

Eros and civilization analysis



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In order to be able to fully understand this literary piece of work, it is important to first start by defining a few terms that will mostly be referred to in this piece of work; Eros refers to an instinct that works towards self-preservation, pleasure and procreation. When the three are considered in a group, they are what constitute Eros. Civilization is a state or condition of being highly developed and mostly refers to a society that has a very high level of organization culturally and socially. In terms of individuality, civilization refers to a certain level of material comfort which a person is used to and probably would not do without. Repression or suppression, which can be used interchangeably in this context, refers to a psychological mechanism in which people try to protect themselves from harmful or not-so appealing thoughts, by blocking them out of their conscious mind. Capitalism is a free market system in which there is private ownership of capital (means of production). Distribution of goods and services is based on a motivation to gain more profits than one's competitors. Instincts are strong freely occurring impulses that occur in the mind to warn somebody about something without necessarily reasoning about it. Sometimes also known as an inborn trait, it is the behavior pattern shaped by biological necessities (Herbert, p. 16).

Eros and civilization is a piece of literary work done by one Herbert Marcuse who was a German philosopher who lived in the 20th century. The literature revolves around a critique approach to Freud's sociological titled 'civilization and its discontents.' Marcuse begins by giving an elaborate description of biology, which he argues is a fight against suppression of instincts, hence is a force that tries to bring out the best of intuition or the sixth sense as many

call it. He continues to argue that capitalism, which is the economic lifestyle that has overtaken society, is up in arms trying all it can to prevent us from reaching the level of a non-repressive society. Herbert continues to say that the theory put forth by Freud that repression is a necessary condition if civilization is to survive in the current. On the contrary, Herbert thinks that Eros is more superficial, constructive and liberating (Herbert, p. 16).

What Herbert's works aims at disapproving is the notion that human instincts and suppression/instincts/superego are always in conflict for survival. Freud argues that the superego is ever in a struggle to follow society's norms and rules at its own expense. In his view, Eros and civilization cannot co-exist, and their clash is what gives rise to a repressed humanity history. He continues to say that it is as a result of suppression of instincts is what has given rise to the modern level of civilization that we are living in today, without which civilization would not have been possible. He gives the example of the sexual instinct. Had it been that human beings give in to this instinct whenever it arises, without a second thought and without channeling that energy into progress, it is likely that there would be no civilization at all in the first place. Herbert comes in to argue that in as much the energy is channeled into progress, human beings do so at the expense of their Eros; pleasure, procreation and self preservation, which should not be the case. According to Marcuse, ' progress' is just another word for sacrifice of human happiness. He is of the opinion that conflict is not really between work and Eros, but between alienated labor and Eros. To give an example on this, he goes ahead to say that sex, for example, is a preserve of the capitalists, and for the laborers when they are not disturbing ' progress.' He advocates for a

socialist society that would not need the performance of the poor top progress, and hence a society that would not deliberately suppress the sexual drives of its inhabitants. Such a society would do away with alienated labor and in its place adopt non-alienated libidinal work. This would then give rise to a non-suppressive civilization. In his view, Herbert confidently infers that instincts are shaped by historical aspects like repression and that today, society suffers from increased suppression which is as a result of contemporary society (Herbert, p. 24).

The struggle for existence is a dynamic concept that should involve a rationality that subdues 'repressive reasoning.' This way, when happiness and reason converge, they will be able to create their own hierarchy of doing things, their priorities and divisions of labor, without one being repressed to give way to the other. This is the performance principle that should administer things or events, but not people. This is so much in contrast to modern civilization which is nothing more than close coordination and arrangements that must carry recognized authority. Marcuse has established that today's hierarchical civilization does not come easy or with freedom per se, but it all the same comes so strongly because repression has become so effective that it has assumed the position of freedom. An attempt in the abolition of this order of things is seen as a terrorization of freedom, which in essence is nothing more than repression of gratification and pleasure. Freedom, in his perception is not only private, but does not exist in the absence or privacy. So the question arises, does civilization give rise to freedom, and how? If it does not, who is supposed to establish and enforce objective standards? After a closer analysis of other philosopher's writings,

Marcuse has settled for the idea that creation of a favorable human existence for all people is no longer confined to a selected few. It is now very possible to create happiness, but only if the human consciousness is not arrested and diverted elsewhere. People have the capacity to learn, understand and tell the difference between what can be termed as normal repression and excessive repression. This cannot be achieved overnight, but would, with time, give rise to a utopia society, marked with perfection, happiness and a balance between work and gratification (Herbert, p. 27).

