

**The Human Implications of Instinctivistic „Radicalism“
A Reply to Herbert Marcuse**

„The Human Implications of Instinctivistic ‘Radicalism’” is a reply to Herbert Marcuse’s paper „The Social Implications of Freudian ‘Revisionsm’ and was first published in: *Dissent*, New York 1955, pp. 342-349. The numbers in {brackets} refer to the pages of this first English publication.- **Copyright** © 1955 by Erich Fromm; Copyright © 2004 by The Literary Estate of Erich Fromm, Ursrainer Ring 24, D-72076 Tuebingen, Germany, E-mail: frommfunk[at-symbol]aol.com.

I am glad to have the opportunity of answering Herbert Marcuse's article on the „Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism“ in the last issue of this journal. This is so partly because Marcuse singles me out as a representative of the „revisionist“ theory and accuses me of having changed from a radical thinker and critic of society into a spokesman for adjustment to the status quo. More importantly, I want to answer Marcuse because he touches upon some of the most significant problems of psychoanalytic theory and its social implications, problems which are of general interest for any student of contemporary society.

However, I cannot follow Marcuse's procedure of lumping various „revisionist“ writers together. I can only speak for myself; and this for a very good reason: although there are certain points which Horney's and Sullivan's writings have in common with my own, they differ fundamentally with regard to the very problems which Marcuse deals with in his paper. (I have myself pointed to various basic differences with Sullivan in *The Sane Society*) This lumping together has the unfortunate result that Marcuse substantiates his brief against me by quoting Horney or Sullivan whenever there is no passage from my writings which would serve the purpose.

Marcuse's paper contains two main theses. First, that Freudian theory is not only correct psychologically, but a *radical* theory in its explicit and implicit criticism of society. Second, that my own theories are philosophically idealistic, advising adjustment to present alienated society, and only paying lip service to the criticism of this same society.

Let us take up these two claims, one after another:

Indeed, it is true that Freud was a critic of society, *but his criticism was not that of contemporary capitalistic society, but of civilization as such*. Happiness, for Freud, is satisfaction of the sexual instinct, specifically of the wish for free access to all available females. Primitive man, according to Freud, has yet to, cope with exceedingly few {343} restrictions to the satisfaction of these basic desires. Furthermore, he can give vent to his aggression. It is the repression of these desires which leads to ever-increasing civilization and, at the same time, to an increasing incidence of neurosis. „Civilized man,“ says Freud, „has exchanged some part of his chances of happiness for a measure of 'security.'“¹ Freud's concept of man was the same which underlies most anthropological speculation in the nineteenth century. Man, as he is molded by capitalism, is supposed to be the natural man, hence capitalism the form of society which corresponds to the needs of human nature. This nature is competitive, aggressive, egotistical. It seeks its fulfillment in victory over one's competitors. In the sphere of biology this

¹ S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated from the German by J. Riviere, The Hogarth Press, Ltd., London, p. 92.

was demonstrated by Darwin in his concept of the survival of the fittest; in the sphere of economics in the concept of the *homo economicus*, held by the classical economists. In the sphere of psychology Freud expressed the same idea about man, based on the competitiveness resulting from the nature of the sexual instinct. „*Homo homini lupus*; who has the courage to dispute it in the face of all the evidence in his own life and in history?“ (*Ibid.*, p. 85.) Freud asks. Man's aggressiveness, Freud thinks, has two sources; one, the innate striving for destruction (death instinct) and the other the frustration of his instinctual desires, imposed upon him by civilization. While man may channel part of his aggression against himself, through the Super-Ego, and while a minority can sublimate their sexual desire into brotherly love, aggressiveness remains ineradicable. Men will always compete with and attack each other, if not for material things, then for the

prerogatives in sexual relationships, which must arouse the strongest rancour and most violent enmity among men and women who are otherwise equal. Let us suppose this were also to be removed by instituting complete liberty in sexual life, so that the family, the germ-cell of culture, ceased to exist; one could not, it is true, foresee the new paths on which cultural development might then proceed, but one thing one would be bound to expect, and that is that the ineffaceable feature of human nature would follow wherever it led. (*Ibid.*, p. 89.)

Since for Freud love is in its essence sexual desire, he is compelled to assume a contradiction between love and social cohesion. Love, according to him, is by its very nature egotistical and antisocial, and the sense of solidarity and brotherly love are not primary feelings rooted in man's nature, but aim-inhibited sexual desires.

