MARUCUSE AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESSION

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As an associate of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research during the 1930s, Herbert Marcuse produced a range of papers that would have significant impact on the future agenda of critical theory. He made innovative contributions, among other things, to the developing relationship between Frankfurt School theory and Hegelian and Weberian notions of social development, to the idea of culture as a limitation on human possibility, and to articulating the sharp differences between liberalism and emancipatory theory. Unlike a number of his peers, notably, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Theodor W. Adorno, he gave little attention to possible affinities between critical theory and psychoanalysis. In retrospect, this disinterest is remarkable given his cooption of that branch of psychology, from the 1950s onward, on a scale that is unparalleled among Frankfurt School philosophers before or since.

Marcuse attempted, in effect, to reset the very foundations of critical theory by granting shared explanatory authority to certain psychoanalytic concepts in the interpretation of experience within contemporary capitalist societies. This merger involves a radical assumption. Marcuse believed that Freudian theory can be coherently modified to enable it to speak of the world that is of interest to critical theory. Some of the topics of critical theory and psychoanalysis may appear suggestively close on a number of issues – alienated and neurotic experience, for example, might be understood as accounts of human beings whose circumstances prevent them from being at home with themselves and in the world – but they lie far apart with regard to the causal explanation of the conditions they describe. An obvious reason for this is that Freud does not see his enterprise as a political one. For him, capitalism represents no special evil. He rejects the optimistic notion that civilization exists in order to enable spontaneous and expressive freedom. Critical theory, by contrast, takes freedom of that variety as an ideal that emancipatory social theory must continue to promote. Freud recognizes that agreeable ways of living could be found wherever civilization has succeeded, but these ways are subordinate to the behavioral constraints required for the very existence of civilization itself. Freud, then, might seem to be of little use to critical theory if he believes that civilization essentially involves constraint, that coercive inner experience that stands in the way of genuine emancipation. Marcuse maintains, however, that Freud’s basic story of how civilization emerges can be translated from science into the more effective register of history. This translation hinges on some of Freud’s own underdeveloped, though acknowledged, historicist theses. The product of Marcuse’s reconstruction of Freud’s official theory amounts, indeed, to a new line of psychoanalytic theorizing, one that will require justifications that cannot be settled by referral to Freudian authority.
The discussion of Marcuse that follows is centered on his book *Eros and Civilization* (published originally in 1955). In that text, Marcuse reinterprets a number of Freudian ideas. These include the ideas of the death and life instincts, the Oedipus complex, and sublimation. An analysis of Marcuse's creative appropriation of any one of these ideas could allow us to appreciate the distinctive new spaces that Marcuse opens up for critical theory. This chapter, however, will focus on the complex variety of ways in which Marcuse reinvents the idea of repression. That idea, in fact, occupies the central place in Marcuse's theory since he finds in it a compelling explanation of the forms of experience and individual formation that are specific to the contemporary world. Particular attention will be given to Marcuse's original ideas of "surplus repression" and scarcity as domination, together with several attendant claims that support those ideas. As we shall see, Marcuse offers several lines of thought about repression and emancipation that pull his key theses in different directions. In some places, Marcuse accepts Freud's claims about the necessity of repression, while in others he offers reasons for the elimination of all repression. These differing lines open up distinctive issues and problems. Marcuse's critical appropriation of Freud, it should be noted, has proved to be hugely controversial on a wide range of grounds. Critics, as the editors of his *Collected Papers* explain, have accused Marcuse of generating "pseudo-concepts" by means of defective and simplistic interpretations of Freud (Kellner, Pierce and Lewis 2011: 51). This chapter will offer no view on whether Marcuse is entitled to read Freud as he does. Rather criticism will be concerned with the coherence of that reading within the terms of the emancipatory social theory it aims to be.

