

# Marcuse's critique of Freud's Theory of Civilization and Society

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*Abstract:* - This paper presents Marcuse's critique of Freud's theory of civilization and society. Herbert Marcuse in his book "Eros and Civilization" specifically devoted to the problem of civilization, society and culture from the perspective of Freud and psychoanalytic theory in general, at the same time expressing his critical attitude towards that theory and discovering the hidden opportunities in it. Freud's thesis on the necessity of repression of happiness in civilization did not take into account the difference between suffering that results from the finiteness of man as a biological being, and that arising from the existing structure of society - what belongs to the latter is attributed to the first, and that legitimized the social injustice. Marcuse concludes "the notion that a non-repressive civilization is impossible, is a cornerstone of Freudian theory". Marcuse's critique is directed on this Freud's thesis.

*Key-Words:* civilization, society, repression, domination, the pleasure principle, the reality principle, surplus-repression, performance principle

## 1 Introduction

Herbert Marcuse in his book "Eros and Civilization" specifically devoted to the problem of civilization, society and culture from the perspective of Freud and psychoanalytic theory in general, at the same time expressing his critical attitude towards that theory and discovering the hidden opportunities in it. In his understanding of process of civilization, Freud otherwise represents the idea that is also in the core of Hegel's conception of history. Because, as for Hegel, "the history of the world is not the theatre of happiness; periods of happiness are blank pages in it", so for Freud the progress of civilization (culture) is repressive toward individual human happiness: "The goal towards which the pleasure-principle impels us - of becoming happy - is not attainable" (F39). According to Freud, "repression and unhappiness *must be* if civilization is to prevail" (M246). However, this repression isn't justified by ultimate purpose of historical development, especially, as in Hegel, in its idealistic form of self-consciousness of (World) spirit, but by extremely materialistic oriented insight in the spirit of Malthusianism - individual happiness cannot be attained due to the scarcity of available material goods.

Human individual existence, according to Freud, is managed by two principles: the pleasure principle,

which is related to the instinctive sphere of unconscious (*id*), and the reality principle, in relation to the dimension of consciousness (*ego*). The first principle requires unrestricted and immediate pleasure, while the latter prevents the *id* in achieving this goal, as it represents the reality that is crucially marked by material scarcity. Thus civilization progresses through repression, by imposing the domination of the reality principle over the pleasure principle. In this sense, morality and knowledge in Freud's thought, as for Nietzsche, are in function of self-preservation, and ruled by the reality principle; psychoanalysis reveals their genealogy in the necessity of repression of immediate satisfaction of instinctive incentives, to ensure the survival of the human community, and, ultimately, of life itself.

That is because the ultimate goal of instinctive tendencies, the return to the inorganic state that is devoid of tension and suffering, must be prevented, or at least sublimated in the extent to preserve life. In his later theory, Freud held that the entire dynamic of instincts is crucially designated by origin of organic life from inorganic matter, and from specific "inertion" of organic - "compulsion inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to

abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces' is common to both primary instinct: Eros and the death instinct" (M135). These "external forces" are precisely the factors that arise in the development of civilization.

Among these, morality takes prominent place. It is tied for the third dimension of the human psyche (*superego*) - thanks to him, repressing of instinctive impulses which satisfaction is not in line with the current scarcity, is taking the form of value ("good"), and what is repressed the form of unvalue ("evil"). *Superego* "works in the service of the antagonist of the life instinct. This inner-directed destructiveness, moreover, constitutes the moral core of the mature personality. Conscience, the most cherish moral agency of the civilized individuals, emerges as permeated with the death instinct; the categorical imperative that the *superego* enforces remains an imperative of self-destruction while it constructs the social existence of the personality" (M53).

## 2 Problem Formulation

Thus, Freud realized the dialectic of civilization - the dominance of morality (*superego*), which aims to sustain life, threaten this goal by increasingly repression and attenuation of life instinct (Eros, the pleasure instinct), and thus strengthens the death instinct (destruction). The civilizing progress is therefore only possible at the cost of increasing repression, suffering and destruction - his "rationality" is based on individual and collective unhappiness, so domination of (instrumental) reason, which turns the nature into the object of brutal exploitation and "literally 'violated'" it (M86), not only does not lead to the progress in happiness, as the founders of modern science and philosophy expected, but actually disables that progress.