On the basis of his concept of man, that of his inherent wish for unlimited sexual satisfaction, and of his destructiveness, Freud must arrive at a picture of the necessary conflict between all civilization and mental health and happiness. Primitive man is healthy and happy because he is not frustrated in his basic instincts, but he lacks the {344} blessings of culture. Civilized man is more secure, enjoys art and science, but he is bound to be neurotic because of the continued frustration of his instincts, enforced by civilization.

For Freud, social life and civilization are essentially and necessarily in contrast to the needs of human nature as he sees it, and man is confronted with the tragic alternative between happiness based on the unrestricted satisfaction of his instincts, and security and cultural achievements based on instinctual frustration, hence conducive to neurosis and all other forms of mental sickness. Civilization, to Freud, is the product of instinctual frustration, and thus the cause of mental illness. It is obvious that from Freud's standpoint, there is no hope for any fundamental improvement of society, since no social order can transcend the necessary and unavoidable conflict between the claims of human nature and happiness on the one side, and the claims of society and civilization on the other. Is this a radical theory, a radical criticism of alienated society?

Freud makes a specific criticism of contemporary society only with regard to one point. He criticizes it for its over-strict sexual morality, which produces neurosis to a greater extent than necessary. This criticism is not at all concerned with the socio-economic structure of society, but only with its sexual morality, and it is part of the same attitude of tolerance which we find in modern education, criminology and psychiatry (as I have pointed out in my paper „The Social Conditions of Psychoanalytic Therapy“ which Marcuse mentions in his article, published in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 4 IV 1935). This criticism of contemporary society is of the same spirit as that of all reformist propositions.

The second premise of Marcuse is the assumption that Freud's theory of instincts is a radical theory, because it is materialistic and goes to the roots. I find it amazing that Marcuse should commit the error of calling a theory which is entirely

of the same spirit as that of nineteenth-century bourgeois materialism „radical.“ As anyone who has read Jones' biography of Freud can see very clearly, Freud was greatly influenced by materialist physiologists like Brucke, du BoisReymond, and others. According to their views, the clues to all phenomena of man were the physical-chemical ones, and Freud's libido theory is built on this basis. It is this type of materialism which had been overcome by Marx's historical materialism, in which the activity of the total personality in his relations to nature and to other members of society is the Archimedean point from which history and social changes are explained.

Starting from this kind of materialism one arrives at a theory of human nature which is by no means „ideological.“ Such a theory is based on the fact of the „human situation,“ on the specific conditions of human existence. Man, having awareness of himself, has transcended the natural world; he is life aware of itself. At the same time he remains a part of nature, and from this contradiction follow his basic passions {345} and strivings, the need to relate himself to others, the need to transcend his own role as a creature by creating (or destroying), the need to have a sense of identity and a frame of orientation or devotion. These needs can be fulfilled in various ways--the difference between these ways is the difference between mental health and illness, between happiness and unhappiness. Yet they *must* be fulfilled unless man is to become insane. On the other hand, the fulfillment of all instinctual needs, including sex, is not a sufficient condition for happiness--not even for sanity. The concept of human existence is not less real than that of the instincts, and it is not idealistic; it is broader and conceived in terms of activity and practice--rather than of a specific physiological substance.

To believe that a theory which demands greater freedom for the sexual instinct is for this very reason a radical theory is an error which can be understood either as the result of a misunderstood materialism, or as a reaction to the fact that the conservative and reactionary groups were adherents of a strict and repressive sexual morality in the first part of the twentieth century. Thus it appears that sexual emancipation was a radical step in the emancipation from oppression. However, the attitude of the Nazis toward sexual freedom was sufficiently concrete evidence that this assumption was wrong. The Nazis, far from following the reactionary ideology in this point, favored sexual promiscuity and were extraordinarily permissive in their sexual code. But the example of the Nazis is not even necessary. Unlimited sexual satisfaction is only part of a characteristic trait of twentieth-century capitalism, the need for mass consumption, the principle that every desire must be satisfied immediately, that no wish must be frustrated.

The principle that desires must be satisfied without much delay has also determined sexual behavior, especially since the end of the First World War. A crude form of misunderstood Freudianism used to furnish the appropriate rationalizations; the idea being that neuroses result from „repressed“ sexual strivings, that frustrations were „traumatic,“ and the less you repressed the healthier you were. Even parents were anxious to give their children everything they wanted lest they became frustrated and acquired a „complex.“ Unfortunately, many of these children as well as their parents landed on the analyst's couch, provided they could afford it.

