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**Marcuse and Adorno: Objectivity, Mediation, and One-Sidedness.
Psychoanalysis in the social context of modern civilization.**

Abstract

Sigmund Freud pioneered the exploration of the reality of unconscious instinctual drives that constitute the essence of the individual's personality and therefore of his behavior. Herbert Marcuse, basing himself primarily on Freud's theoretical conception, attempts in *Eros and Civilization* to both expose the existence and illustrate the workings of a capitalist civilization whose progress has been marked by domination and 'surplus-repression'.

Theodor Adorno, however, in his essay *Sociology and Psychology*, argues that an attempt to derive the social totality in terms of the instinctual psychic personality is problematic, as this totality transcends the psyche and actually mediates it under its organization. In this paper we will contrast both approaches, based on some significant texts, and raise the problem of the method of Psychoanalysis and science in the social context of modern civilization. Our intention is to question the demarcation between philosophy and science in modern readings of *Eros* in Psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Freud, Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, *Eros*, Psychoanalysis, science

Resumo

Sigmund Freud foi pioneiro na exploração da realidade das tendências inconscientes que na sua visão constituem a essência da personalidade individual e portanto do seu

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comportamento. Herbert Marcuse, baseando-se sobretudo na visão teórica de Freud tentou em *Eros e Civilização* expor a sua existência e ilustrar o seu funcionamento numa civilização capitalista cujo devir seria marcado pela ‘sobre repressão’.

Teodoro Adorno, contudo, no ensaio *Sociology and Psychology*, argumentou que a tentativa de fazer derivar a totalidade do mundo social nos termos definidos a partir dos instintos psíquicos da personalidade humana é bastante problemática, pois essa totalidade transcende a psiquê e é realmente mediada pela sua organização. Neste artigo contrastamos ambas as abordagens, baseados nos textos que considerámos mais significativos e levantamos o problema do método psicanalítico e da ciência no contexto social da moderna civilização. A nossa intenção é questionar a actual demarcação entre filosofia e ciência nas leituras modernas do *Eros* na psicanálise; na medida em que um texto tão breve o permite.

Keywords: Freud, Marcuse, Teodoro Adorno, *Eros*, Psicanálise e ciência.

Marcuse and Adorno: Objectivity, Mediation, and One-Sidedness.

The method of Psychoanalysis in the social context of modern civilization.

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1. The problem of human repression under the economic organization, and how to account for this

Through his revolutionary theories, Sigmund Freud pioneered the exploration of the reality of unconscious instinctual drives that constitute the essence of the individual's personality and therefore of his behavior. Freud, of course, was not unaware of the relation between men's passions and desires, conscious and unconscious, and the social context, that he approached, e.g., in his 1930 book *Civilization and its discontents* (Freud, 2005)², but the effects of the socio-economic framework on human life were never developed by him.

Basing himself primarily on Freud's theoretical conception, in *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse attempts to both expose the existence and illustrate the workings of a [capitalist] civilization whose progress has been plagued by domination and 'surplus-repression'—and thus explores the bondage of the individual in terms of Freud's analysis of the human psyche.

In his essay « Sociology and Psychology » , however, Theodor Adorno argues that an attempt to derive the social totality in terms of the instinctual psychic personality is problematic, as this totality transcends the psyche and actually mediates it under its organization.

Facing both these thinkers is a human society that has fallen victim to a dominating economic organization, one that alienates man and rationalizes the repression necessary

¹ We would like to thank Prof Parker Everett, University of Chicago, for his advice throughout the process of writing this paper and to the numerous colleagues, both in Paris and Chicago, both in favor and against our approach, who made suggestions while this paper circulated as a working paper.

In this article we assume basic knowledge of the concepts of Freud's theory of sexuality, and both Marcuse and Adorno theories, to focus in a specific problem. For example, we do not try to explain Freudian concepts such as the pleasure or reality principle (including their relationship) or even why civilization is synonymous with repression, a relation that helps to differentiate Marcuse from Freud.

² He maintained, e.g. that religion – once necessary to restrain man's violent nature in the early stages of civilization – in modern times, can be set aside in favor of science Cf. Freud, 2005.

to sustain this. Marcuse finds answer to this problem in a complex but fragile and ambitious link between Freud's theory and the alienating system of labor; while Adorno argues that such a link is impossible, as the difficulties in doing so reflect an actual objective contradiction between the individual and society.