"This idea of reason becomes increasingly antagonistic to those faculties and attitudes which are receptive rather than productive, which tend toward gratification rather than transcendence - which remain strongly committed to the pleasure principle...The Logos shows forth as the logic of domination" (M111). Freedom, which is in civilization conquered by reason, thanks to an increasingly wider subjugation of external nature, relies on repressive attitude towards the inner nature - everything that doesn't contribute to the domination over natural processes, especially that which has the character of passivity and affirmation of the pleasure principle, must be subjected to the activities of reality and reason, as its representative.

As a good, true and useful, reason declares that which is in accordance with that principle, and everything else dismisses as unvalue.

So, "in so far as the full satisfaction of needs is happiness, freedom in civilization is essentially antagonistic to happiness: it involves the repressive modification (*sublimation*) of happiness" (M18). "Self-consciousness and reason, which have conquered and shaped the historical world, have done so in the image of repression, internal and external. They have worked as the agents of domination; the liberties which they have brought (and these are considerable) grew in the soil of enslavement and have retained the mark of their birth" (M57).

However, the dominance is not exhausted in the subjugation of external and inner nature: it is complete only in the "domination over man by man". In this context Marcuse develops a well-known motif from the "Phenomenology of Spirit" on the relation of master and slave. Two dimensions, in which dominance and repression take place, and which are in "constant and inseparable interaction", also appear in Freud's theory - on "the phylogenetic-biological level" there is "the development of the animal man in the struggle with nature", and on "the sociological level", "the development of civilized individuals and groups in the struggle among themselves and with their environment" (M133).

In order to understand the nature of civilization, Freud reconstructs the prehistory of mankind, life of the men in primal horde, and relations that ruled in it. He concluded that even in the genus community "domination over man by man" was established - it has a form of domination of father over women and children. By possessing of women, father "monopolized the supreme pleasure" (M61), and thus imposed on sons repression of satisfaction, that enabled their direct involvement in the work process. Therefore, the mutual mediation of work and repression is noticeable even in the earliest community. "Setting the model for the subsequent development of civilization, the primal father prepared the ground for progress through enforced constraint on pleasure and enforced abstinence; he thus created the first preconditions for the disciplined 'labor force' of the future" (M62). Hierarchical distribution of pleasures corresponds with hierarchical division of labor, within which the father of horde appears as a prototype of private owner.

And "the economic and political incorporation of individuals into the hierarchical system of labor is accompanied by an instinctual process in which the

human objects of domination reproduce their own repression” (M91). Feeling of guilt is linked to the ideas of satisfaction, or liberation, of instincts, because the social dominance is based on a hierarchical division of labor and repressive organization of instincts. The attempt to break the dominance is tabooed as a threat to social whole. Psychological mechanism that indicates successful interiorization of these taboos is the sense of guilt (“guilty conscience”) that occurs at the thought of forbidden pleasures or different ways of shaping social reality (F120-123). It “cements” social dominance in consciousness and needs of individuals, and so is its strongest foothold.

This vicious circle of social and individual repression of freedom, domination and its internalization, which is defined as the dialectic of civilization, leads to similar articulated dialectic of liberation (of previous civilization) - freedom presupposes the need for liberation, but it is this need that becomes more efficiently repressed in the development of civilization. Instead of it, the surrogates of freedom and happiness are imposed, and internalized into the psyche of individuals, in their consciousness and instincts, so they do not perceive them as coercion. For the establishment of the authority, moment of its “voluntary” acceptance is of decisive importance, the fact that individuals are recognized and adopted it as something justifiable (reasonable), that it is not based on mere force and coercion. Really existing domination and oppression are so transformed - individuals in the current society does not recognize the domination and repression anymore, or at least consider them as justified (that is the effect of ideological indoctrination), so society appears to them as a rational entity that satisfies their needs and interests. They accept themselves for what they are socially produced, and assume the role and character that are essential for the reproduction of the *status quo*. Believing that they are free to make decisions and follow their own interests, they just repeat and confirm the decisions and interests of the ruling cliques. It seems that “closed universe” of society, thought and speech, appears, and that we are in the totality which effectively rejects and suppresses any alternative.

