhaps as yet unimaginable sexual activities. Not to mention body massages and other forms of sensuality. All of this in what would seem to be a rather anarchistic context suggested by passages such as the following in which Marcuse tells us that "in a truly free civilization all laws are self-given by the individuals."¹⁹

It is this kind of interpretation that led Marcuse to be identified with Perls, Laing, Brown, and others who were genuinely committed to an extreme form of sexual liberation. It also led to angry accusations that Marcuse's theories are "directed against civilization" and lead to "scorn for all social bonds and family authority." And since this level of indulgence in sensual activity is for most of us quite difficult to imagine, it also led some to ask very skeptically, "What will we actually *do* in this sexually liberated state?"

Marcuse was disturbed by this kind of interpretation and eager to disassociate himself from the human potential movement or any segment of the psychoanalytic left which focused on what he considered to be a narcissistic sexuality. "I neither advocated the abolition of the family nor the lifting of the incest taboos,"²⁰ he asserted in a 1978 interview, and "I'm not stupid enough to assume that . . . in a free society no administration whatsoever would be necessary."²¹ When confronted with the above-quoted passage in which he writes of "the disintegration of . . . the monogamic and patriarchal family," he attempted unconvincingly to disassociate himself from that statement by claiming, "That is not advocacy; that is an interpretation."²²

How is one to understand such a disavowal of what clearly does emerge as advocacy in the book? Along the same lines, how is one to understand an interpretation of Marcuse such as Marxist Ben Agger's that:

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²⁰ Myriam Miedzian Malinovich, "Herbert Marcuse in 1978: An Interview," *Social Research* 48 (Summer 1981): 370.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 370.

By polymorphous perversity Marcuse simply means that liberated human beings would be able to touch their loved ones, and to be touched without shame. He does not, on this basis, endorse "free love" or counsel against monogamy but only attacks narrow genital sexuality under capitalism for being libidinally and emotionally unfulfilling. By "re-erotization" Marcuse refers to the various ways in which people would infuse their various activities and relationships with tenderness and caring.²³

This extraordinarily tame interpretation of Marcuse's hyperbolic indictments of sexual repression under capitalism is supported by those passages in *Eros and Civilization* in which Marcuse assures us that the sexual liberation he advocates would lead not to an explosion of sexuality but to a "libidinizing of all activities." For example, in the paragraph following the above-quoted one in which he speaks of "the resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality," he assures the reader that

the process just outlined involves not simply a release but a transformation of libido; from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy to erotization of the entire personality. It is a spread rather than an explosion of libido—a spread over private and societal relations which bridges the gap maintained between them by a repressive reality principle.²⁴

After all this talk of capitalist repression and revisionist denial of polymorphous perverse sexuality, are we to believe that all that Marcuse *really* means by sexual liberation is that people would be free to enjoy their work and love one another?

One can easily be left baffled by this juxtaposition, as is Leszek Kolakowski, who comments:

As to Marcuse's qualifications of the notion of eroticism, they are too vague to convey any tangible meaning. What could the eroticization of the whole man signify except his complete absorption in sensual pleasures?²⁵

²³ Ben Agger, *Western Marxism: An Introduction* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Goodyear, 1979), p. 238.

²⁴ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, pp. 201–202.

²⁵ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 3: 408.

It is only if one realizes that there exists a fundamental discrepancy in Marcuse's work between Marcuse the Hegelian Marxist and Marcuse the Freudian that one can begin to understand what he is doing here. For the Marcuse who identifies himself with Freud, the repression of human sexuality is at the core of his indictment of capitalist society, and the enjoyment of free sexuality is inextricably linked to happiness. For Marcuse the Hegelian Marxist, freedom and happiness have little if anything to do with unfettered sexuality and have all to do with the fulfillment of true rather than false needs (genuine fulfillment in work and love would be considered true needs). Hegelian Marxist Marcuse tells us that "the concept [happiness] denotes a more than private, more than subjective condition; happiness is not in the mere feeling of satisfaction. Happiness involves knowledge; it is the prerogative of the animal rationale."²⁶ For Hegelian Marxist Marcuse, every human need including the sexual cannot be taken at face value but must be critically assessed as a true or false need. This suggests not rampant sensuality but an integration of reason and sensuality, or rather sensuality as a value but under the guidance of reason's judgments. This interpretation is further corroborated in passages where Marcuse speaks of the reconciliation "in the reality of freedom [of] the 'lower' and the 'higher' faculties of man, sensuousness and intellect, pleasure and reason."²⁷ These passages lead to an entirely different vision of a free society from that which emerges from his discussion of the repression of sexuality under capitalist domination.