**The Turn to Psychoanalysis**

Marcuse's commitment to psychoanalysis is of a quite different order to what we find elsewhere in Frankfurt School critical theory. The conventional, and indeed continuing, motivation for critical theory's consideration of psychoanalytic material is to locate an apparently neutral – i.e. non-ideologically driven – theory of individual development or personality that can provide evidence for the fundamental theses of critical theory itself. Notions like commodification or reification capture social relations that have gone awry in some sense: they describe brutal yet apparently normal ways of relating to others, the world, and oneself. The intricate accounts of individual development offered by Freudian theory might – the conventional line goes – provide a way into an explanation of the entrenchment of these inadequate forms of relating. When critical theory approaches psychoanalysis with that sort of interest, it is, in effect, intellectually exploitative: it seeks corroboration of its antecedently developed concepts, and its involvement with psychoanalysis is limited strictly to what is supportive of those concepts. Marcuse's adoption of psychoanalytic material for social theoretical purposes, however, goes further than that. Psychoanalytic material is not alone to be used, it is also developed. Likewise, critical theoretical concepts are not merely illustrated by psychoanalytic terminology, but broadened in response to psychoanalytic insights. Marcuse, in effect, wants to employ psychoanalytic psychology and critical theoretical notions as two complementary and mutually implicating perspectives on the very same phenomena. Two ostensibly radical accounts of social agency combine, as equal partners, to try to explain with unprecedented reach the hidden forces that generate the sense of reality that frames human experience. The social phenomena that Marcuse considers in *Eros and Civilization* are revealed uniquely through this synthetic theory.

In the introduction to *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse explains the need for a new theoretical approach to the social world:
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This essay employs psychological categories because they have become political categories. The traditional borderlines between psychology on the one side and political and social philosophy on the other have been made obsolete by the condition of man in the present era: formerly autonomous and identifiable psychical processes are being absorbed by the function of the individual in the state – by his public existence.

(EC xi)

The analysis of contemporary human experience offered in Eros and Civilization works to make good on the claim that political and psychological life are inseparable. It is argued that individual formation is no longer intelligible without reference to the social-political context of that formation. Marcuse maintains, we can see, (1) that there was once an “autonomous” psychical space. This view implies that the political dimension of life could be, what we might call, external or, indeed, perhaps nonexistent. By the political realm Marcuse intends those conditions put in place by human beings to facilitate interpersonal freedom and the effective production and consumption of goods necessary for the preservation of life. When that realm is external it will lie under the control of human beings. It can be manipulated by them without it exerting any reciprocal influence on those who manipulate it. This realm, however, has now become, through the development of a capitalist system which encroaches on our lives, part of the inner world. The relationship of control is reversed. Once external institutions, having lost any reference to human agency, have themselves become autonomous and now govern our experiences and expectations. This brings us to Marcuse’s basic proposition (2) that there are uniquely totalizing conditions in place in contemporary life, i.e. that all experience is in some respect an expression of the social system. There is a weaker version of this claim which holds that actions which are assumed to belong to individuals – their personal preferences or their conceptions of a good life – operate within the limits of what the allegedly self-maintaining social system can tolerate. Marcuse takes the stronger view of this process and proposes that society shapes individuals to the degree that their choices are a function of the system. They are “a standardized reaction pattern” (EC 252). It is this claim – the totalization thesis – that underpins Marcuse’s synthesis of the psychological and political spaces. As we shall see, Marcuse’s considerations of what emancipation would mean oscillate between these two options. That is, Marcuse tries to identify freedom both with the space of the ordinarily civilized (i.e. the former reality) and the absence of all repression since repression is a special quality of the totalized world (i.e. the present reality).

