

EROS IN MARCUSE: Liberating or to be liberated?

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ABSTRACT

For Marcuse, a well-known figure of the influential Frankfurt School, earlier philosophical attempts to develop a promising account of desire were inadequate, not because they failed to appreciate what desire might mean in one's life, but rather because their thinking of desire has always necessitated reason as a kind of universal judge. Against this trend, Marcuse argued for the identity of reason and freedom, and necessary connection between these two and desire. I want to argue in this paper that Marcuse was right in searching for new and better lines of argument for liberating potentials of desire or Eros, but he was not right in his celebration of Freud as a true father of the view that desire may establish itself in such a way that repressive instruments can no longer function and alienate individuals.

Key words: Marcuse, desire, Freud, Deleuze.

ÖZET

Frankfurt Okulu'nun ünlü siması Marcuse'a göre, önceki felsefi çabalar arzu nosyonu ile ilgili umut verici bir kavramsallaştırma sağlamak bakımından yetersiz kalmıştır. Bunun nedeni bu girişimlerin arzunun bireyin yaşamında ne anlama geldiğini açıklamada yetersiz kalışları değil, arzuyu düşünme biçimlerinin, *usu* evrensel bir yargıç kılmayı zorunlu hale getirmesidir. Bu eğilime karşı, Marcuse, *us* ve özgürlük kavramlarının özdeşliğini savundu, daha da önemlisi bu iki kavramla arzu arasındaki zorunlu bağa dikkat çekti. Bu çalışmada, Marcuse'un arzu nosyonunun özgürleştirici potansiyelini araştırmaya değer görmek konusunda doğru davrandığını, ama arzunun toplumsal baskı araçlarını bertaraf etmeyi kolaylaştıracak bir biçimde okunabileceği görüşünü Freud'a dayandırmakta haksız olduğunu savunacağım.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Marcuse, arzu, Freud, Deleuze

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I**INTRODUCTION**

Marcuse argues in *On Hedonism* that earlier philosophical attempts to develop a promising account of desire were inadequate, not because they failed to appreciate what desire might mean in one's life, but rather because their thinking of desire has always necessitated reason as a kind of universal judge. Neither Epicureanism, nor idealist reading of desire was in this sense reasonable enough, for the former "Reason ... became the adjudicator of pleasure" and for the latter reason was simply "superior". (King, 1972) For Marcuse, on the other hand, reason, freedom and desire are never separate though they can be distinguished for the sake of contextual clarity. Rather, Marcuse argued for the identity of reason and freedom, and necessary connection between these two and desire. According to King, Marcuse was aware even in this earlier article that the tension between reason and desire was a superficial one originated and constantly supported by bourgeois society. Reason in this class society was meant to be ideological prerequisite of labor, and desire was accordingly posited against reason. He writes:

He (Marcuse) pointed out that in bourgeois society and ethics, sexuality was sanctioned only to the extent that it contributed to "physical or mental health" or 'the production of new labor power'. In such a society labor was also separated from enjoyable and spontaneous feeling, just as it was separated from thought. (King, 1972)

In *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse relates this point to Freud, perhaps more than Marx, and attempted at establishing a broader case against so-called superiority of reason and rationality based on Freudian concepts such as “pleasure principle”, “reality principle” and “instincts”. I want to argue in this paper that Marcuse was right in searching for new and better lines of argument for liberating potentials of desire or Eros, but he was not right in his celebration of Freud as a true father of the view that desire may establish itself in such a way that repressive instruments can no longer function and alienate individuals. In establishing my argument for and against Marcuse, ie., for his account of Eros in general and the critique of repressive rationality he derives out of this account and against his reading of Freudian theory, I will first outline what Marcuse makes clear in *Eros and Civilization*. Then I want to discuss that Marcusean shift to Freud cannot be defended if we are to take post-structuralist notions of desire into consideration.

II

WHAT IS TOLD IN *EROS AND CIVILIZATION*?

Marcuse's interest in Freud is very late compared to his interest in Hegel and Heidegger.

Disappointment about Marxism, which was common in the emotional atmosphere of fifties, led Marcuse like many others to seek some understandable reasons for irrational resistance to better social formations. Marcuse began to read Freud seriously against this background.

