



Eros and Civilization by Herbert Marcuse

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contemporary societies now requires external cultural forms to achieve feelings of personal completion. And, as in drug dependencies or love affairs, we sometimes willingly give ourselves to our “addictions.” Although we allow ourselves to be “caught in play” to this extent, we usually “catch ourselves” before things get too far out of hand. As Georg Simmel argued, we are commonly in and out of situations at the same time.

Caught in Play is a thoughtful analysis of entertainment forms. It is somewhat less successful as an interpretation of ritual and play. Stromberg’s (p. 102) definition of ritual as a “religious ceremony of some sort” is largely just a way of making room for an expanded treatment of play as a kind of imaginative involvement—which is rather narrow. Indeed, his book is less about play in its wider implications than it is about what this reviewer (*Play Reconsidered* [University of Illinois, 2006]) calls “communitas.” That is, imaginative participation is tremendously important, but play is something different. Play features a prominent role for human agents in the construction and management of their own activities. Giving oneself to transcendent form—as Émile Durkheim’s ritualists or Stromberg’s “players” do—provides many lessons about the character of social arrangements and their emotional and moral possibilities. However, discovery is not the same as invention, games are different from play, and the meanings of orderliness are not equivalent to those of disruption and disorder. Play, as Huizinga explained, may be an obeisance to orderly form, but it is much more a willful, assertive stance that is taken toward persons, objects, and situations. Players—even those with rootless, flexible selves—energetically deconstruct and reconstruct events as much as they luxuriate in the splendor of their accommodations. That more active player deserves further analysis.

Eros and Civilization. By Herbert Marcuse. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
Pp. 277.

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It is hard to remember that the central theoretical concern of 19th- and 20th-century social theory was scarcity. Despite the predictions of writers from Patten and Commons to Keynes and Schumpeter, despite the “affluence” theories of the 1950s, social theory focused on scarcity until well after 2000. Of course, starvation levels of scarcity had rapidly vanished from developed societies. But then relative scarcity became the new focus, under the rubric of “inequality.” And of course international scarcity—the differences characterized as “north and south”—remained a problem of truly 19th-century proportions. Together, these factors long preserved the dominance of theoretical approaches that told us little or nothing about societies that had too much of nearly everything.

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To be sure, the environmental movement protested the consequences of abundant consumption. Yet it did not therefore rethink the practices and aims of living itself, but only those of living too extravagantly. Air, water, space, “nature”: these became the new subjects of scarcity. Economics itself dodged the fact of abundance by transferring its attention to the scarcity of time in which to enjoy abundance. Thus, one way or another, the same old theories were applied. Only the transformation of social and cognitive life by the internet and the knowledge revolution finally forced the issue of abundance. When the internet made everyone an expert, the experts finally took notice.

Yet some theorists had posed the question of abundance long before, none of them more forcefully than Herbert Marcuse. In today’s histories, Marcuse survives as the avuncular European intellectual beloved by American youth of the 1960s, who turned to Marcuse for enlightenment when their tranquil coming-of-age was disrupted by an incomprehensible war, the radicalization of the civil rights movement, and the new self-awareness of American women. Marcuse’s name was made by *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), which argued that modern technological rationality had managed to so invade public and private life as to control all realms of possible freedom and critique. In Marcuse’s view, even philosophy, science, and art—the traditional zones of critique—were overtly or covertly controlled by the technological system, just as surely as consumers were controlled by meaningless wants fostered by advertising. The book was translated into 16 languages and sold well over a 100,000 copies. Ironically, its commercial triumph confirmed its argument, for not only were the youths of the 1960s a great radical generation, but also a great consumption generation. It was they who established *youth* as a specific commercial market (youth-specific radio stations date from this era, for example), a market that would serve as America’s universal training school for lifetimes of consumption. By 2000, young people were established as the unquestioned leaders among consumers.

All that lay far ahead in 1964. But if *One-Dimensional Man* was Marcuse’s popular success, the earlier (1955) *Eros and Civilization* was the deeper book. For in it, Marcuse addressed the core issue: How should we live? It was a question he had good reason to ask.