In a paper from the time of Eros and Civilization, “Freedom and Freud’s Theory of Instincts” (originally delivered in 1956), Marcuse further addresses the justification for his new theoretical approach. It is one thing to be struck by the similarities between the concerns of two quite different theories that belong to two separate fields of enquiry. The methodological question of how the two can be combined needs, though, to be answered. Marcuse acknowledges that he must show that Freudian categories, which are generally thought to be in some sense biological ones, can be appropriately employed as categories of the “social and historical” world (Marcuse 1970: 1). More fundamentally, the claim that “psychology today is an essential part of political science” (ibid.: 1) requires a defense. The justification Marcuse promises is not, in fact, delivered in a specific argument or set of theses. Rather, it turns out to be performatively demonstrated through the fluid and mutually corroborating employment of concepts from both social theory and psychoanalysis. To take one example, Marcuse describes a state of affairs in which “the individual’s goals and purposes and the means of striving for and attaining them are prescribed to him and performed by him as something prescribed” (ibid.: 1). In this situation, there is no real freedom: experience is exercised within and channeled through constraints that are determined by general social
forces. Individuals wrongly believe that these constraints are self-imposed. That error is embodied in the ideal of autonomy. And that ideal—just expressed in philosophical and social theoretical terms—is perfectly described, Marcuse thinks, in Freud's notion of the superego which "absorbs the authoritarian models, the father and his representatives, and makes their commands and prohibitions its own laws, the individual's conscience. Mastery of drives becomes the individual's own accomplishment—autonomy" (ibid.: 2). The Freudian language speaks aptly—not merely coincidentally or figuratively—of political phenomena which are of significance for critical theory. Marcuse specifically rejects the traditional form of defense of the incorporation of psychoanalysis or psychology into political theory in which one region is identified as basic and a second one is subordinate to it. The two regions, he maintains, are coextensive rather than hierarchically arranged.

Beyond Basic Repression

The synthesis of critical theory with psychoanalysis involves a bold move designed to redress what might be described as the political indifference of Freud's work. Freud, obviously enough, makes no distinction between the ordinarily civilized and the totalized. His notion of civilization is unvariegated. And in that respect his anthropology might lend itself to a moral resignation in which the miseries of repression—pleasure forestalled and the attendant phenomenon of social aggression—are facts of any human community. Marcuse acknowledges the difficulties that Freud's evolutionary story is ordinarily seen to present for the ideal of a non-repressive civilization. He notes that "Freud's proposition that civilization is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts has been taken for granted" (EC 3). But there is a way beyond the apparent resignation of Freud's position, and it is to be found, according to Marcuse, in Freud's work itself which, he writes, "provides reasons for rejecting his identification of civilization with repression" (EC 4). Marcuse proposes what he sees as a sympathetic evolution of Freudian theory by transforming it into a historical science. In fact, that transformation, as noted earlier, is supposedly in line with an unstated commitment within Freud's work to a more contextual notion of civilization than at first appears.

Marcuse's starting point is the Freudian thesis that the human organism in its pure state is naturally driven to seek the immediate gratification of its desires. This, the pleasure principle, is its sole end. The organism makes no plans and neither organizes nor assesses the implications of acting on those desires. This is an impractical disposition, however, since reality cannot facilitate both endless spontaneous pleasure and the general survival of the organism: the organism must also attend to its vital material needs. As Freud himself puts it: "what decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle." But there "is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the regulations of the universe run counter to it" (Freud 2001a: 76). The organism is situated in an environment of what Marcuse glosses as "scarcity." This is an economic thesis that refers to the fact that the goods that we require have to be secured through work; they are not superabundant. Marcuse justifies that gloss by quoting from Freud's A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis:

Society's motive in enforcing the decisive modification of the instinctual structure is thus "economic; since it has not means enough to support life for its members without work on their part, it must see to it that the number of these members is restricted and their energies directed away from sexual activities on to their work."