Alway helps us clarify what lies behind this shift to Freud: "Marcuse was troubled by Marxism's inability to account fully for the fact that, throughout history, the struggles of the oppressed had always resulted in new and better systems of domination." (Joan Alway, 1995)

Alway argues that Marcuse sought for an explanation for this what he called "self-defeat" that seems necessarily involved in the dynamic of revolutionary struggle. Alway writes:

It was the need to understand and explain this element of self-defeat that prompted Marcuse's turn to Freud. In Freud he found not only an account of the origins and perpetuation of the guilt feelings that, he believes, sustain the element of self-defeat, but also a means for addressing the subjective dimension--a dimension he finds notably absent in Marx and that he will increasingly stress. (ibid, 74)

Merging Marx and Freud in this sense was not original at that time, for the theory of "alienation" has already been at the center of psycho-social criticism. Marcuse searched for the same opportunity also in Reich's works. However, according to Marcuse, Reich failed to identify complex nature of "repression" and therefore he adapted too simplistic version of libidinal emancipation. In a similar way, Marcuse's reading of Fromm was also disappointing as he gradually developed extremely optimistic understanding of human emancipation (after

he left the Institute) as if it was simply possible with psychotherapy or other means of remedy. Reading of Freud brought Marcuse to become also aware that repressive social systems, particularly capitalism, do not operate as self-sufficient perfect systems, but they demand subsidiary sub-systems that necessarily exist with and within themselves. According to Marcuse "The political economy of advanced capitalism is also a psychological economy: it produces and administers the needs demanded by the system-even the instinctive needs". (cited in *ibid*, p. 74)

Marcuse presents in *E&C* a very detailed summary of Freud's account. Freud's claim, accordingly Marcuse, that "Free gratification of man's instinctual needs is incompatible with civilized society and progress..." has been taken for granted and no critical perspective is endorsed against this belief. Marcuse agrees with Freud that repression may easily end up with violence and the 20th century in particular provides too many evidences for this fact. He would also agree that society has something to do with repression. However, according to Marcuse, Freud failed to recognize that repression is not an essential for all forms of society, but is rather specific to a certain historical form of society. He asks this question in the preliminary pages of the book:

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? (Marcuse, 1956, p. 4-5)

Marcuse is convinced that Freud's theory, despite its pessimistic tone in general, promises a non-repressive future. His objective in *E&C* is simply to disclose this possibility and develop a non-repressive society in which Eros and civilization will no longer be separated.

According to Marcuse, Freudian reality principle operates based on a false assumption. It is told that repression of desires and/or delaying them is not only necessary for society's well-being but also for the individual. Thus so-called needs, prohibitions and requirements of the individual do not in fact belong to the individual, but are imposed from outside. As Kelly rightly highlights, "This process constitutes for him a domination of the individual by society which shapes thought and behavior, desires and needs, language and consciousness." (Kelly, 2004)

For Kelly, Marcuse's project is a philosophical attempt to explore the historical and political aspects of Freudian theory. In this sense Freud's work, Kelly argues, should be read as "social psychology". He writes:

Whereas most theories of socialization stress its humanizing aspects by claiming that socialization makes individuals more "human"-- and thus legitimate dominant social institutions and practices --, Freud exposes the repressive content of Western civilization and the heavy price paid for its "progress. (Kelly, 2004)

Marcuse emphasizes in several places in E&C that there is a hidden trend in psychoanalysis. This trend, he argues, makes Freudian theory necessarily political and even emancipatory if we cease to perceive it only as therapeutic. His suggestion is that Freud's theory of instincts, drive and desire contains a possibility for freedom of desire without sacrificing social happiness and responsibility.

