

Daniel Burston:

Repression, Reality and the Autonomy of Theory in the Fromm/Marcuse Debate

The debate between Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, which began in 1955, was a long and complex one that covered a wide range of theoretical issues. Beneath all their disagreements, however, lay two fundamental questions, namely; 1) how do we interpret Freud's ideas today and 2) what is the relationship between theory and practice in the application of psychoanalytic theory to history and society. In The Legacy of Erich Fromm, I devoted a chapter to the interpretations of Freudian concepts like repression, primary narcissism, the Oedipus complex, the archaic inheritance and sado-masochism offered by Fromm and Marcuse. Unfortunately, I cannot summarize all of these findings in the brief time allotted to us today. Nevertheless, using the concepts of repression and the reality principle as illustrations, I will argue that while Fromm was embarked on a frank, forthright and commendable revision of analytic theory, Marcuse unconsciously distorted and de-contextualized Freud's ideas, ostensibly in the interests of fidelity to Freud. The application of such misguided formulations to the study of social psychology adds little or genuine theory, especially if these ideas are applied in a speculative and impressionistic way, without being subject to the common-sense constraints of logic or empirical proof, or consistency with clinical findings.

Before getting to my argument, however, let me briefly summarize Marcuse's position. In Eros and Civilization, published in 1955, Marcuse dismissed Fromm's work (after 1935) as a total betrayal of Freud's legacy. According to Marcuse, while the earlier Fromm had been a radical and dynamic theorist, the later Fromm abandoned Freud's most important concepts, including the primacy of sexuality, the death instinct, the archaic inheritance, the Oedipus complex and primary narcissism. In Marcuse's estimation, all of these Freudian concepts have revolutionary theoretical implications which Fromm supposedly ignored or disparaged, that can be liberated from the conservative cultural philosophy Freud had embedded them in. Marcuse argued that the merit or meaning of Freud's ideas must not be interpreted in light of clinical experience or of advances in analytic "technique" because doing effective therapy in present circumstances necessarily involves strengthening conformist tendencies in the patient, then disguising this conformist undertaking with idealistic verbiage about maturity, "productive love", etc.

Fromm's first response came in the fall and winter editions of *Dissent* in 1955/1956. According to Fromm, Marcuse underestimated the extent to which Freud was a prisoner of 19th century mechanistic materialism. Fromm also emphasized that genuine love is quite rare in contemporary society. Moreover, Fromm insisted, Marcuse failed to appreciate to what extent his notion of the "productive character" is critical with respect to current expectations for "adaptive" social functioning (Jay, 1973, p.111).

In retrospect, of course, Fromm's rebuttal had merit, but at this stage, Fromm was still somewhat overwhelmed by the ferocity of Marcuse's onslaught, and failed to press his advantage, and to expose some critical weaknesses in Marcuse's position that occurred to him only later in "The

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(Fromm, 1970; Fromm, 1973). Here Fromm argued insistently that the so called "autonomy of theory" that Marcuse was calling for, which would detach metapsychological theory from clinical research, is seriously misguided, because under its auspices the actual meaning of analytic concepts becomes utterly lost or transformed.

A close examination of Eros and Civilization bears out the truth of Fromm's critique, and the dangers involved in detaching theory from clinical practice. The first intimation of this is in the introduction, where Marcuse declared that throughout his book the words "repression" and "repressive" are used "in the non-technical sense to designate both conscious and unconscious, external and internal processes of restraint, constraint and suppression " (Marcuse, 1955, p.7). While Fromm expressed alarm at this cavalier use of words, I think that we should be grateful for this modest disclaimer, for it informs us that whatever else it is (or may pretend to be), Eros and Civilization is not really a psychoanalytic treatise. How could it be? Repression in the *dynamic* sense refers specifically to an unconscious mental process whereby certain mental contents -- be they thoughts, feelings, memories or fantasies -- are deliberately thrust out of awareness, and rendered inaccessible to conscious retrieval or introspection, but which strive to achieve expression through dreams, symptoms, parapraxes, and so on.