So, “Freud considers the ‘primordial struggle for existence’ as ‘eternal’ and therefore believes that the pleasure principle and the reality principle are ‘eternally’ antagonistic” (M17). “Freud’s psychology of civilization was based on the inexorable conflict between Ananke and free instinctual development” (M213). Marcuse concludes “the notion that a non-repressive

civilization is impossible, is a cornerstone of Freudian theory” (M17).

At that point Marcuse’s critique of Freud begins. He considers that “Freud’s conclusions preclude the notion of an ‘ideal’ state of nature; but they also hypostatize a specific historical *form* of civilization as the *nature* of civilization” (M147). In contrast to these conclusions, the following questions must be opened: “Does the interrelation between freedom and repression, productivity and destruction, domination and progress, really constitute the principle of civilization? Or does this interrelation result only from a specific historical organization of human existence? In Freudian terms, is the conflict between pleasure principle and reality principle irreconcilable to such a degree that it necessitates the repressive transformation of man’s instinctual structure? Or does it allow the concept of a non-repressive civilization, based on a fundamentally different experience of being, a fundamentally different relation between man and nature, and fundamentally different existential relations?” (M4-5).

### 3 Problem Solution

According to Marcuse, Freud did not sufficiently explicate the social dimension and specificity of relations of domination which prevail in it. So, in Freud’s thought, social dominance remained hidden behind the thesis of scarcity and hence (biological) inevitability of conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Marcuse presents the core of his criticism: “This argument, which looms large in Freud’s metapsychology, is fallacious in so far as it applies to the brute *fact* of scarcity what actually is the consequence of a specific *organization* of scarcity, and of a specific existential attitude enforced by this organization. The prevalent scarcity has, thought civilization (although in very different modes), been organized in such a way that it has not been distributed collectively in accordance with individual needs, nor has the procurement of goods for the satisfaction of needs been organized with the objective of best satisfying the developing needs of the individuals. Instead, the *distribution* of scarcity as well as the effort of overcoming it, the mode of work, have been *imposed* upon individuals - first by mere violence, subsequently by a more rational utilization of power. However, no matter how useful this rationality was for the progress of the whole, it remained the rationality of *domination*, and the gradual conquest of scarcity was inextricably bound

up with and shaped by the interest of domination” (M36).

Therefore, it is necessary to re-emphasize the social structuring of the reality principle, and affirm the Freud’s own insights that are left in his conclusions, especially one that “expresses the historical fact that civilization has progressed as organized *domination*” (M34). Namely, according to Marcuse, although the “phylogenetic-biological” and the “sociological” factor “have grown together in the recorded history of civilization”, “this does not dispense with the necessity of making the distinction” between them (M134, 132) (JVO, 18). The specificity of the latter, “sociological” dimension, are exactly the relations of domination that are developed in it, which fundamentally shape the basic struggle for survival, giving decisive character to repressive organization of instincts. This insight enables the reality principle back to its socio-historically concreteness: “The various modes of domination (of man and nature) result in various historical forms of the reality principle. For example, a society in which all members normally work for a living requires other modes of repression than a society in which labor is the exclusive province of one specific group. Similarly, repression will be different in scope and degree according to whether social production is oriented on individual consumption or on profit; whether a market economy prevails or a planned economy; whether private or collective property. These differences affect the very content of the reality principle, for every form of the reality principle must be embodied in a system of societal institutions and relations, laws and values which transmit and enforce the required ‘modification’ of the instincts. This ‘body’ of the reality principle is different at the different stages of civilization” (M37). So, “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” (M35).

Marcuse in this context introduces two concepts that develop further and integrate Freud’s insights, or emphasize “their historical substance”: “surplus-repression” and “performance principle”. “Surplus-repression” represents “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”. And “performance principle” is “the prevailing historical form of the reality principle” (M35). “Moreover, while any form of the reality principle demands a considerable

degree and scope of repressive control over the instincts, the specific historical institutions of the reality principle and the specific interests of domination introduce *additional* controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association. These additional controls arising from the specific institutions of domination are what we denote as *surplus-repression*” (M37).

Freud’s negligence of these differences leads to that “for his metapsychology, it is not decisive whether the inhibitions are imposed by scarcity or by the hierarchical distribution of scarcity, by the struggle for existence or by the interest in domination...Freud’s consistent denial of the possibility of an essential liberation (of the pleasure principle) implies the assumption that scarcity is as permanent as domination - an assumption that seems to beg the question” (M134). Therefore what Freud attributed the nature of civilization and the reality principle as such, is actually a consequence of a special, historically achieved form of civilization and its specific reality principle (performance principle) which “stratified society according to the competitive economic performances of its members” (M44).