The greed for things and the inability to postpone the satisfaction of wishes as characteristic of modern man has been stressed by thoughtful observers, such as Max Scheler and Bergson. It has been given its most poignant expression by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*. Among the slogans by which the adolescents in the *Brave New World* are conditioned, one of the most important ones is „Never put off till tomorrow the run you can have today.“ It is hammered into them, „two hundred repetitions, twice a week from fourteen to sixteen and a half.“ This instant realization of wishes is felt as happiness. „Everybody's happy nowadays“ is another of the *Brave New* {346} *World* slogans; people „get what they want and they never want what they can't get.“ This need for the immediate con-

sumption of commodities and the immediate consummation of sexual desires is coupled in the *Brave New World*, as in our own. It is considered immoral to keep one „love“ partner beyond a relatively short time. „Love“ is short-lived sexual desire, which must be satisfied immediately.

The greatest care is taken to prevent you from loving anyone too much. There's no such thing as a divided allegiance; you're so conditioned that you can't help doing what you ought to do. And what you ought to do is on the whole so pleasant, so many of the natural impulses are allowed free play, that there really aren't any temptations to resist.¹

This lack of inhibition of desires leads to the paralysis and eventually the destruction of the self. If I do not postpone the satisfaction of my wish (and am conditioned only to wish for what I can get), I have no conflicts, no doubts; no decision has to be made; I am never alone with myself, because I am always busy--either working, or having fun. I have no need to be aware of myself as myself because I am constantly absorbed having pleasure. *I am a system of desires and satisfactions*; I have to work in order to fulfill my desires--and these very desires are constantly stimulated and directed by the economic machine. Most of these appetites are synthetic; even sexual appetite is by far not as „natural“ as it is made out to be. It is to some extent stimulated artificially. And it needs to be if we want to have people as the contemporary system needs them--people who feel „happy,“ who have no conflicts, who are guided without the use of force.

The principle, then, that love is identical with sexual desire, and the idea that the emancipation of man lies in the complete and unrestricted satisfaction of his sexual desire is, in fact, part of the cement which binds men together in the present phase of capitalism. It was a reformist ideology in the beginning of the century; to think of it as a radical theory now, means not to have learned anything from the development of society during the last thirty years.

I come now to Marcuse's second thesis: his criticism of „revisionism.“ Marcuse claims that Freud's most basic concepts, as for instance the function of the unconscious, „were redefined [by me] in such a way that their explosive connotations were all but eliminated... Psychoanalysis was reoriented on the traditional consciousness-psychology of pre-Freudian texture.“ Marcuse does not even try to substantiate this criticism. My own work (and that of Sullivan and to a large extent that of Horney), is centered around the conflict between unconscious and conscious strivings. If one assumes that the unconscious is identical with sexual strivings, one might be blind enough to assume that any theory which does not assume that the sexual instinct is *the* {347} driving force disregards the unconscious,--but it requires a good deal of naiveté, at best, to arrive at this conclusion.

Related to this point is Marcuse's insistence that „secondary factors and relationships (of the mature person and his cultural environment) are now given the dignity of primary processes,“ thus neglecting the impact of early infancy, „the formative period of the universal fate in the individual.“ I am at a loss to see how Marcuse can have missed the fact that Sullivan's work is almost entirely concerned with the development of childhood, and that I have stated that the character of a person is mainly determined by his childhood situation. I have tried to show in *Escape from Freedom* that this fact, however, is not in contrast to the impact of society on the individual, because the family is „the psychological agency of society“ which has the function to mold the character of the growing person in a way useful and necessary for the continued functioning of an existing society. Marcuse does not refer to one of the key concepts in all my writings, from the article in 1932 to the present, namely that of the „*social character*.“ I have defined social character as the nucleus of the character structure which is shared by most members of the same culture. The members of the society and of the vari-

¹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*. The Vanguard Library, p. 196.

ous classes or status groups within it have to behave in such a way as to be able to function in the sense required by the social system. It is the function of the social character to canalize the energies of the members of society in such a way that their behavior is not a matter of conscious decision as to whether or not to follow the social pattern, but one of *wanting to act as they have to act* and at the same time finding gratification in acting according to the requirements of the culture. In other words, it is the social character's function to *mold and: channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society*.