Herbert Marcuse was born in Berlin in 1898, the child of highly assimilated Jewish parents. His father was a textile manufacturer and real estate magnate, his mother came from a family of book manufacturers. After an uneventful childhood and early education, Marcuse was drafted into the German army in 1916.

Although he never saw combat, he was eventually caught up in soldiers’ rebellions and counterrevolutions, for he was a center socialist and delegate to the Berlin Soldiers Council in the heady days of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. In 1919 he returned to humanistic studies, first at Berlin and later at Freiburg, taking a Ph.D. in 1922 with a thesis on novels of “artistic formation,” from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* to Mann’s

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Tonio Kroger. After spending the middle 1920s in Berlin reading radical philosophy while running a small publishing house, Marcuse returned to academia for further study (with Martin Heidegger). Reading the dismal future better than most, he moved in the early 1930s from academia to the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. With the institute, he moved to Geneva in 1933 and then to New York in 1934, earning a meager living until 1941 by the institute's precarious funds. In 1942, he went to the Office of War Information and in 1943 to the Research and Analysis Division of the Office of Strategic Services, then absorbing the cream of American academia. After remaining in government service until 1951, Marcuse spent four years in part-time academic work before accepting an appointment to the Brandeis University faculty. But the controversial success of *One-Dimensional Man* led that university to decline to renew his contract in the mid 1960s; he then went to the University of California at San Diego, where death threats and other such excitements continued to pursue him. (A veterans' organization—the American Legion—at one point offered to buy out Marcuse's professorial contract for \$20,000 if the university administration would agree.) Marcuse died—peacefully enough—in 1979.

Eros and Civilization was published in 1955 and was dedicated to Marcuse's first wife, who had died of cancer in 1951. It poses a simple question: What should we do with ourselves now that the "economic problem" is solved, now that there is enough productivity in advanced societies for everyone to have food, shelter, health care, education, relaxation, and so on? Marcuse took the welfare state of T. H. Marshall, William Beveridge, et al. for granted. Of course there should be cradle-to-grave care provided by the state. Much more important was the question of what to do with one's time once such support was available. In the essay "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," Keynes had posed the same question in the depths of the Great Depression:

Thus for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem—how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.

This question lay beyond even the problem of inequality. Indeed, it presumed that problem could be straightforwardly solved. What, such writers asked, is then to be done?

Marcuse framed his analysis of abundance as a dialogue with the later writings of Sigmund Freud. This choice perhaps curtailed the lifetime of his book, for Freud dropped quickly from the American intellectual scene after the 1970s, just as Marcuse reached his reputational peak. But it was a necessary choice nonetheless, for Freud had what Marcuse needed: a serious theory of motivation. Most other social science of the time employed rational action theories that ranged from the simpleminded to the vacuous. They would have been little help.

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The Freud that Marcuse engaged was the two-instinct, structural Freud of the 1920s. The two instincts were Eros, generalized from the earlier sexual instinct into a life instinct and a builder of larger social wholes, and Thanatos, the instinct for peace and quiet, for respite from stimulation and disturbance, in short, for death (not death as destruction, as in Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, but death as peace). These instincts ruled unchallenged in the unconscious id, which pushed unceasingly for immediate instinctual gratification. This was the Freudian "pleasure principle." A structure called the ego emerged out of the experiences of childhood as a mediator between this pleasure-seeking mass of instinct and the very real constraints of the outside world. It enacted the domination of the "reality principle," summarized well in a popular song of the period: "You can't always get what you want. But if you try some time, you just might find . . . you get what you need." The id's perpetual response, also summarized in a popular if less grammatical song from the same musicians, was "I can't get no satisfaction." (That these two songs were among the most popular of the 1960s even during the so-called counterculture testifies to the dominance of Freudian theory in the postwar period.)