2. Marcuse and the reality and pleasure principles in contemporary society

Marcuse asks whether the conflict between Freud's « pleasure principle » (cf. Jones, 1964)³ and the reality principle that subdues it is « irreconcilable to such a degree that it necessitates the repressiveness of man's instinctual structure » (Marcuse, 1966, 5). Through this question, he attempts to explore the concept of a non-repressive civilization. Though he notes that Freud himself argues for the irreconcilability of the two principles as a pre-requisite of civilization, Marcuse argues that Freud's own theoretical conception contains elements that break through this irreconcilability (Marcuse, 1966, 5). Attempting to « reinterpret Freud's theoretical conception in terms of its...socio-historical content », Marcuse makes clear his opposition to the revisionist Neo-Freudian schools, who reject the sociological elements of Freud's theory (Marcuse, 1966, 5). Moreover, Marcuse argues that precisely these rejected concepts provide « the most concrete insights into the historical structure of civilization » — despite the fact that Freud himself treats these as tentative preliminary hypotheses — and thus attempts to uncover the 'instinctual roots' behind the specific organization of reality (Cf. Marcuse, 1966, 6-7, 87).

According to Marcuse, Freud's equation of civilization with repression should not only be questioned, but he also suggests that, in fact, that « intensified progress seems to be bound up with intensified unfreedom » and that « repressiveness is the more vigorously maintained the more unnecessary it becomes » (Marcuse, 1966, 4). Though agreeing with Freud that the progress of culture does necessitate some degree of instinctual repression, Marcuse differentiates between *basic* repression—the instinctual repression that is always and everywhere necessary to effect man's change from the 'human animal to the animal sapiens' and thus render civilization possible—and *surplus-repression*, repression acting as the agent of domination (Cf. Marcuse, 1966, 38). He argues that, in the history of civilization after the advent of capitalism, the two forms of repression have been inextricably intertwined. Capitalism rendered some labor and repression unnecessary, he maintains, yet the *surplus-repression* remained.

As repression has been enforced in the name of progress, Marcuse also explores the process of the pleasure principle's subjugation under the reality principle⁴. Marcuse calls

³ Though Freud revised his theory of the instincts multiple times, the notion of a pleasure principle as the driving force of the instincts is consistent. Cf. Jones, 1964.

⁴ Marcuse does not simply take over the categories of Freud, nor do we assert this, that would imply to gloss over a number of significant differences between them. E. g. Marcuse claims that the various component

the specific reality principle of capitalist civilization the *performance principle* (Marcuse, 1966, 35). Behind it lies the attitude of productivity — holding that man must be productive in labor because he lives in a world that cannot satisfy his needs without requiring restraint and work. Marcuse argues, however, that, under current industrial civilization, scarcity is no longer a matter of its ‘brute fact’, but of its «specific organization» (Marcuse, 1966, 35). This specific organization of scarcity imposes and necessitates surplus-repression to perpetuate the dominating organization of reality to which it belongs. In light of Marcuse’s criteria for gauging repression — «the scope and intensity of instinctual repression obtain their full significance only in relation to the historically possible extent of freedom» (Marcuse, 1966, 88) —the current societal organization under the performance principle appears as an explicit denial of the potentiality of freedom in industrial civilization.

The performance principle’s repressive organization of sexuality is the foremost expression of Marcuse’s attempt to reveal a *direct* link between Freud’s theory and the dominating nature of civilization, a direct correlation between a repressive instinctual organization and the dominating system of labor sustained by it. From Freud’s theory of sexuality, Marcuse elaborates that, under the reality principle, the various component instincts of infantile sexuality are unified and subjugated into genital primacy and the procreative function, and argues that procreative sexuality is then channeled into «monogamic» institutions (Cf. Marcuse, 1966, 41). While acknowledging this instinctual repression by the reality principle, Marcuse points out that the external world faced by the ego is a *specific* socio-historical organization of reality, materialized in and affecting the psychic structure through societal institutions and agents, laws and values, which together constitute the «body» of the reality principle (Marcuse, 1966, 37). Moreover, while any form of the reality principle requires a certain degree of instinctual control and repression, this ‘body’ of the specific reality principle imposes additional or *surplus* constraints, « over and above those indispensable » for civilization and thus repression solely in the interests of societal domination. Into this system of institutions and agents in the services of domination he groups procreative sexuality channeled into monogamic institutions. And exposing these as agents of surplus-repression for the performance principle, Marcuse reveals the link between the repression of infantile sexuality (and the instinctual modification it implies) and the dominating reality principle, in other words, the sociological dimensions of Freud’s theory.