Major themes raised by Herbert Marcuse

In his theory of Eros and civilization, there are many life topics that this philosopher seeks to address. These themes include conflict, happiness, sexual desire/lust, gratification, and exploitation. In the theme of exploitation, we can see that repression is a force applied unconsciously by laborers, so that they can please their employers in the capitalist setting. The employers on the other hand know that their employees are working extra hard at the expense of their happiness, but they do nothing to liberate the employees from this torture. All the employers want is to maximize their profits from the labor of these poor fellows, while at the same time being able to enjoy the finer qualities of life. One of the things that they enjoy freely without having to repress their feeling is sex, as Marcuse says ‘...sex is a preserve for the elite...’ who in this case are non others than the exploitative employers. Life, looking at it from a larger perspective, also exploits the members of society. This is because they put in so much effort into their work, with the hope of being able to enjoy rewarding benefits, but what happens? Life continues to tie them in a cycle of what is commonly

referred to as the rat race; putting much effort with little or no rewards to enjoy. Isn't this exploitation (Herbert, p. 36).

The theme of happiness comes out so strongly because it is the essence of the writing anyway. Herbert seems to strongly support the idea that happiness should be the essence of living, and anything that derives us of the opportunity to be happy should be done away with or modified to fit into the lifestyle in which we can derive happiness. Marcuse says that a utopia society is possible, a society where everyone is happy, satisfied with life and still enjoys the benefits of labor. He dreams of a society that will not require Eros does not possess a natural self-restraint, delay or detour from the normal course of life.

The theme of gratification comes with happiness. Marcuse is of the idea that, when people's desires are met and they have a sense of gratification, then the most likely thing that will follow is happiness. Gratification comes as a pre-requisite for happiness. When Eros and civilization co-exist at harmonious levels, what results is gratification. Conflict is depicted so clearly when Freud suggests that for there to be civilization, there must be some level repression. Civilization is viewed as progressive development and for progress to be realized, energies that seek gratification must be converted into energy and then directed towards progress. There is conflict of instincts, progress/development and happiness/gratification. This conflict as depicted by Freud is what forms the basis of Herbert's critic theory of Eros and Civilization. There is also conflict of ideas in that while one philosopher feels that Eros and civilization cannot co-exist, the other one is of a totally

different view and feels that Eros must be present if civilization is to be meaningful (Herbert, p. 46).

Sexual desire is theme that is sharply projected in Herbert's work of Eros and civilization. To Marcuse, the ability to freely express and satisfy sexual desires equate to human liberation. This, he says, has become a preserve for the rich and the elite, while the poor and the less educated are left with nothing but alienated labor that forces them to suppress their desires, with a false hope of becoming civilized. He adopts the Marxist approach and advocates that human beings should adopt play, phantasm and art in order to be able to fully express their real needs and desires. Marcuse sees human beings as the vessels of abundance, with the full potential of gratification of energies and other faculties of existence. Non-repressive civilization is a concept that Marcuse is fond of referring to, having borrowed the idea from Marx, with a great emphasis on sexual liberation.

Describe the internal logic of the piece of political philosophy you are reading.