The ego was aided in its domination of the instincts by a third psychic structure (again unconscious), the superego. This was an interiorized version of the parents and other disciplinary authorities who had coerced the developing self into the socially proper patterns they desired. Their internal representation became guilt, which took the flow of desires from the id and redirected, repackaged, and restructured it into a variety of things: predominantly, problematic symptoms on the one hand and socially useful activities on the other. Both the ego and superego (and the socially useful activities along with them) were thus "powered" by instinctual energy redirected from the id. In the case of socially useful activities, Freud called this process sublimation (one of several types of "repression," Freud's general name for this redirection of instinctual energy). Civilization, he argued, is just a large flow of sublimated id energy redirected from pure pleasure-seeking to the sterner pursuit of reality, in the process transforming that stern pursuit from a dreary obligation into—at its best—an erotically charged quest.

Marcuse modifies this Freudian analysis in two ways. First, he argues that only some of the sublimation is necessary. The rest is dedicated to maintaining the particular power of a particular group in society—the dominant classes—and hence is unjustifiable. To give a current example, there is no need for the immense psychic repression necessary to assembly-line production, since we could obtain equally large outputs under workplace organization that would require less rigid disciplines of the self. We have assembly lines only because they are more profitable to dominant classes (because they utilize minimally skilled labor in inhuman ways under labor market conditions that enable the payment of minimal wages). Marcuse draws this analysis straight from *Das Kapital* and predictably

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calls the excess sublimation “surplus repression.” The combination of Marx and Freud is very clever indeed.

To surplus repression then Marcuse adds the concept of the “performance principle.” Here, too, he marries Marx and Freud. On the one hand, the “performance principle” is his Freudian translation of the early Marx’s “alienation” concept into a more subtle psychological construct than that permitted by Marx’s unabashed admiration of *homo faber*. On the other, the performance principle is his Marxian historicization of the instincts that Freud had taken to be constant forever.

The performance principle, Marcuse holds, is the form of reality principle characteristic of *this particular society*, with its surplus repression and domination, justified hitherto (at least in part) by the necessities born of scarcity (Freud’s *Ananke*). Under the performance principle, men work for others, not themselves. Their work is disciplined rather than free. To be sure, Marcuse recognizes that this “sublimation” supports vast social production, which in turn does better workers’ lives and often makes them very happy, particularly during the “leisure” time that is left to them after their (alienated) labor. But as this vast discipline makes society more and more productive, it comes to dominate all of social life. Its dominance eventually colonizes leisure itself, which becomes a realm of performance and discipline, as does even the erotic life, which is limited and confined to one other person and one particular zone of the body.

Marcuse thus anticipates most of the arguments later made by Michel Foucault, but with a far more plausible historical mechanism than Foucault’s nebulous “discourse.” For Marcuse, the roots of what Foucault would call “discipline” lie in the emotional necessity to control the intense but somewhat random human instinct for pleasure in the context of a highly productive society. There are real benefits to such a society produced in such a way, but they come at a high price: “The individual pays by sacrificing his time, his consciousness, his dreams; civilization pays by sacrificing its own promises of liberty, justice, and peace for all.”

After a chapter showing the philosophical antecedents of his argument (largely in Schiller, on whom he had prepared a detailed bibliography in the 1920s), Marcuse turns in the six remaining chapters to sources of liberation from surplus repression and the performance principle. A chapter of purely historical interest derives proper Freudian reasons for the historicity of the reality principle. Then Marcuse turns to the central role of fantasy, art, and utopian thinking—all the “unrealities” laughed aside by the performance principle. From these frontiers of the performance principle, he feels, come the only real critiques. The more doctrinaire Marxists of course disagree; Pierre Bourdieu’s insistence that art in the last analysis is dominated by the field of power comes to mind. But Marcuse was more optimistic. After taking Orpheus and Narcissus as his symbolic patrons because of their songs and playfulness, their contemplation and love of beauty, Marcuse explores the centrality of art as a disciplined mode of play, in which freedom is indifference to the constraint

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of reality and which obeys a liberated, imaginative logic. He also tries to overcome his creeping elitism (which infected some of his Frankfurt school colleagues far more deeply) by insisting that art become a mass phenomenon, that it return to the “lower instincts” and civilize them.