Indeed, to be precise, Freud's theory of repression implies a *threefold* kind of unconsciousness. In the first instance, repression pertains to 1) a thought, feeling, memory trace or fantasy that is denied entry into consciousness. In addition, 2) the specific process or means whereby this is accomplished is also, necessarily, unconscious. Not only is the mechanism

whereby a certain "content" is rendered unconscious itself unconscious, but finally, 3) the *motive* for such repression, which presumably brings the whole process into being, remains unconscious as well. Therefore, in proper clinical usage, repression designates a complex series of operations on experience whereby content, process and motive are all consigned to oblivion -- at least as far as consciousness is concerned (Burston, 1986; Burston, 1991). So as Fromm correctly noted, repression has nothing to do with conscious or external processes of restraint, constraint or suppression, (Fromm, 1970, p. 25-26).

What is also lost in Marcuse's rendering of Freud is an awareness of what *conscious* restraint signified for Freud, and how both repression and restraint relate to the idea of the "reality principle". Though he talked of instinct and impulse, and of cathexis and counter-cathexis, Freud never actually talked about *will* as a distinct process or faculty of the human psyche. To do so was unfashionable, because it was reminiscent of the kind of philosophical psychology that had been dominant until the mid 19th c., and was falling into disrepute during his own life time. The closest Freud came to actually describing or explaining an act of will was in purely negative terms, through the voluntary constraint the individual puts upon the expression of an emotion or a spontaneous impulse to action. Though doubtlessly painful at times, Freud thought that conscious constraint -- as opposed to repression -- is by no means necessarily pathogenic. In so far as it is congruent with the demands of reason and reality, it even helps us manage life's inevitable frustrations. Besides, after a moment's reflection, any reasonable person will agree that a conscious and deliberate delay in the expression or satisfaction of a specific impulse -- much as it may frustrate or disappoint us momentarily -- does nothing to diminish our

actual capacity for pleasure, nor does it block the entry of a specific thought, feeling or phantasy into consciousness. In short, it is not repression, or anything like it.

Marcuse's overly-inclusive use of "repression" obliterates another conceptual differentiation that is essential to understanding Freud; the difference between purposive or creative constraint, on the one hand, and neurotic inhibition on the other. In Freudian theory, neurotic inhibition is a product of unconscious conflict that leads to a constriction of the sphere of ego operations, and to a decrease in the capacity for pleasure in both the short and the long term. In addition to decreasing the capacity for personal happiness, it makes the afflicted individual a less capable and energetic agent of culture in the long run. By contrast, purposive or creative inhibition, which involves the voluntary deflection or delay of an impulse striving for expression, if not its total renunciation, is a process that *frees* the person from internal conflict, or allows them to develop their personal gifts in a way that is consonant with the requirements of culture. This critical distinction was utterly lost on Marcuse, who believed in the possibility of a developed cultural existence that is based on the effortless and immediate gratification of all our impulses, which as Fromm correctly observed, is not merely utopian and infantile, but utterly inconsistent with what Freud actually believed.

In the final analysis, as regards the concept of repression, the only thing in Marcuse's indiscriminate use of language that is vaguely worth retaining was his insistence that both repression and conscious constraint are called forth by what Freud termed the "reality principle", and the organism's need to adapt itself to the exigencies of survival in its natural and social surroundings. However, the fact that both processes have a

common origin, up to a point, does not justify confounding them as Marcuse did. They are different modes of mental life, with vastly different consequences. They are not equivalent or interchangeable by any means, since repression, though necessary to survival in many instances, threatens our psychological integrity when it exceeds a certain threshold in ways which the exercise of conscious constraint does not. Characterizing the autonomous exercise of conscious constraint in deference to reality as "repressive", as Marcuse did, is really a value judgement masquerading as a theoretical "advance", and a dubious one at that.

Moreover, as Fromm points out, Marcuse's rendering of the "reality principle" is exceedingly problematic. In Eros and Civilization, the "reality principle" is frequently described as the sum total of the coercive constraints placed on the expression of the instincts by a specific form of society at a particular historical juncture. In short, in Marcuse's usage, it corresponds to what Fromm, in another context, called a "historical dichotomy" or contradiction; one that is socially and historically conditioned, and not rooted in the conditions of human existence per se (Fromm, 1947). Unfortunately, by treating the "reality principle" as a *social* artifact, rather than a basic dimension of human ontology, Marcuse ignored the fact that, in Freud's estimation, the reality principle corresponds to *ananke*, or necessity, or what Fromm termed an *existential* dichotomy; a limit or constraint woven indelibly in the fabric of human reality.