(EC 17)

Meeting basic organic needs eventually gives rise to an entirely new form of experience. Immediate satisfaction of desires is repressed, self-preservation is granted priority, and pleasure
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Marcuse draws out the critical theoretical significance of the Freudian idea of repression through the innovative claim that there is a distinctive form of repression that marks contemporary capitalist societies. He terms this surplus repression. This is not that basic repression which Freud describes as a response to natural reality. It is repression that exceeds what is required for survival in the literal sense. The appearance of surplus repression is nevertheless explained as the result of a process that is essentially the same as that through which Freud accounts for basic repression. Reality bears down on human beings and constrains what they prefer spontaneously to do. In response, human beings adjust their desires to the limitations imposed on them by the realities within which they live. This adjustment is, again, repression. By adjusting repressively the demands of reality, which are initially a contingent matter of external circumstances, such limitations become their norms. The ego then has the mission of regulating the organism to the requirements of its social environment, whatever that happens to be. In this respect, a civilized creature is one who has adapted, so to speak, to the distinctive ecosystem of its social reality. Marcuse holds that the reality principle, as Freud had conceived it, “sustains the organism in the external world” but that in “the case of the human organism, this is an historical world” (EC 34). Social reality is a historically variable “phenomenon” (EC 16). It is not limited to one form and nor, therefore, are the reality demands that can be placed on the ego. This historicization thesis, we shall see, generates a complexity in Marcuse’s position since it tempts him, in one significant line of thought, into construing repression as ontologically historical and therefore without the necessity that attaches to it as a biological phenomenon.

Marcuse gears the notion of repression toward the distinctive inner lives of individuals caught up in the forces of contemporary capitalist societies. We are to think of the repressions generated in that context as of a different species to those of basic repression. Capitalism does not maintain itself by using human beings equipped only with the formation they have received in that basic state. Rather, its human beings are shaped in wholly new ways in order to function effectively within the system (the totalization thesis). Marcuse believes that “the specific historical institutions of the reality principle” found in capitalism “introduce additional controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association” (EC 37). The fact that these repressions are “additional” will offer a kind of diagnostic insight into the somehow inordinate presence of social determination. As Marcuse put it in a 1979 interview, the “degree of repression is decisive” (Marcuse 2011: 228). What is “decisive” comes into view as the “distinction between rational and irrational authority, between repression and surplus-repression” (EC 225). What is normatively reprehensible or irrational,
it seems, is the surplus degree of adjustment that is required. This is a striking thought when placed against the core of Freud's theory. Freud adopts the perspective of biology, of what an organism causally necessarily does in order to survive. This is to be distinguished from his accounts of what we might call individual deformativ adjustment articulated through his theories of neurosis and psychosis, in which some unbearable feature of reality is accommodated at the cost of inexplicable behavior. And indeed the content of what is unbearable will be sociohistorical (e.g. social mores, familial bonds). The sort of general adjustment that is a function of civilization, however, belongs to a prior level. A theory which translates the mechanisms of the putatively biological into those of sociology has therefore to provide an account, alien to psychoanalysis, of how those mechanisms might in fact be wrong. That is, it must show that adjustment cannot be neutrally viewed as a natural-causal event because it is one which is induced due to circumstances that are neither natural nor neutral. The form of explanation given to it by psychoanalysis is not enough on its own, if at all, to explain the normative application of the reality principle and its repressions.

Marcuse largely maintains that the imposed denial of pleasure is a wrong other than in situations of unavoidable or unrevisable necessity. It seems, in this regard, that he does not therefore think of basic repression as a normatively significant phenomenon. Perhaps, the absence of wrong in cases of necessity is explained by the fact that those situations cannot be attributed to human action. Surplus repression is, though, an unnecessary violation of an orientation toward pleasure, a situation in which the organism would be free from tensions. It may seem like an imposition to construe Marcuse's interest in surplus repression as one that comes down to its implications for pleasure. Certainly the scope of his critical theory has broader and wider-ranging concerns, concerns which might be fairly encapsulated under the single heading of emancipation: liberation from capitalism. However, if the link between repression and pleasure denial is broken, Marcuse's use of the Freudian theory would amount to little more than word play. Repression would be the name for any kind of adjustment regardless of what its costs and advantages were to the organism. But that is certainly not, as we have seen, how Marcuse wants to engage with Freud's work.