In his last two chapters, Marcuse tries to put some flesh on the bones of this shadowy utopia. He tells us we must turn work into play. He tells us we must treat the world as a garden to cultivate, not a storehouse to pillage. He tells us our erotic life must move beyond monogamic reproduction, the “central fortification of the performance principle.” At times he seems to be talking about a specific expansion of erotic activities: free love and the broader sexual repertoire. At other times he emphasizes the “erotization” of work, using Mead’s Arapesh as an example. At times he seems to be hoping for what would later be called “flow:” the timeless, rapid doing of utterly meaningful work in a pure meditative pleasure. At other times, he seems to point towards the effortless, erotic flow of ideas that had been embodied in aristocratic conversation from Castiglione’s *sprezzatura* to Mme. de Staél’s *esprit*.

One wishes here for more concrete illustrations or discussions of empirical cases. After all, the Fourierist *phalanstères* Marcuse so admired failed in short order: Was it only because of excessive bureaucracy, as Marcuse thought? Or again, the six-hour work day persisted at Kellogg’s Company for 50 years, but many workers had trouble filling the extra two hours. Would Marcuse simply have thought the workers so dominated by the performance principle that they couldn’t see their own interests? By contrast, in Barcelona during the Popular Front years, the refusal of workers to work led to social chaos, even for a strongly leftist state. Could a society actually maintain the high production necessary to abundance by highly disciplined, alienated work for three hours a day followed by a sudden and complete shift to pure pleasure? More recently, even artistic, creative leisure has seemed rapidly to fall under the dominance of the performance principle, as we see from birders’ life lists, competitive genealogy, and the elaborate ceremonies of the war re-enactors. Indeed, bodily pleasure itself succumbed to the performance principle. What would Marcuse have said of our elaborately graded wine system or competitive restaurant hopping or consumptive tourism or the tedious debates over the best positions for sexual intercourse?

One wonders, too, if there is not a strong vein of aristocracy—indeed of scholarly aristocracy—in Marcuse’s analysis. Does his Schillerian paradise make room for second-rate art or for folk art of the kind that would turn a highbrow stomach? After all, the great debate about cultural omnivores eventually concluded that Bourdieu had been right about “distinction,” if for the wrong reasons. Highbrows can code-switch as easily as lowbrows.

Finally, one wonders what Marcuse might have made of the revolution in sexual behavior in the late 20th century: the rise of the hookup culture with its solipsistic eroticism, the adoption by young women of the selfish

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sexuality their feminist predecessors had derided in men, the strange divorce of sexuality and personal intimacy, the extensive public focus by both young and old on issues of “sexual performance?” A world further from Marcuse’s free and imaginative erotization of the everyday could not be imagined. This was the performance principle with a vengeance. But it was far too from the profound and overwhelming commitments of 19th century monogamous marriages as it was from the 19th century *grandes passions* that had challenged those marriages. As Marcuse had feared, the new sexual world was a world of technical rationality.

Or was it? Could not one also think that dismantling the elaborate taboos surrounding sexuality would inevitably result in its demotion from the central, unspoken warp of a culture to simply another of the many wefts woven into a multiply patterned tapestry? Perhaps what seemed to the elders like a frightening disregard of the dangerous power of sex was in fact a simple recognition that the sexual emperor—who of course had no clothes—wasn’t really much of an emperor at all. It was that fact which disturbed the senior generations of the turn of the 21st century. The birth-control pill had allowed them sexual indulgence at a time when sexual indulgence still seemed novel and uniquely powerful. When their grandchildren began to think that sexual intercourse was more or less like eating dinner at a fast food restaurant, the sexual 19th century was truly, finally over.

It is the custom to end our annual readings with a book that is in dialogue with its five predecessors. *Eros and Civilization* is emphatically such a book.

Like Oliver Cox’s *Caste, Class, and Race, Eros and Civilization* aims to interpret and redirect the historical direction of modernity. And they share a substantive theme: the problem posed by alienated work and the work practices born of domination. But where one book focuses on the structural implications of social groupings and relations and the particular way in which class domination employs racial difference as a tool of proletarianization, the other focuses on the subjective experience of alienated work and the possibilities for its transcendence. Where one book remains within the framework of inequality and justice, the other ventures into the unknown of erotization and personality reconfiguration. From one political stance, the two books move in strikingly different but strangely complementary directions.