The "real" Marcuse, I believe, is the Hegelian Marxist one. The use which Marcuse makes of Freud is very much an ad hoc one. By using Freudian sexual images of the repression of polymorphous perverse sexuality, by using the murderous Oedipal conflict between the father and sons of the primal horde as symbolic of the social domination of the instincts,

²⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, pp. 103–104.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 172–173.

Marcuse was able to draw an unusually intense and dramatic picture of the degree of repression inflicted by advanced capitalist society, repression which he then claimed was no longer necessary under present technological conditions. By accepting the death instinct theory he could even argue that the death instinct itself was socially conditioned and perpetuated by capitalist society. In a liberated socialist society it could be abolished or at least qualitatively diminished—"death would cease to be an instinctual goal" because "if the instincts pursued and attained their fulfillment in a non-repressive order, the regressive compulsion would lose much of its biological rationale."²⁸

In brief, using Freud furnished Marcuse with a ready-made psychological theory which enabled him to avoid the difficulties of having to formulate a viable distinction between true and false needs on the basis of critical reason. It also permitted him to draw a much more dramatic picture of capitalist repression than that which would have emerged had he relied on the Hegelian Marxist distinction between true and false needs.

With respect to this latter point, it should be pointed out that, if Agger's and Marcuse's own interpretation of *Eros and Civilization* are correct, then in fact Marcuse's view of human needs is not so far removed from that of the cultural revisionists whom he so vehemently attacked for their playing down of biological needs. The culturalists, and in particular Erich Fromm whom Marcuse attacks at the greatest length, are also concerned with people infusing "their various activities and relationships with tenderness and caring"; they also favor people being able to touch their loved ones without shame! And Fromm would certainly agree with Marcuse when he argues that people's needs cannot be taken at face value but must be critically assessed to determine if they might be the outgrowth of irrational social pressures.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

Marcuse uses Freudian theory as a tool with which to show the unnecessary repression of the instincts which capitalism inflicts upon us. Once he has to his satisfaction established the notion of surplus repression, he is then free to drop the tool and go back to what he is really committed to—the distinction between true and false needs, a distinction which would ill serve the purpose of establishing the necessity of socialist revolution. The very few concrete descriptions that Marcuse gives of a free society (members of the Frankfurt School held that it was not possible for unliberated human beings to describe what a free society would be like) are tame indeed, and this leads William Leiss to make a point very similar to the one I have just made:

What is the *content* of the “new reality principle”? Sifting Marcuse’s writings produces few leads, and the ones that do emerge are rather prosaic. We are told that “socially necessary labor would be diverted to the construction of an aesthetic rather than repressive environment, to parks and gardens rather than highways and parking lots, to the creation of areas of withdrawal rather than massive fun and relaxation . . .” and that we shall be “free to think about what we are going to do.” Do we really have to purge utterly the existing order through fire and blood—for this?²⁹

A Negative Contribution

It becomes clear that Marcuse’s distinction between true and false needs and his subsequent portrayal however limited of a free society have little if anything to do with the Freudian theory of human nature that he has based his argument on in *Eros and Civilization*. The distinction seems rather to be based largely on his own elitist notions of what life ought to be like and his projection of these notions draped in Freudian terminology to humanity at large. Take for instance the following passage:

²⁹ William Leiss, “Marcuse’s Utopianism and the Passing of Critical Theory,” paper presented at the 1980 Meetings of the American Political Science Association, p. 14.

Certainly there can be "pleasure" in alienated labor too. The typist who hands in a perfect transcript, the tailor who delivers a perfectly fitting suit, the beauty-parlor attendant who fixes the perfect hairdo, the laborer who fulfills his quota—all may feel pleasure in a "job well done." However, either this pleasure is extraneous (anticipation of reward), or it is the satisfaction (itself a token of repression) of being well occupied, in the right place, of contributing one's part to the functioning of the apparatus. In either case, such pleasure has nothing to do with primary instinctual gratification. To link performances on assembly lines, in offices and shops with instinctual needs is to glorify dehumanization as pleasure.³⁰

One strongly suspects that behind Marcuse's accusation that the pleasure of the tailor or the beauty-parlor attendant "has nothing to do with primary instinctual gratification" lies his inability to appreciate that for some people doing the work of a tailor or a beautician is genuinely and intrinsically enjoyable—he does not even mention this possibility. Just as for many people, perhaps a majority, having areas of "massive fun and relaxation" would be more enjoyable than having "areas of withdrawal." And anyway what does having "areas of withdrawal" have to do with "primary instinctual gratification"? "Critical reason" can easily turn into little more than a statement of personal preferences and prejudices.