More important, however, than all these distortions or misunderstandings, is Marcuse's central point, that to speak of love, integrity, inner strength, etc., means to speak on an ideological level. Only the sexual instinct is the substratum of reality which underlies the ideological super-structure of love, etc. Would Marcuse claim that hate, destructiveness, sadism, is an ideology? Obviously not. The only controversy which might arise is whether one explains them as being rooted in the sexual instinct, in the death instinct, or in other fundamental factors of human existence. Love and inner strength on the other hand are, according to Marcuse, only ideologies. His argument is that in contemporary alienated society there does not exist any love, integrity or inner strength as a reality. He claims that the goal of „optimal development of a person's potentialities and the realization of his individuality“ is „essentially unattainable ...because the established civilization itself. in its very structure, denies it.“ He goes on to say that

either one defines „personality“ and „individuality“ in terms of their possibilities within the established form of civilization, then their realization is for the vast majority tantamount to successful adjustment. Or one defines them in terms of their transcending content, including their {348} socially denied potentialities beyond (and beneath) their actual existence: in this case, their realization would imply transgression beyond the established form of civilization and to radically new modes of „personality“ and „individuality“ incompatible with the prevailing ones. Today, this would mean „curing“ the patient to become a rebel or (which is saying the same thing) a martyr. The revisionist concept vacillates between the two definitions. Fromm revives all the time-honored values of idealistic ethics as if nobody had ever demonstrated their conformistic and repressive features. He talks of the productive realization of the personality, of care, responsibility, and respect for one's fellow men, of productive love and happiness as if man could actually practice all this and still remain sane and full of „well-being“ in a society which Fromm himself describes as one of total alienation, dominated by the commodity relations of the „market“.

What Marcuse is saying here is that any person who has integrity and is capable of love and happiness, in present-day capitalistic society, must either become a martyr or insane. He makes slight reservations himself by speaking of these goals as being „essentially“ unattainable, and of their realization as being tantamount to adjustment for the „vast majority;“ but he does not pay any attention to these important qualifications. I make it very clear in my own description of the productive character that he is rare in an alienated society, and in contrast to the marketing orientation which is the rule. I analyze the productive orientation as being one which transcends the prevailing pattern, and only a biased reading can ignore the fact that I emphasize again and again that happiness, love, as I define them, are not the same virtues as those called love and happiness in an alienated society. But all this is very different from saying that only a martyr or a psychotic can have integrity or love today.

It is amazing that Marcuse should neglect his own dialectical position to the extent of drawing a black and white picture, and forget that the alienated society

already develops in itself the elements which contradict it. To equate a rebel with a martyr in Western capitalistic society is rather unrealistic, unless somebody is so deeply conformist that to be a rebel to him means to be a martyr. If Marcuse were right, then indeed we would have to arrive at the conclusion that there is no place for love and happiness whatsoever in capitalistic society. The only difference between the average man and the „radical thinker,“ then, is that the average man is an opportunistic automaton without knowing it, while the radical thinker is the same, but knowing it. In Marcuse's theory obviously the dehumanization of man has to reach its completion, and then, and only then, can his liberation take place. Anybody who studies the conditions for happiness and love is, according to Marcuse, betraying radical thought. Anybody who tries to help himself and others to realize to some extent these traits is, unless a martyr or a fool, a companion to Rev. Peale. I believe, on the contrary, that to study the conditions of love and integrity means to discover the reasons for their failure in capitalistic society; that the analysis of love {349} is social criticism; that to attempt to practice these virtues amounts to the most vital act of rebellion. Unfortunately, this is not only an academic question. The neglect of the human factor, and the callousness towards moral qualities in political figures, which was so apparent in Lenin's attitude, is one of the reasons for the victory of Stalinism. Stalinism is the realization of socialism, with the exception of its human goals. Since any improvement of the human situation will depend on the simultaneous change in the economic, political and in the human characterological spheres, no theory can be radical which takes a nihilistic attitude toward man.

I agree with Marcuse that contemporary capitalistic society is one of alienation. Hence one in which the humanistic goals of life, those of happiness and individuality, are rarely realized. (In *The Sane Society*, which has just been published, I deal with the effects of alienation on the individual). But I disagree entirely with the view that as a consequence these qualities exist in nobody, that to analyze their nature and the conditions for their development is ideological, and that the encouragement of their practice means preaching adjustment. Marcuse's position is an example of human nihilism disguised as radicalism.

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