By contrast, Berelson and Steiner’s *Human Behavior: An Inventory of the Scientific Findings* seems a book Marcuse would have despised for trapping humans within a set of alienated, reified categories made up by social scientists and imposed upon their objects with little worry about their subjective reality. Conversely, Marcuse’s relentlessly abstract argument includes dozens of empirical assertions about modern society that Berelson and Steiner would have challenged and rejected as imprecise and unfounded. But two of the Frankfurt Institute’s *Studies in Prejudice* contribute findings that Berelson and Steiner’s collection (*The Authori-*

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tarian Personality and *Dynamics of Prejudice*) and Marcuse's book—despite its rhetorical structure as a meditation on Freud—draws on at least one of the Berelson/Steiner sources (Margaret Mead). The two books relate as ying and yang, reminding us of the perpetual tension between theoretical cohesion on the one hand and empirical cohesion on the other. To read them together is to recognize the true breadth of what social science aims to accomplish.

With Frances Donovan's three books on women and work, Marcuse shares a common theme of sexuality. Indeed, Donovan's books—had Marcuse known of them—might have provided precisely the empirical foundations he needed. Like Donovan, Marcuse would have seen the waitresses as vibrantly erotic although he might not have accepted Donovan's optimistic judgment that their eroticism represented liberation from the performance principle: Were tips and new clothes a quid pro quo for erotic performance or were they indeed the mere by-product of a welcome and joyous game?

With Thoreau Marcuse shares the grand project of asking what it is to live and live well. As I noted some months ago, Thoreau believes that through the shedding of illusions and appearances comes the ability to know the core of life and thereby to begin again to dream. The hard part, he tells us, is to put foundations under the castles we then begin to build in the air. Marcuse too has built castles in the air—that has been the most consistent critique of his work. It remains for us to find the foundations for them, just as it remained for Thoreau to construct the social project merely implicit at the end of *Walden*. As for the rest, the two books obviously share the aim of debunking the performance principle as they share a respect for the physical environment and for the “nature” of humanity. On the other hand, surely no book could be less erotic than *Walden*. Yet Marcuse wrote about sensuousness as much as about eros, and *Walden* is an extraordinarily sensuous book, a book of sights and sounds and smells and feelings. The two works may be closer than it seems, even on this last matter.

Finally, *Eros and Civilization* like *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is a frankly utopian book. Although it lacks the practical details of Michael Young's dystopia, it shares the desire to imagine a truly different future. Moreover, the terrors of the present are the same in both books: a focus on individual performance and its measure, a meaningless, pointless perfectionism whose real *raison d'être* is domination and exclusion. The books share too the common fate of being misread. Young thought “meritocracy” a sham and a elusion, but his neologism has been taken to label one of the central ideals of modern society. Marcuse emphasized the constructive power of Eros to build larger and more multiply pleasurable zones of experience, but his readers took him as advocating free love and esoteric sexual positions.

In this Annual Sociology List, then, we have seen the classic themes in many guises: the empirical and the normative, the individual and the

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social, the contemplative and the erotic. We have seen class and work, race and experience, gender and feeling. I thank all of you who have sent suggestions and am pleased to announce that we will in the coming year turn back from this American-focused list to the more customary international list.

The annual reading sequence renews our commitment to our common enterprise of imagining the social. In the great diversity of our work, it is easy to lose sight of one another, as it is easy to forget those forms of social knowledge that lie across the lake or beyond the hills or indeed at the very antipodes of our own. We become parochial and small-minded. Yet we do not escape that parochialism by becoming mere polymaths or universalists, for that is to lose the focus and the commitment that make our own work coherent. But by reading together a series of old works, we leaven our specialization with the yeast of difference. It works different wonders in the work of each, but here offers an intellectual repast better than any we could imagine alone.