This piece of article has a great sense of logic in it, in that it brings out the complete essence of civilization. If civilization is described as the level of material comfort that an individual is able to enjoy and which he hopes to maintain, then it beat logic if man is able to create that wealth, but lacks the freedom or opportunity to enjoy the benefits that come with the wealth, then he might as well not have struggled so much to make that wealth. In as much as Freud argues that some repression is determined by society, Marcuse is of the feeling that some limitations that we impose on ourselves

are not necessarily stimulated by an external repressive reality principle. Instincts, he says, are sometimes bound to 'obey' the rules of nature because they happen to have inherent libidinal value. This he goes on to explain saying that there is a great possibility that the sexual instinct in nature has some characteristics that makes it impossible to achieve absolute gratification. Repression, if always allowed to dominate the human mind, would more likely than not become barriers to human freedom since they tend to protect that other nature from which pleasure, gratification and happiness originates. Eventually, human beings would not be able to rise to the level of self actualization; neither would they be able to differentiate gratification at the mere sense of the word and happiness as a result of gratification. If human beings concentrated on the pleasure principle, then they would be able to bring together their refusals and selections, gauge which ones helps to alleviate conflict, pain and frustrations, then these antagonisms would be embedded with the rational mind of gratification ((Herbert, p. 74).

Pleasure principle is a concept based on psychoanalysis and was developed by Sigmund Freud and Marcuse applies it in his Eros and civilization theory to bring out the close relationship between the strength of Eros and the level of civilization that one can achieve depending on that strength. The principle of pleasure states that people are always on the look out for things, activities or events that bring them pleasure and not pain. They are always out to satisfy their biological and psychological needs. On the other hand, and contradictory to the pleasure principle is the reality principle, which tends to postpone gratification when necessary for attainment of a greater need at

that moment. The id, which is the selfish nature in human beings, is ruled by the pleasure principle and starts operating when human beings are very young. As they grow older this nature is overtaken by the ego and superego, which teach man to suppress their immediate desires and emotions and to defer gratification. This is how people learn to reason and to take account the reality principle, which even though seeks pleasure as well, does so in account of reality and hence postpones pleasure. Marcuse is of the idea that id should not be suppressed and should be let to rule, but in a balanced level. If the so much desired pleasure can be attained in the here and now and yet maintain the required level of civilization, then be it whatever the cost (Herbert, p. 264).

The reality principle on the other hand takes into account the advantage there is in postponing gratification for the sake of attaining a goal that is long lasting and which will provide security in the future. This is where the concept of repression comes in as depicted by Freud. The principle implies that is only desires and pleasures can be suppressed today and that energy directed towards growth and progress, then gratification will come at a later date, with all its benefits because with it will be happiness and satisfaction. To Marcuse, this is flawed thinking because repression of desires and emotions is an injustice to naturally occurring desires and wants. For example, he says, repressing the desire to have sex today in order to enjoy it at a later date when one is economically stable is doing an injustice to this natural biological drive that one is born with. Logically speaking, if these desires were not meant to be satisfied, why then do they exist in the first place? Why does their gratification have to be suppressed all in the name of

civilization? In Marcuse's words and opinion, it is very possible for these two factors to harmoniously co-exist (Herbert, p. 67)

Incorporate some historical context surrounding Herbert Marcuse.

Herbert Marcuse was a German philosopher born in Berlin in the year 1898 and died in 1979. He was a critical thinker who in his lifetime wrote a lot of philosophical works among them being *Eros and Civilization*, *One Dimensional Man* and *The Aesthetic Dimension*. In his early youthful years, he joined the German army and he later found his way into the soldiers' council that participated in the Spartacist uprising where he became a member. By the year 1922 he had completed his Ph. D. thesis at the University of Freiburg. He moved to Berlin after this and worked with a publishing house and while at it met and married Sophie Wertheim, who was a mathematician. In 1924 he and another writer by the name of Martin Heidegger, whom he referred to as his greatest teacher, wrote a book by the title *Hegel's Ontology and Theory of Historicity*, which was later published in the year 1932. In 1933 after Marcuse's academic career was blocked by the rise of the Third Reich, he joined the Frankfurt Institute for Social research. In the same year he published his own review of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. This was the first publication that helped him gain a social standing as a theorist of his generation. He did not step here because while still a member of the Institute, he created a model for critical social theory by creating a theory on capitalism. In this theory he described the relationships between philosophy, sociology and cultural criticism. He went ahead and provided a criticism and analysis of German

fascism. His works were boosted by the fact that he closely worked with critical theorist while in Frankfurt Institute (Herbert, p. 301).