Marcuse also claims that, through a repressive unification of the various component instincts of infantile sexuality that implies a denial of their ‘autonomous development’, the nature of sexuality is transformed « from an autonomous principle governing the entire organism...into a specialized temporary function » (Marcuse, 1966, 41). The nature of *Eros*, the life principle behind sexuality, is thus transformed. Subsequently, the

instincts of infantile sexuality are altered. This may need to be unpacked and discussed in much detail, but would demand the inclusion of a section summarizing Freud’s theories, which is completely outside the scope of this essay.

success of this process achieves the «socially necessary *desexualization* of the body: the libido becomes concentrated in one part of the body, leaving most of the rest free for use as the instrument of labor» (Marcuse, 1966, 48). Therefore, in Marcuse's analysis, the organization of the sexual instincts enforced by the 'body' of the performance principle directly correlates with the interests of the system of labor.

Marcuse argues that the reason why this does not appear as problematic is that, in the perpetuation of the performance principle, repression becomes 'rationalized', as domination no longer sustains merely specific privileges but also the framework of society as a whole (cf. Marcuse, 1966, 45, 91). Under its rule, the individual is rewarded with a higher standard of living, but he remains ignorant that these fruits of the performance principle blind him from the awareness that he « could both work less and determine » his « own needs and satisfactions » (Marcuse, 1966, 94) . Alternatively, he argues that, in a societal state that «released the free play of individual needs and faculties», the body would no longer be used as the full-time instrument of labor and would therefore be '*resexualized*' (Cf. Marcuse, 1966, 208). According to Marcuse, this 'resexualization' in turn implies a «reactivation of erotogenic zones», whereupon the body in its entirety would become an instrument of pleasure, making work pleasurable and improving libidinal relationships (Cf. Marcuse, 1966, 201-202, 210).

Marcuse thus bases his theory on Freud's own theory of the psychological personality and of the instincts. By demonstrating that the repressive organization of sexuality corresponds with a reality principle that, for the services of its perpetuation, makes use of this modification of libidinal energy, Marcuse attempts to derive the latter from the former (i.e. derive the dominating capitalist society and its performance principle from the repression of instinctual drives)⁵.

In a paper titled *Sociology and Psychology*, Theodore Adorno confronts the dominating organization of reality in a different way. His theory does not derive from Freud's theory the way Marcuse's does, but, rather, exposes the shortcomings of such an approach in the face of the objective societal antagonism.

3. Adorno and the limits of psychological and sociological explanation

Adorno's criticism in « The Continuum between Neurosis and Psychosis » in part II of *Sociology and Psychology*, printed in *The New Left Review*, contains the various elements of his theory of an antagonistic society. This text does not change Adorno's fundamental ideas on the subject, which were expressed in a Conference held in 1946 in

⁵ To include other texts and works, such as Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and the *Essay on Liberation*, or for Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, *Minimia Moralia*, and *Dialectics of Enlightenment* might help to build up this interpretation, but would take us too far away from the main argument.

San Francisco, unpublished in English until 1952 (Cf. Adorno, 2007, 7), but we prefer, however, to refer to the more recent paper⁶.

He argues that the dynamic of this antagonistic society creates problems that are manifested in the obstacles facing psychological therapy, as well as in those facing psychology, not to mention the light in which psychology views the object of its study (Adorno, 1968, 94). Looking into various particulars of psychoanalysis, Adorno links these observations with his larger societal theory.

Adorno observes that, in the case of psychotics, their defenses against unconscious impulses—stemming from the ego—are supposed to be bolstered, whilst those of neurotics broken down (cf. Adorno, 1968, 94). In terms of the affinity—acknowledged in psychoanalysis—existing between neurosis and psychosis, this practice of insisting on more consciousness for one patient while protecting the other «against the...danger that is...invoked as the first patient's salvation» constitutes a «nonsensical» dualism, according to Adorno (1968, 94). On the same note, however, Adorno emphasizes that this same dualism of treatment is not merely an inconsistency on the part of therapy, but reflects and mimics an objective contradiction in the societal organization.

Moreover, Adorno argues that, in reducing «everything it calls unconscious...to the same thing», in extracting the psyche from the social dialectic and investigating it as an «abstract 'for itself' », psychoanalysis «makes a first principle out of a mediated product» — namely, the psyche of «the bourgeois individual» (Adorno, 1968, 79, 81, 96). Psychoanalysis' abstraction of the psyche as a 'for itself', Adorno continues, is «all too consistent with a society that hires and fires people as so many units of abstract labor-power» (Adorno, 1968, 81). Thus, Adorno seeks to reveal the reality that psychoanalysis tends to take as objective fact something that is actually mediated by the societal organization, namely, the individual psyche. He argues that, under this illusion of objectivism, psychoanalysis attempts to give a «psychological explanation for what does not derive from the individual psyche» (Adorno, 1967, 74). In essence, this '*one-sidedness*' of psychoanalysis' object of study mimics the one-sidedness of an apparatus that sees individuals as units serving to perpetuate it and governs their relations «according to the dictates of exchange-value» (Adorno, 1967, 74).