By holding that Marcuse's idea of pleasure denial motivates his interest in repression theory, we can place his position within a kind of philosophical hedonism. In fact, Marcuse, from the earliest days of his critical writings, found significant agreements, unmediated by Freudian considerations, between hedonism and critical theory. In an essay of 1938, “On Hedonism,” he noted that “the hedonistic trends of philosophy” have sought to redress the rationalistic conditions of the world by “identifying happiness with pleasure.” The interest in pleasure is, Marcuse writes, “the materialistic protest of hedonism,” which as a contribution to “human liberation” – liberation from a rationalized world – “is linked with the interest of critical theory” (Marcuse 1968: 162). This hedonist positioning gives us some view of the grounds of Marcuse's normative assessment of repression: socially produced repression is a harm to whatever range of dispositions that fall within human sensuality. As he explains in *Eros and Civilization*: “The erotic aim of sustaining the entire body as subject-object of pleasure” – an aim that critical theory must, Marcuse believes, find ways of defending – “calls for the continual refinement of the organism, the intensification of its receptivity, the growth of its sensuousness” (EC 212). Control of pleasure is the target of the reality principle. Marcuse can then explain how freedom or emancipation will lead to pleasure. But the criterion of pleasure will also, as we shall see, place limits on what can be coherently envisaged for non-repressive emancipated civilization.

Marcuse then is adding two fundamental dimensions to Freud's essential theory: a normative one that allows theory to evaluate repression (its “additional” or “irrational” forms), and a historical one in which repression varies according to circumstances that are attributable to human action. Marcuse sets out his historical-normative ideas of repression and the reality principle, as follows:
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... the Freudian terms, which do not adequately differentiate between the biological and the socio-historical vicissitudes of the instincts, must be paired with corresponding terms denoting the specific socio-historical component. Presently we shall introduce two such terms:

(a) Surplus-repression: the restrictions necessitated by social domination. This is distinguished from (basic) repression: the “modifications” of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization.

(b) Performance principle: the prevailing historical form of the reality principle.

(EC 35)

Surplus repression and conformity with the performance principle of capitalist reality are not simply notions held by individuals of what they ought to do in order to survive contemporary life. They involve adjustment to what individuals literally feel they must do. There is an acquired bodily discipline that predisposes them toward socially validated ways of acting. And since, as Marcuse puts it (in an essay of 1960, “From Ontology to Technology”), all “social repression rests on a ‘biological’ repression,” it follows that “all liberation presupposes a revolution, an upheaval in the order of instincts and needs: a new reality principle.” With that liberation, he explains, there would be a “total transvaluation of values that would affect the being of nature as well as the being of man” (Marcuse 2011: 139). Repression, then, is no Freudian analogue of the notion of ideology or false consciousness. What is repressively imposed is registered at a noncognitive level.

Civilization with Repression

Marcuse seems at times to be committed to the notion that surplus repression is a secondary repression which is subsequent to the biologically explained basic repression. Basic repression as a nonnormative event, so to speak, is of no concern to critical theory. But Marcuse also maintains that all repression is antagonistic to our biological being – our hedonistic orientation – and that genuine emancipation would amount to a comprehensive transformation of our sensory being. That emancipatory ideal expands, in other words, to include a concern with all repression. We will look at these two options in turn. These are, in essence, the civilization with and without option.