In an analysis and critique of Marx's works, Marcuse argued that many of Marx's thoughts had become too rigid for life and that they needed a phenomenological view in order to become revived and to apply to the modern-day life. This is bearing in mind that Marx had neglected individuality in his writings, yet Herbert was for liberation of humanity from the philosophical ideologies that held him captive. Herbert views a world where society would transform from capitalism to socialism. His study and critique of Hegel's Ontology and theory of Historicity also had some major contributions to the Hegel renaissance that took place in Europe around the same time. His was an emphasis on the theory of spirit and dialects, which greatly shaped the outcome of the Hegel. Herbert became quite an observer on anything and everything about society, from politics, to economics to social interactions. So ingrained was he in analyzing society that in 1941 he wrote his own book in English whose title was Reason and Revolution. The book traced the genesis of Hegel, Marx and modern social theory. In 1934 he had become a social radical and he fled from the Institute of social research in which he was based then and went to the United States where he lived for the rest of his life ((Herbert, p. 304).

Marcuse served in the Office of Street services and in the government offices in the years between 1941 and 1950. It was his experience in this workforce that led him to write the book Eros and Civilization. In his view, the US government was motivated by a desire to overcome fascism. It was in this book that Herbert tried to synthesize Marx and Freud's ideologies and to

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bring out an outline of a non-repressive society. He argued that the suggested repressed conscious in human being is expressed through daydreams, works of art, philosophy and other works of cultural projection. In his works, Marcuse hoped to bring out the possible outlines of non-repressive civilization characterized by libidinal and non alienated labor, play, free and open sexuality and liberation of humanity into freedom and happiness. His desire and vision for a liberated society gave shape to many of his 1960s writings and this is what helped him to become a major political, social and intellectual influence during his lifetime and years after his death.

It was during his tenure at Brandeis University in the year 1958 that Marcuse published a critical study of the Soviet Union (Soviet Marxism) and his view and opinions are what brought to an end the taboo that existed within the government circles of criticizing the USSR and Soviet communism. He distanced himself from those people who had a tendency of viewing Soviet communism as a bureaucratic system that was not capable of reforms and democracy. To him, the Union possessed the potential to become liberal and this indeed was seen in reality in 1980 when the union came under the rule of Gorbachev. In an attempt to theorize the potential decline of capitalism, Marcuse published yet another critical book known as *One Dimensional Man* in 1964. He argued that the industrial society had succeeded in creating false needs in which individuals would be so much ingrained to satisfy that they would forget about everything else that pertains their lives. Media, industrial management, advertising and contemporary modes of thinking all worked in perfect harmony in order to keep humanity from complaining, negativity and opposition. As a result, man became a one-dimensional

creature while his very aptitude and ability for critical thinking withered away. This book was severely criticized by orthodox Marxists and other theorists. However, it remains a great influence in the New Left as it was in the forefront for a demand of revolutionary change that earned Marcuse the respect of new radicals ((Herbert, p. 216).

Conclusion

Eros and Civilization has continued to be a great piece of philosophical criticism that arouses mixed feeling among other philosophers and theorists. Marcuse is today a renowned social, political and economic critic although his influence is slowly but surely waning. However, this fading of his influence can greatly be attributed to the fact that there are not many writings that have followed since the publication of Eros and Civilization to support his works. However, this does not mean that his works have no relevance to the contemporary society we live in today. Marcuse presents humanity with rich and unbeatable philosophical views on human beings and their relationship to society in terms of nature, social theory and radical politics. In addition, Marcuse had a vision of the existence of a liberal, repression-free society that allowed people to attain happiness without necessarily postponing gratification. Marcuse comes out very strongly as a sharp, keen and ever-present social analyst. In other writings, he brings out the relationship between technology, economy, and culture and everyday's life and even predicts a rapid change. In as much as technology was not so advanced in those days, we in the twenty first century can witness what this philosopher predicated. Marcuse had a great desire to leave behind a legacy and this he achieved without much struggle. Eros and Civilization, if well

studied and analyzed forms a basis on which society can become free from oppression and repression and people can learn to live a day at a time.

Work cited

Herbert M., Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud, London, Routledge, 1987