In answer to the question: "What about the view that your model [of the psychologically free person] is very much the artist or the very creative person, and that most people are far more mediocre than you give them credit for?" Marcuse states: "If they are mediocre this does not exclude that this mediocrity may be remedied. Otherwise you couldn't have a free society. People will have to change, and I think they are in the process of changing."³¹

It sounds very much as if Marcuse is saying that people will have to become psychologically free whether they like it or not. If they *think* they prefer massive fun to areas of with-

³⁰ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, pp. 220–221.

³¹ Malinovich, "Herbert Marcuse in 1978: An Interview," p. 368.

drawal, something will have to be done to make them change their taste. In light of Marcuse's position in *Repressive Tolerance* that "the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly" is justified with respect to certain groups, the reader might wonder how far he would be willing to go in order to develop this "new [socialist] sensibility," "a sensibility which would register, as biological reactions, the difference between the ugly and the beautiful, between calm and noise . . . joy and fun. . . ." ³²

In his essay on "Two Concepts of Liberty," Isaiah Berlin points out the dangers involved when a person or group claiming to know what constitutes "positive freedom" (of which psychological freedom would be a subgroup) feels free to coerce others to live in accordance with

their "real" self, of which the poor empirical self . . . may know nothing or little. . . . Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their "real" selves. . . . ³³

Kolakowski reads Marcuse as a prime example of this danger. He writes:

The freedom he advocates is non-freedom. . . . If Marcuse and his followers have the sole right to decide what people must choose and what they must say, then "freedom" has simply taken on the contrary of its normal sense. In these terms a "free" society is one that deprives people of freedom to choose either objects or ideas except at the behest of those who know better. ³⁴

Contrary to the impression one tends to get from his writings alone, Marcuse was very much aware of and concerned with the dangers that Berlin and Kolakowski point out. Marcuse felt uncomfortable with some of his own views in *Repressive Tolerance*. This was clear in the previously mentioned

³² Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), pp. 90–91.

³³ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in R. E. Dewey and J. A. Gould, eds., *Freedom: Its History, Nature, and Varieties* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 92.

³⁴ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 3: 419.

interview, where he seemed to waiver between saying that intolerance should be exercised only in extreme cases of "movements like the neo-Nazi movement" and the much stronger position expressed in the essay. It was also apparent in his behavior in the 1960s when he served as a mitigating force upon leftist students who became involved in disruptions of university lectures, disruptions which they believed to be justified by the views expressed in *Repressive Tolerance*. As a vociferous critic of the Soviet Union he was committed to the view that "in the struggle for socialism the end has to be present in the means. . . ."³⁵ Clearly there was a conflict between the end goal of a socialist society based on the highest degree of freedom imaginable and a transition period during which people's ideas and tastes would have to be severely censored in order for them to become free human beings realizing their true potentialities. This appears to have been a conflict which Marcuse never resolved to his own satisfaction.

Because of his tendency to hyperbole and oversimplification of complex issues, this conflict between a commitment to psychological freedom and the necessity of some kind of dictatorship of an elite to make sure that a psychologically liberated socialist society will come about is particularly pronounced in his work. These difficulties in Marcuse may however point to a problem inherent in any concept of psychological freedom which goes beyond the purely personal. For how can one ever justify *enforcing* psychological freedom? In the name of civil, political, and economic freedom, certain forms of coercion are widely accepted—mandatory education, taxation, jury duty are a few examples. But what kinds of coercion would be acceptable in the name of psychological freedom?