In the 1979 interview, Marcuse addresses what he claims is a misunderstanding of his position. If it is a misunderstanding, it can probably be attributed to the ambiguity just noted. His critics take him to hold that an emancipated society would be free of all repression. But he responds: “I wouldn’t say that repression today is no longer necessary – surplus repression is no longer necessary. That is to say, repression that goes beyond the basic taboos and the basic prohibitions any and every civilization depends upon” (Marcuse 2011: 228). This moderate claim has the convenience of avoiding conflict with Freud’s account of basic repression. It can accommodate that account by simply banking it and moving on to a secondary level which sits on top of basic – biological, “phylogenetically necessary” (EC 87) – repression. Marcuse may then direct his critical attention to surplus repression, defined as “that portion” of “the repressed personality” “which is the result of specific societal conditions sustained in the specific interest of domination” (EC 87–88). This independent tier of repression is, though, an account of adjustment to an environment that will seem quite different to the environmental responses of basic repression in very fundamental ways. We have already seen their differences captured in terms of those which are phylogenetically necessary and those which are not. But there is an even more significant distinction. Basic repression refers to the conditions in which an ego emerges. This is a primal act, so to speak. Surplus repression operates within the conditions under which the agent who “performs” within capitalism
must develop. A particular kind of socially useful individual is generated. We can already anticipate the different outcomes of emancipation from these conditions: freedom from basic repression is the elimination of the ego, whereas freedom from surplus repression is a return to a noncapitalist ego.

We have seen Marcuse identify surplus repression as a different version of repression, one which is responsive to the performance principle. He is clear that while it “is probably biologically impossible to get away without any repression whatsoever,” repression is “not identical with domination” (Marcuse 1970: 81). At the same time, an explanation of the mechanisms that make surplus repression effective is dependent on the story of the mechanisms of basic repression. For this dependence to succeed, each form of repression will need to function in generally the same way. Reality will have to present itself to the organism with a clear sense of threat to its preferences. Rather than persist with those preferences the organism will internalize the demands of reality and make them its own. Marcuse, as we have seen, identifies the pressures of reality in the context of surplus repression as social domination. In examining the structural similarities of the two types of repression, we should expect to find in the notion of social domination the same dynamic effects as natural scarcity if the organism is again to find a self-preserving solution in repression. The conditions of scarcity produce, in Marcuse’s accounts, the same dynamic effects as the conditions of domination even though these conditions differ in their sources and in the consequences of defying them. Marcuse nonetheless maintains that the economic thesis (scarcity) is straightforwardly applicable to the level of surplus repression, too. He claims that

Throughout the recorded history of civilization, the instinctual constraint enforced by scarcity has been intensified by constraints enforced by the hierarchical distribution of scarcity and labor; the interest of domination added surplus-repression to the organization of the instincts under the reality principle.

(EC 134)

This will mean that the two forms of repression can be explained by reference to the same dynamic: scarcity.

The supposed similarity of the dynamic effects of scarcity and social domination needs closer analysis. Marcuse commits a considerable amount of attention to identifying the deforming effects of domination, those that are essentially repressive. His notion of domination is multifaceted, in fact, in that among its many aspects are several that do not easily conform to the basic dynamic of scarcity in even the most attenuated sense. The following are representative of the characteristics of domination noted at various points in Marcuse’s text. These are characteristics of domination that relate specifically to surplus repression, rather than basic repression.

(i) Throughout the world of industrial civilization, the domination of man by man is growing in scope and efficiency.

(EC 4)

The aggressive attitude toward the object-world, the domination of nature, thus ultimately aims at the domination of man by man.

(EC 114)

Domination here refers to the ruthless system of exploitation and competition familiarly identified by critics of capitalism. It involves the destruction of social relations and nature. This system generates institutions to maintain human beings in an attitude of compliance.
Marcuse sometimes refers to this form of social determinism as “institutionalized repression” (EC 92 et passim). Those institutions, which are not equivalent to basic survival adaptations, are the loci of the specific repressions of surplus repression. Marcuse notes a number of those arrangements:

(ii) For example, the modifications and deflections of instinctual energy necessitated by the perpetuation of the monogamic-patriarchal family, or by a hierarchical division of labor, or by public control over the individual's private existence are instances of surplus-repression pertaining to the institutions of a particular reality principle.