In fairness to Marcuse, of course, Freud *also* confused existential and historical dichotomies in the application of psychoanalysis to society, as Erich Fromm repeatedly pointed out (Fromm, 1955; Fromm, 1970). Significantly, however, Freud did *not* attempt to reduce the existential or ontological domain -- the domain of *ananke*, or necessity -- into the realm

of social and historical contingencies, as a Marcuse was wont to do. If anything, Freud erred in the opposite direction, mistaking social and historical contradictions (like class-structure and exploitation) for aspects of fundamental human ontology. By reversing rather than rectifying Freud's errors in this direction, Marcuse's use of the term "reality principle" becomes tendentious and mystifying, rather than illuminating or critical. Moreover, it suggests a refusal to recognize that human reality is shaped by limits and constraints that are inherent in the nature of things and the structure of the cosmos, and not just by the conventions, limitations or contradictions of human groups. (Witness his discussion of death, which Marcuse thinks can be transcended and abolished through the liberation of the instincts). Were Freud alive, I suspect he would interpret this ostensible "deepening" of his ideas as a retreat to infantile omnipotence, rather than a move towards constructive disenchantment, just as Fromm did.

Having said that, of course, this does not mean that there is nothing worthwhile in Marcuse. By and large, Marcuse's charge that the practice of psychotherapy in contemporary society fosters conformity is perfectly true. Moreover, the widespread temptation to universalize on the basis of the experiences and ideas of contemporary clinicians who promote conformity (whether consciously or otherwise) *is* inimical to the interests of theory and genuine scientific research. The point, however, is that Fromm's work is not a part of this general trend, as Marcuse alleged, and that Marcuse's failure to grasp the meaning of Freud's clinical concepts makes any application of his ideas to the study of society highly suspect. Having no appreciation of what Freud meant to begin with, Marcuse's demand for the "autonomy of theory" -- which strikes impressionable people as a bold

demand for intellectual freedom -- resolves itself into nothing more substantial than the defiant claim of the hashish-smoking caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland, that words mean precisely what *he* wants them to mean.

One of the most emotionally charged issues dividing Fromm and Marcuse and their followers were their divergent notions of fidelity to Freud. Prior to his split with C.G.Jung in 1912, Freud had warned his disciples that after his death there would arise theorists who either minimized or dismissed the primacy of sexual factors in the etiology of the neuroses. Freud claimed that these new theories would be offered in the ostensible interests of broadening the basis and scope of analytic theory, although their underlying intention (and ultimate result) would be a drastic dilution and revision of analytic theory to render it more palatable to the general public, who prefer to shun unpleasant truths. Freud's warning was intended to galvanize the faithful, and to buttress his self-image as a revolutionary challenger of conventional pieties.

Meanwhile, of course, Jung argued that Freud's relentless insistence on the the vicissitudes of the libido as the bedrock of the neuroses was conditioned by cultural and historical factors peculiar to the Victorian era, and that it ignored other psychological needs and processes of an ethical and spiritual nature that must be dealt with in psychotherapy (Jung, 1934; Jung, 1939). As a result, ever since 1912, many theoretical innovations have been met with the charge that they are Jungian (or Adlerian) "deviations", and therefor, forms of "resistance" to Freud's revolutionary message. Accordingly, when Marcuse charged Fromm with abandoning all that is essential in Freud, and reverting to a pre-Freudian psychology of

consciousness, he was following a time honored precedent, and many thought he was adhering to the revolutionary core of Freudian theory.

By contrast to Marcuse, Fromm insisted that Freudian orthodoxy, while radical in its day, is really fighting a Quixotic, conservative and rearguard action in contemporary society, where the kinds of taboos and constraints that shaped the Victorian era are no longer in force. In Fromm's estimation, what is typically repressed in contemporary life are not sexual needs and strivings, primarily, but strivings for genuine autonomy and love, and the development of a humanistic conscience. Like Jung, but in a more rigorous and systematic way, Fromm attempted to situate Freud in his cultural and historical context, in order to discern what elements of his thought are enduringly relevant, and which are time and culture bound (Fromm, 1970).