One of the few possibilities which comes to mind, in contemporary society, is some attempt at regulating aspects of the mass media, in particular those which affect the psychological development of young children. There has been much concern of late about the effect that the constant portrayal of

³⁵ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 3: 419.

violence has on children's minds. More generally, there is concern about the passivity created by the fact that American children spend a large part of their leisure time watching television and are subjected to a conditioning based almost entirely on commercial interests. These are dangers which Marcuse was one of the first to point out—long before they became documented by studies. For Marcuse, only by abolishing capitalism could the conditioning of the human mind in the interest of profit-making (i.e., domination) be abolished and human beings become psychologically free. For those of us who are as concerned about possible socialist conditioning as we are about capitalist conditioning, the solution is far less clear. In the case of the media, censorship of any kind, in any society, represents some threat to freedom of speech, so that benefits and dangers must be examined with the utmost care before any regulations are instituted. And how does one regulate the sheer number of hours spent watching television?

If even this form of regulation geared only at restraining the media from an inordinate power of psychological conditioning is problematic, how much more problematic would be any positive attempt to mold people to become psychologically free, to realize their potentialities.

It seems that the concept of psychological freedom may be even more fraught with difficulties than the concepts of civil, political, and economic freedom. For even where there is fundamental agreement on the value of realizing one's potential, of living an authentic life, rather than one which is programmed by society, there is still enormous disagreement as to what this potentiality actually consists of, and what kind of familial and social environment would be most conducive to its development. Ultimately such questions can be resolved only by a theory of human nature. Isaiah Berlin points out that "conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man. Enough manipulation with the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes."³⁶ Given the disagreements between different schools of psychology on this question, not

to mention sociobiological theories, what is one to base one's concept of psychological freedom on? Would the views of any particular school of thought carry enough force, would there ever be enough agreement to justify enforcing a particular set of conclusions on people, in the name of the realization of their own true selves?

How fraught with danger any such attempt would be becomes apparent if one considers that in the last 15 odd years segments of our population have allowed their lives to be deeply influenced by the writings of Friedrich Perls and other leftist psychoanalysts and by intellectuals who identified psychological freedom with complete spontaneity and absence of commitments. The influence of this adolescent conception of what constitutes psychological freedom was a major factor in the formation of what has been called the "me generation." Its shortcomings have been analyzed by numerous social critics, among them historian Christopher Lasch in the *Culture of Narcissism* and psychoanalyst Herbert Hendin in *The Age of Sensation*. They and others have pointed out how highly inadequate is this view of psychological freedom which emphasizes the need for spontaneity while ignoring needs for security, commitment, stability.

Given the human tendency to be influenced by institutions and opinions, one is led to ponder the possibility that any theory of liberation whose content goes much beyond the general notion of authenticity or freedom from alienation will end up becoming a new form of oppression insofar as it becomes the credo of any influential group. The existentialist writers were well aware of the human tendency to conform, which is so antagonistic to psychological freedom. Sartre attributed it to our need to escape the anxiety we experience when we realize that we really are free. Whatever the explanation, the tendency is as strong in those who in the name of psychological freedom adopt a new type of conformism to a standard of spontaneity as in those who in the name of duty conform to age-old traditions.

³⁶ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," p. 93.

To believe with Marcuse that this tendency could be eradicated or that an adequate concept of psychological freedom could be developed in a socialist state demands an act of faith. The history of the concept of psychological freedom in the last 20 years as well as Marcuse's own handling of the topic have made such an act even more difficult for many of us than it would have been before.

And so one is led to the conclusion that Marcuse's contribution to the literature on psychological freedom is to a large extent negative—it lies mainly in his critique of certain forms of psychological oppression in capitalist society. For while *Eros and Civilization* is no doubt destined to retain a place among the classics in utopian literature, and while it remains an original attempt at bringing together the different strands contributing to the concept of psychological freedom, it is too flawed to represent a significant contribution to the elucidation of the concept. Under any circumstances, the most speculative writings of Freud would have ill served as the basis for a theory of psychological freedom. In Marcuse's case these limitations are augmented by his own speculative interpretations of Freud. Besides which, Marcuse's underlying commitment to a Hegelian Marxist conception of true and false needs, which bears little if any relation to a Freudian theory of the instincts, leaves him without even a consistent view of human nature upon which to base a theory of psychological freedom.

On the other hand, at a time when there was a general intellectual failure to critically examine society Marcuse used the concept of a free human being as a criterion by which to judge its inadequacies. However confused this concept was, and however exaggerated his criticisms, he was able to pinpoint early on many of the areas in which advanced capitalist society is most detrimental to the free development of human beings. In this negative sense he has made a lasting contribution to the development of the concept of psychological freedom.