(EC 37–38)

The implication in this passage is that the forms of experience which are enabled by these institutions are in some sense harmful. The structured bourgeois family, for instance, constrains the roles of everyone within it; the division of labor is a denial of a range of expressive opportunities in that skills are placed within an order of prestige; social norms govern experience that is lived out in private. It may be difficult to imagine what a reversal of those institutions would amount to but it would, in short, be release from domination. The structure of everyday life and its interactions would no longer be determined by the systematic needs of capitalism. In these ways, Marcuse is expressing an orthodoxy of critical theory. He is more ambitious, however, in his effort to show that domination of this kind – with its worldly external hostility to the organism and its individual-internal repression – somehow reproduces scarcity of the original type:

(iii) domination does not exclude technical, material, and intellectual progress, but only as an unavoidable by-product while preserving irrational scarcity, want, and constraint.

(EC 36–37)

Marcuse has in mind a society in which access to goods is under the control of free market forces. In that sense, goods are not strictly scarce, but nor are they immediately accessible unless one participates in the market. Interestingly, progress – achieved through the dominating institutions noted in (ii) – nevertheless holds open the possibility of liberation: technological advances can free us of the scarcities that produce repressions. But the more significant point from this passage (iii) is that domination is in some sense the cause of a new form of scarcity, i.e. not the scarcity that is characteristic of nature.

The link between scarcity and the repressive dynamic of domination is not yet in view. Marcuse argues that participation in a reality where the performance principle prevails will require a repressive adjustment. Among the features of the performance reality to which surplus repression is a response are, he notes: “competitive economic performances” (EC 44); “body and mind are made into instruments of alienated labor” (EC 46), productivity becomes an obligation, reason “as an instrument of constraint, of instinctual suppression” (EC 159). No doubt each of these phenomena can be portrayed as manifestations of social domination but it is harder to link them with scarcity. That gap is particularly evident in the case of labor. Work, for Marcuse, is not – as we have just seen – simply a matter of securing self-preservation, as it is under circumstances of basic repression. Work involves direct opposition between workers who compete, perhaps, for positions or for prestige. Marcuse connects this competitiveness with the established Marxian idea of alienated labor. As a phenomenon, in Marx's terms, labor corresponds to a misery distinctive to the capitalist production of commodities. It involves the virtual enslavement of the worker, on subsistence
wages, and it destroys the worker’s capacities for expressive interactions with nature. In these respects, it is a model of a pleasure-denying reality. Marcuse’s invocation of the notion of alienated labor in the context of the dynamic of scarcity is complicated since it is not an account of labor under the conditions of the industrial revolution. Rather, it is employed to capture the qualities of work within the practices of contemporary capitalism. The notion of scarcity is not an immediately obvious entailment of that reality. And that means that an account of contemporary labor that is compatible with the surplus repression thesis will have to rest on a mechanism that departs in some way from the mechanism of basic repression. That mechanism is not however offered in Marcuse’s work. A further issue related to work, with implications for the surplus repression thesis, arises from Marcuse’s acknowledgment that alienated labor might be pleasurable (EC 220), or at least not miserable. In that case, a criterion other than the hedonist one is needed to explain why some kinds of pleasure are symptomatic of domination (a point of which Marcuse was keenly aware in the early essay on hedonism). The conditions of reality adjustment that are characteristic of the era of advanced capitalism cannot be uniformly spelled out in hedonistic terms: its quasi-imperatives do not always involve an attack on pleasure per se.