In light of the impossibility of giving a 'psychological explanation for what does not derive from the psyche', Adorno criticizes Freud's attempts to solve sociological problems psychologically, to derive the objective totality from the mediated end-result of the individual psyche. Under the hierarchical division of labor and its alienating, one-sided conception of man determined by his labor capacity, the individual's instinctual structure is mediated and cannot be analyzed objectively.

⁶ The San Francisco paper represents a previous and less mature conception and remained unknown to the general public and was seldom mentioned in this debate.

4. Adorno against Marcuse?

In this sense, Adorno would seem to criticize Marcuse, for his own theory in *Eros and Civilization* is based on Freud's 'theoretical conception' and therefore falls vulnerable to the same objections. Marcuse's attempt to uncover the 'instinctual roots' of the performance principle rings of the same error of trying to uncover a 'psychological explanation for what does not derive from the individual psyche' and taking the findings of psychoanalysis as objective, unmediated facts.

In the face of this problem and the one-sidedness of the dominating order, Adorno does provide a solution. He argues that this *one-sidedness* must be *pursued* — in the case of psychoanalysis—by an investigation of its object of study without its abstraction to explain reality outside of its scope, in order to come closer to an understanding of the actual one-sidedness of the antagonistic society. By pursuing this one-sidedness, Adorno maintains, «there is more hope that concentration on the particular isolate will break through its monadic crust to disclose the universal mediation at its core» (Adorno, 1967, 74). By focusing of its object of study alone, without abstracting it to account for the societal reality, psychoanalysis can come closer to understanding how the societal mediation of the psyche actually works.

The different ways in which these two thinkers approach the problem of the societal domination confronting man are thus contrasted. Adorno exposes the shortcomings of Freud's attempts at explaining sociological problems psychologically, deriving the general from the particular and therefore exhausting psychoanalysis' field of study⁷. By following a theory that both exhausts its scope and takes as objective fact an end result that is actually mediated, Marcuse falls vulnerable to Adorno's theoretical criticism.

This problem, according to Adorno, is not one that can be overcome by a conceptual abstraction and quantitative information; for, so long as the organization of reality sees individuals as labor capacities for its own perpetuation, only an *awareness* of this one-sidedness and an investigation free from attempts at conceptual psychological abstraction can lead to an understanding of the fundamental problem in this dynamic.

This means that sociological domination should not be explained (solely) crossing the psycho-social divide, in the happy expression of Cavalletto (cf. 2007, 11-36).

Even Marcuse, in the new preface to the Vintage Edition, acknowledges some insufficiencies of his method, or at least the provisional status of his theories: « I have sufficiently (and perhaps unduly) stressed the progressive and promising aspects of this

⁷On the treatment of sublimation in Adorno cf. Goebel, 2012, 193-224.

development in order to be entitled to accentuate here the negative » (Marcuse, 1962, xi.).

5. Conclusion: Objectivity and the method of Psychoanalysis

We can therefore reach the conclusion, as others recent critics did, that «[o]nly dogmatism can today still blind one to the fact that a string of premises of Freudian theory have in the meantime become highly questionable»⁸; or at least question the scientific value of Vulgar Marxism applied to psychoanalysis (cf. the excellent essay of Whitebook, 2004, 51-78).

Notwithstanding, it is difficult not to see that both Marcuse and Adorno shared a powerful insight on the consequences of the organization of modern life and society concerning the impoverishment of love and eroticism, maybe as a result from the « conscious separation of the instinctual from the intellectual sphere » (Marcuse, 1962, x.). Even if morality is not self-evident (Adorno, 2001, 5, however 167 and ff), it should not be expelled from the exploration of the reality of unconscious instinctual drives

The divide between these two members of the Frankfurt School is the divide concerning which scientific method should be pursued in exploring this problem, an extension of (Marxian) sociology (Marcuse), or a specific (Marxian) psychological method (Adorno).

Suspicious could arise, however, that neither Freudian revisionist method passes the test of demarcation between philosophy and science: verification. In the words of Karl Popper, «[s]ome of the famous leaders of German sociology who do their intellectual best, and do it with the best conscience in the world, are nevertheless, I believe, simply talking trivialities in high sounding language (...)» (Adorno *et alia*, 1976, 296). Moreover, if we are dealing with genuine philosophical and non-scientific problems, perhaps a deeper, and certainly more beautiful, starting point can be found in the Ladder of Love that Socrates reveals in the *Symposium*.

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⁸ And Honneth criticism is quite comprehensive: « Developments in infant research, in developmental psychology generally, but also in evolutionary biology, have cast doubt on central and basic assumptions of the psychoanalytic view of young children », Honneth, 2009, 126. Cf. also 126-145.

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