III

FREUD'S CONFIGURATION OF DESIRE AND MARCUSIAN OVERVALUATION

It is in generally accepted that Freud was the very first one who attempted to question humanist narrative of "conscious self". The conscious self against which Freud raised his own split-self was in fact a Hegelian ideal of the self. This humanist ideal presupposed and constructed successive appearance of a conscious self that denotes consciousness and self-consciousness. The boomerang-like movement of consciousness in Hegelian sense places "desire" within "conscious self" as the unique source of motivation. Desire in this sense is almost one and the same thing with self consciousness. (See Chapter IV in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit)

For Freud, on the other hand, the humanist ideal of the self is an impossible project as there is no such thing as unified consciousness that is to evolve and come back as the self-consciousness. Discovery of unconscious, therefore, displaced and destabilized Hegelian "desire" as well as "subject". This attempt was quite revolutionary as it challenged thus far unified consciousness, but Freud, with his conviction that the unconscious is to be brought into the consciousness eventually gave rise to emergence of various post Hegelian successors. Marcuse was among the followers who overvalued Freud's this timely but inadequate attempt. Before exploring in what sense Marcuse overweighs Freudian notion of "instinct" or "drive" let me discuss first what is wrong in Freudian configuration of desire.

The Freudian shift from self-consciousness to unconscious aspects of the self is crucial to understand how psychoanalysis has configured desire. It is common to accept that the notion

of unconscious was at least imagined by several other philosophers before Freud named it. Spinoza, for instance, thought that consciousness is vulnerable to illusions that blur or distort the way one perceives the reality. It is surprising to see that a lousy notion of unconscious is first introduced by Spinoza in the third chapter of *Ethica*: “See particularly p. 87”

This passage and many others show, according to Sunat, that Spinoza’s *Ethica* is obviously one of the most influential sources of inspiration for Freudian psychoanalysis. Similarly, Nietzsche can also be seen as one of the predecessors of Freudian idea of unconscious. Nietzsche’s idea of “will-to-power” could be read as a result of his discomfort with the idea of conscious self and so-called noble actions that follow from it. Hegel, in a rather different sense, gave in *Phenomenology of Spirit* a quite detailed account of “abyss” that can be proposed as an initial conceptualization of contemporary unconscious. (J. Mills, 2004)

Yet it is still more reasonable, I believe, to argue that Freud is unique in his intellectual investment in the implications of the idea of unconscious. Desire, in Freudian anthropology, is the sum of what has always been repressed in human being from birth to death. Repressed desire or libido forms the unconscious and seeks to survive in it. In its survival, Freud argues, desire constantly reorients itself symbolically and shows up in different occasions in disguised forms. Dreams in this sense are signs of repressed desire, and therefore tell us about what is stored in unconscious.

In one of the case studies, Freud reads his patient’s obsession with wolves as a sign of repressed childhood desire. Colebrook shows how Freud connects a singular figure to an earlier “parental phantasy”:

By a series of associations Freud argues that the memories lead back to a “primal scene” where the parent, as a child, had witnessed his parents having

sexual intercourse with his father “mounting” his mother from behind. The child therefore represents his father with a wolf figure. Freud traces all connections back to this childhood trauma; he even interprets the “W” of “wolf” as a sign of the bent over servant girl who, in turn, symbolizes the sexual position of his mother. (Colebrook, 2002, p. 34)

In Freudian theory desire is conceived as a general drive and is always coupled with an object. Objects of desire, in classical psychoanalysis, might be anything that is capable to gratify the immediate instincts occurring in the form of desire. The object, however, is not always present when it is in the focus of desire. The absence of objects results in delay and modification of desire, and its both quality and direction may change irreversibly: “It is also possible for the object of gratification of the instinct to be changed or displaced from the original object to another object. Thus, the love of one’s mother may be displaced to the wife, kids, or dog.” (Pervin, 91)

Thinking of desire as something which is necessarily linked to an idea of object motivated the Psychoanalysis, both Freudian and Lacanian versions, to agree with the entire mainstream approach to desire that reads it as “lack”. The conceptual link between desire and absence or lack, Alan D. Schrift argues, “seems natural, and we should not be surprised to find this conceptual link running throughout the history of Western philosophical discourse”. (Schrift, 2000, p. 173) Schrift perfectly sketches how this discourse of “desire as lack” has been established through various instances of philosophical history. Marcuse also belongs to this canon and he does not question Freudian desire for being defined in terms of lack. According to Marcuse, like Freud, repression of desire means frustration in the sense that desire is nothing but a subject’s feeling of separation from his/her object(s) of gratification. This separation exists, for Freud, for the sake of civilization and progress. Or, in other words, civilization is possible at the expense of free satisfaction of our desires. Marcuse raises his

most important objection about this presupposition. For Marcuse, Freud mistakenly dismisses the importance of “culture” and “nature” distinction and prioritizes the former against the latter. David Ingram outlines Marcusean objection:

The problem with this attempt to conceive a nonrepressive civilization, Marcuse claims, is that it eliminates the one factor that critically resists a repressive status quo--nature in its immediate, *presocialized* form. Once the nature/culture tension has been eliminated, psychoanalytic theory loses its critical thrust and becomes a therapeutic tool aimed solely at adapting "social deviants" to societal constraints. So construed, psychoanalysis functions as a vehicle for reinforcing domination and repression--rather than dissolving it. (Ingram, 1990)

According to Marcuse resistance to repression may not necessarily mean barbarism or forgetting civilization. This belief is itself a by-product of repressive society and Freud too missed the point when he claimed that reality principle is necessarily opposed to pleasure principle. Marcuse believes that this false belief and pessimistic conditioning can be overcome only by liberation of Eros. Yet, as I maintained before, Marcuse is not critical to Freudian understanding of desire as something that is directly linked to object, which is mostly absent or away from subject. Marcuse was wrong in thinking that desire can be liberated and then transforms society once it is realized that reality is not one and same forever but various, temporal and different. Because his account of desire is constructed on permanent lack and is defined as an endless (even hopeless) search for satisfaction.

Against this trend, however, Schrift argues that another way of thinking is possible in which desire is no longer a desperate search after an idea of object. It rather recognizes “the productivity of desire”. He writes: “Where the philosophical mainstream has focused on the *desideratum*, the object of desire, as lacking, this other discourse focuses on the motivational force of the *desiderare*, the act of desire, as productive.” (ibid, p. 176)

Deleuze, for instance, introduces us, perhaps once again after Spinoza and Nietzsche, with the notion of productive desire. It is important here to notice that Deleuze's understanding of desire covers two dimensions namely "desire" and "social": "There is only desire and the social, and nothing else". (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 29) The next to be remembered is that "... everything is production: production of productions, ...". (ibid, p. 4) Deleuze conceives desire as a productive, motivating, connective and differentiating "flow" which disrupts the so-called "subject-object" dichotomy. Desire, in this sense, very much resembles Spinoza's "conatus" which is to be understood in terms of "immanence", in and by which Being expresses itself. They write:

...man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other...
rather they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product.
Production as process overtakes all idealistic categories and constitutes a
cycle whose relationship to desire is that of immanent principle. (ibid, p. 4-
5)

IV

CONCLUSION

All this shows, in a sense, what is wrong in psychoanalysis and neglected by Marcuse from the standpoint of post-structuralist account of desire. Psychoanalytic fiction does not allow subjects to prompt desire to communicate, disseminate and intensify itself. Oedipus, in this sense, can be read as a form of imperialism that attempts to invade the very field between life, society and subjective desire. The oedipal schema forces the desire production into the daddy-mommy-me triangle and keeps it away from real production. Desire in this way turns to be an enemy, attack of which from unconscious to outside needs constant control and manipulation.

All this does not rule out, however, that Marcusean optimism about and hope for Eros should be endorsed. "Politics of desire" deserves a patient philosophical study, and Marcuse perhaps sparked this discussion in a very vivid context. His tolerance to Freud and his concepts, I think, is sometimes too uncritical. As Kelly writes,

... surprisingly, Marcuse adopts a rather mechanistic concept of the instincts, building on Freud's biogenetic energy-instinct model -- which has been sharply criticized and rejected both within various circles of psychoanalytic theory, as well as within critical theory (Habermas and his students) and poststructuralism. (Kelly, 2004)

Yet I believe that his interest in neither Freud, nor the importance does he attach to the very notion of Eros and desire is irrelevant to the contemporary politics and philosophy. He can be read and re-read from various post-structuralist perspectives. In these reading attempts, I believe, Marcusean insistence on the idea that many of Freudian concepts should be taken outside the realm of psychology and therapy. Desire, I would argue, is the very first one to take outside if we are to liberate our conceptions of "freedom" and "productivity".

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