That also means that Eros is not opposed, as Freud thought, to the reality principle and work as such, but only the performance principle, i.e. the form of the reality principle that perpetuates “need for toil and delayed satisfaction” (M88). It can even be argued that there are internal connections and consent between Eros and work. Freud himself comes to such insight in some instances, but then abandons or does not sufficiently take it into account. Marcuse’s critique follows that trend of Freud’s teachings, which gets suppressed and remains “hidden”, trying to assert it and to find the emancipatory potentials in psychoanalysis itself: “The idea of erotic tendency toward work is not foreign to psychoanalysis. Freud himself remarked that work provides an opportunity for a ‘very considerable discharge of libidinal component impulses, narcissistic, aggressive, and even erotic’” (M212). “Against his notion of the inevitable ‘biological’ conflict between pleasure principle and reality principle, between sexuality and civilization, militates the idea of the unifying and gratifying power of Eros, chained and worn out in a sick civilization. This idea would imply that the *free* Eros does not preclude lasting civilized societal relationships - that it repels only the supra-repressive organization of societal relationships under a principle which is the negation of a pleasure principle” (M43). Freud allows himself that “we might well imagine that a civilized community

could consist of pairs of individuals libidinally satisfied in each other, and linked to all the others by work and common interests” (F80). Therefore, accentuated antagonism between work and pleasure, scarcity and joy, reason and sensuousness, are tied solely to the existing reality principle, which still maintains alienated labor and encourages competitive fight between individuals, not to each social reality as such; by abolishing the existing reality principle, these antagonisms are overcome, which leads to harmony of psychic forces and among the individuals.

Resistance to the dominating reality principle and its rationality occurs in the form of a “return of the repressed” - the principle of pleasure cannot be completely eradicated, because it expresses the original aspirations of organism, which developed before the separation and independence of the reality principle, in a period when the whole organism was filled with desire for integral gratification. This archaic impulse is not at peace with the necessity of suffering and repression, and requires individual happiness in union with freedom. A new and different way of being, which transcends the existing reality principle, can be accessible only to a power that is free from the domination of the reality principle, the power which has been linked to the pleasure principle, and that is a phantasy. Phantasy resides in the unconscious, while consciousness (ego) developed in the reason, the ability to determine what is true and false, good and bad, compared to the reality principle, and under its domination. While the reason adapted to the existing antagonistic reality, and began to serve as its powerful instrument of domination, phantasy preserves the memory of a different reality, “the subhistorical past when the life of the individual was the life of the genus, the image of the immediate unity between the universal and the particular under the rule of the pleasure principle” (M142). “In contrast to the entire subsequent history of man that is characterized by the destruction of this original unity...in and against the world of the antagonistic *principium individuationis*, imagination sustains the claim of the whole individual, in union with the genus and with the ‘archaic’ past. Freud’s metapsychology here restores imagination to its rights. As a fundamental, independent mental process, phantasy has a truth value of its own, which corresponds to an experience of its own - namely, the surmounting of the antagonistic human reality. Imagination envisions the reconciliation of the individual with the whole, of desire with realization, of happiness with reason” (M142-143).

Mind and phantasy as powers of dialectical thinking and poetic expression, deny existing reality, and overcome its principle, realizing it as finite and insufficient. In later interpretations of art, in which “cognitive function of phantasy” (M144) reaches its peak, Marcuse will emphasize its effect of de-realization of what is proclaimed as reality. Phantasy opposes the existing reality by preserving “the memory of past stages of individual development at which integral gratification is obtained. And the past continues to claim the future: it generates the wish that the paradise be re-created on the basis of the achievements of civilization” (M18). So, “the orientation on the past tends toward an orientation on the future” (M19). “The truth value of imagination relates not only to the past but also to the future: the forms of freedom and happiness which it invokes claim to deliver the historical *reality*. In its refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle, in its refusal to forget what *can be*, lies the critical function of phantasy” (M148-149).