To sort out the issue of who best kept faith with Freud, one has to first decide what is really essential, and what is time bound, expendable or simply wrong in classical psychoanalysis. Obviously, from a Freudian point of view, appearances seem to favor Marcuse, who echoed the orthodox in his denunciations of Fromm and the cultural/interpersonal school. However, as indicated earlier, Marcuse did not really understand the first thing about the dynamic unconscious. By contrast, Fromm, who abandoned the libido theories, and stressed the non-instinctual sides of human motivation and characterological development, adhered to the dynamic unconscious, relating social and individual psychology through the medium of economics and culture and their impact on human character.

That being the case, we seem to be left with a choice between two alternative readings of Freud. If we side with Marcuse, we retain the traditional Freudian emphasis on the primacy of instinct and sexuality, and deem that to be essential, regardless of what clinical experience or common

sense may tell us. If we side with Fromm, we retain the idea of the dynamic unconscious, and deem that essential, while treating Freud's emphasis on instinct and sexuality as an artifact of Victorian society and the mechanistic materialism of the mid to late 19th c.

For me, the choice is relatively easy. With minor caveats, which I will not go into here, I think the Frommian position to be an eminently sensible one. Like Fromm, I believe that in order to retain some credence among scientists and serious intellectuals, psychoanalysis *has to* undergo continual revision in light of developments in other fields of study in order to develop, and to remain relevant to contemporary life. Having said that, however, I admit that I also have some sympathy for the traditionalist Freudian view, despite my equally insistent belief that fidelity to Freud on this matter is more a matter of personal loyalty or identification with "the cause" than it is of dispassionate scientific judgement or sound critical thinking.

Nevertheless, those who share the orthodox view would be wise to remember that Marcuse's spirited defense of Freud -- or of Freud as Marcuse understood him -- is subject to serious defects. To begin with, his remarks on repression and the reality principle represent a tacit or unconscious deviation from Freud that is at least as deep and wide-ranging in its implications as Fromm's openly acknowledged revisionism, albeit in a much less constructive manner. After all, the primary subject matter of psychoanalytic theory and therapy is -- and always will be -- "the repressed", or those unconscious mental processes that are rendered inaccessible to conscious retrieval or introspective awareness as a result of unconscious conflicts, but which strive for expression in dreams, slips of the tongue and pen, symptomatic actions, and in other forms of unconscious

communication. Freud's theories about sexuality and the instincts were intended to elucidate this domain of unconscious mental functioning, and not the other way around. It is not as if Freud invented a theory of the unconscious mind as a scaffolding to support his notions of sexuality and instinctual life. Quite the opposite is true. The first and most basic experiential datum of analytic experience is the existence of the "unconscious repressed", and Freud sometimes referred to the instincts instructively as "our mythology". Freud loyalists should consider whether it really makes sense to champion sexuality and the instincts, as Marcuse did, while dispensing with his theory of the dynamic unconscious. In the long run, endorsing this kind of haphazard, piecemeal theorizing would be like admitting a Trojan horse inside the city walls. At the very best, it is a sterile and self-defeating strategy. At least with Fromm's revisionism, and other, parallel efforts, psychoanalysis has some chance for renewal, and some continued lease on life.

Finally, those who sympathize with the orthodox view on the primacy of sexuality and the instincts should remember that while Marcuse championed them in principle, in practice, his actual interpretation of these cardinal principles of Freudian theory is as fickle, capricious and wrong-headed as his use of technical terms like "repression" and "reality principle". Much as he may have denounced Fromm's ideas, likening them to Jung's, perhaps, Freud would *never* have endorsed Marcuse's interpretations of such important concepts as the Oedipus complex, the archaic inheritance, the death instinct, primary narcissism and so on. Nor would he have rallied to Marcuse's so-called "autonomy of theory", or any attempt to sever his metapsychology from the exigencies of clinical practice. In short, in the final analysis, there is really very little to choose



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between Fromm and Marcuse. The real choice is between Freud and Fromm, who was faithful to Freud in his fashion.