**Civilization without Repression**

Marcuse also tells the story of domination in a way that lends itself to his other line of thought, namely that repression is a single phenomenon. He sees as “the truth in Freud’s generalization… that a repressive organization of the instincts underlies all historical forms of the reality principle in civilization” (EC 34). Freud also, he notes, “expresses the historical fact that civilization has progressed as organized domination” (EC 34). The key point here, which sustains the notion that civilization must be free of repression, is the direct connection Marcuse makes between repression and domination. Even basic repression is to be read as a response to domination. The claim that civilization can function in the absence of repression may be a direct amendment of Freud’s official position. Unofficially, however, “Freud’s own theory,” Marcuse writes, “provides reasons for rejecting his identification of civilization with repression” (EC 4). He also conjectures that historical developments “seem to create the preconditions for the gradual abolition of repression” (EC 5). This is because it has become possible, as we have seen in the notion of technological liberation, to organize the world to meet our basic needs without any compromise of our erotic, pleasure orientations. There are considerations now, Marcuse perhaps thinks, that were unavailable to Freud.

We might wonder how the notion of the elimination of all repression might affect our understanding of emancipation. It cannot, in this context, be restricted to emancipation from capitalism. The point can be illustrated by reference to an oscillation within Marcuse’s work about the liberating possibilities of aesthetic experience: the familiar options of a return to noncapitalist basic repression and the elimination of all repression. At various places, Marcuse construes aesthetic experience as a space free specifically of surplus repression and therefore, implicitly, no reminder of a primal past prior to repression. Art offers us a model of experience which stands in oppositional contrast with the requirements of the performance principle. It is, in this regard, that it earns the sobriquet the “Great Refusal,” which Marcuse sees as “the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom” (EC 149). The individual self gains an intimation of freedom from the kind of repression that is attributable to the institutions of the totalized society. Marcuse, though, also offers an elimination of all repression view of freedom as an implication of aesthetic experience. That experience provides us with a glimpse of the freedom which reminds us of life prior to repression, not merely surplus repression. Marcuse seems to say that this experience conveys something that has practical significance for us: it points to a space of freedom. Aesthetic “phantasy
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(Imagination) retains the structure and the tendencies of the psyche prior to its organization by the reality, prior to its becoming an ‘individual’ set off against other individuals” (EC 142). And he specifies that “the entire subsequent history of man is characterized by the destruction of this original unity…” (EC 142). Aesthetic experience, then, speaks to some original phase of our existence, one that is recognizably governed by the pleasure principle.

That second set of thoughts – about pre-individual experience – brings us back to the question of how we are to conceive of the idea of emancipation from all repression. There is a challenge in explaining whose interests are in focus when emancipation involves the release from all repression. Now it may seem that Marcuse avoids this dizzying space by claiming that he is concerned simply with domination-repression. In that case, he is really then concerned with surplus repression. As we have seen, however, Marcuse does not restrict the scope of repression to the “additional” level. And in that case the subject of emancipation is not the individual who has suffered from the performance principle but some human form without ego identity. If liberation involves a transformation of subjectivity then who is to be the beneficiary of this liberation becomes obscure. There is no “I” referent, no subject in any familiar sense who can recognize a space within which existential improvements might be enjoyed. It seems, then, that the Marcusan subject of emancipation seeks not only liberation from capitalism – the theater of the performance principle, the manufacturer of scarcity – but from itself. It does not merely want the overthrow of capitalism, but wants, in fact, the overthrow of the conditions that allow capitalism to persist, and among those conditions is the “ego” subject itself.

Conclusion

Marcuse's theory of repression is, as we have seen, an original effort to explain the forms of behavior that are peculiar to the era of advanced capitalism. Its ambitious synthesis of psychoanalytic and political concepts has certainly left its mark on the work of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. If the analysis offered in this chapter is sustainable, then it might be concluded that Marcuse's theory is, in a quite serious way, impeded by the very explanatory model which largely inspires it: the Freudian notion of basic repression. There are complications produced directly from the isomorphism of basic and surplus repression. The association of domination with scarcity bears a tremendous weight. A different sort of difficulty arises once emancipation is conceived in terms of a non-repressive civilization. That very idea takes us to a space in which those human interests and experiences that motivate political theory – Marcuse's included – can no longer be seen.

Abbreviation


References

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**Further Reading**