In Marcuse interpretation of “orphic” and “narcissistic” Eros, the power of fantasy and its relation to the pleasure principle seeped into the characters of Orpheus and Narcissus, while the performance principle is presented by the figure of Prometheus. Eros represents fundamentally different attitude towards nature, it unites man and nature, and liberates the nature from its own barbarity which is a consequence of dominance of the performance principle, “tyrannical” reason that “violate” and “oppress” the nature (F102-103). Only in erotic attitude towards being is possible to get out of a fatal dialectic of domination of the reason over the nature that leads to the domination of the nature over the reason, to the “return of the repressed” in its extremely perverted and destructive form of outbursts of irrational natural forces. Thanks to this erotic manner, nature is able to unleash its creative capabilities and to develop the wealth of its forms.

In the context of further developing a thesis about the clash of psychic powers and their principles in the current development of civilization, Marcuse cites Schiller’s conception of aesthetic: “He had diagnosed the disease of civilization as the conflict between the two basic impulses of man (the sensuous and the form impulses), or rather as the violent ‘solution’ of this conflict: the establishment of the repressive tyranny of reason over sensuousness. Consequently, the reconciliation of the conflicting impulses would involve the removal of this tyranny - that is, the restoration of the right of sensuousness” (M190). It is about protecting the

autonomy of the sensuousness and re-gaining its rights that were taken away from it during the domination of the performance principle. Sensuousness can then express its rational function, to be presented as a special form of knowledge, which had been challenged in a long tradition of philosophical thought, and what the foundation of aesthetics should promote. And since “liberation of instincts includes intellectual liberation”, the sensuous, receptive moment of the mind is promoted in the same process - the mind can then leave its former (perverted) form (reason) which is imposed through the performance principle, the form of continuous activism, tedious work that overpowers and subjugates external and inner nature, which doesn't find in itself any final settlement and satisfaction. In order to stop this endless activism, the mind has to regain the moment of passivity, receptivity, and that is exactly what is achieved in the aesthetic dimension.

From Kant, via Schiller, to Hegel, art was defined as the appearance of the mind in the form of sensuousness, as a creative form of their union, which overcomes the limitations of their independent existence. Through the learning about “play impulse”, which unify sensuousness and mind, nature and freedom, “a new form of civilization” is projected. And “the quest is for the solution of a ‘political’ problem: the liberation of man from inhuman existential conditions” (M186). The art is so connected with the revolution again. This “total revolution in the mode of perception and feeling” (Schiller) (M189) suggests a “new” idea of the mind that is no longer antagonistic towards the pleasure (Eros), but at the peak of its development reaches reality that reconciles with the pleasure principle, and that allows the unity of freedom and happiness, activity and receptivity. Marcuse finds confirmation of these views in the psychoanalysis itself, in its “hidden trend” which is repressed by Freud's conclusions about necessarily repressive character of civilization.

In the highest achievements of philosophy, logic of domination is also overcome - the mind can be left to its own activity, which is, in fact, enjoying its sustained freedom, so bliss is considered as the top state of mind existence. The mind overcomes the activity of incessant transcendence, and find pleasure in the finishing of the battle with nature (being), so the vision of “closed circle” triumph over the endless “ascending curve”. Plato (“Symposium”), Aristotle, Hegel and Nietzsche are deciding interlocutors here - in their final insights they express opposite tendency vis-à-vis logic of domination, in the form of unity of hitherto

opposing forces and principles. “The logic of domination does not triumph unchallenged. The philosophy which epitomizes the antagonistic relation between subject and object also retains the image of their reconciliation. The restless labor terminates in the ultimate unity of subject and object: the idea of ‘being-in-and-for-itself’, existing in its own fulfillment...The ascending curve of becoming is bent in the circle which moves in itself” (M112).

## 4 Conclusion

Freud's thesis on the necessity of repression of happiness in civilization did not take into account the difference between suffering that results from the finiteness of man as a biological being, and that arising from the existing structure of society - what belongs to the latter is attributed to the first, and that legitimized the social injustice. For, it is relations of domination, preserved in the society, that make repression takes form of the continuous weakening of life instincts (Eros) and the strengthening of the death instinct (Thanatos), so their antagonism is not some biological irremovable contradiction, but is mediated by the existing form of the reality principle. Thus, in a strict sense, (social) oppression is related to surplus-repression, and not to primary repression that is inevitable for basic biological survival: “The extent of this surplus-repression provides the standard of measurement: the smaller it is, the less repressive is the stage of civilization” (M88).

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