



Unconscious Coupling: The implications of Freud’s assertion that ‘the sexual instinct and the sexual object are merely soldered together’

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Sigmund Freud – the man and his ideas – bequeathed a legacy of contradictions. For some he is the father of psychoanalysis, for others a sex-obsessed kook sucking on a cigar (which is never *just* a cigar), and his theories oscillate between apparent common sense and controversial conjecture. One observation that sits uncomfortably with western culture is Freud’s assertion, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, that ‘we have been in the habit of regarding the connection between the sexual instinct and the sexual object as more intimate than it in fact is’.¹ This habit has emerged ‘in consequence of the uniformity of the normal picture, where the object appears to form part and parcel of the instinct’, contrary to Freud’s declaration that ‘the sexual aim and the sexual object are merely soldered together’ (ibid.). Compared to concepts such as the Oedipus complex this may not seem contentious but the severing of the sexual drive from the sexual object raises some important issues.² If Freud has taught us anything it is to not assume that because something is frequent it is ‘normal’ or ‘natural’. We are ‘in the habit’ of mistakenly connecting the drive and the object and avoid acknowledging the error due to our assumption that the ‘uniformity’ of normality is synonymous with reality. This occlusion invites an enquiry into the reasons for it and its implications should we look closer and realise that the normal picture of sexuality only appears uniform from a distance. This investigation will cover four main areas. Firstly, an expansion of Freud’s theory regarding the separation of the sexual drive from its objects. Secondly, an exploration of its link to transference and what this means for our concept of – for want of a better expression – the ‘emotional drive’ and its objects. Thirdly, a discussion of western capitalist ideology, its parallels to collective and individual repression by the unconscious, and the extent to which this both serves and restricts us. Finally, an analysis of how the ideologically-constructed discourse of love is threatened by Freud’s reconception of sexuality.

In his preface to the second edition of *Three Essays* Freud expressed ‘the earnest wish that the book may age rapidly – that whatever was once new in it may become generally accepted’ (p. 9). Earnest as that wish was, it has not been fulfilled. Whilst acceptance of sexual practices or object-choices that Freud termed ‘aberrations’ or ‘perversions’ has increased in western culture, the locus of attraction is still largely perceived as native to the sexual object. The dominant western discourse of love and sexuality dictates that both sexual and emotional drive are directed at a single human being of opposite sex and appropriate age, and that this person is desired for their innate qualities. There are of course alternative models – or ‘perversions’ – being

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Imago, 1949), p. 26 [henceforth *TE*].

² Like other commentators I substitute ‘drive’ for Strachey’s ‘instinct’, although I have maintained fidelity to the original in quotations.



practiced outside the borders of ‘normality’ but their minority status serves only to highlight their deviance and reinscribe the norm. For Freud, however, the norm is itself a perversion. Josh Cohen states that ‘undue fixation on the means at the expense of the ends of sexual behavior is the core of perversion’:³ the ‘pathological character in a perversion’ (*TE*, p. 39) is a result of ‘exclusiveness and fixation’ (*TE*, p.40). The conclusion is that perversion is not constituted by kinks, fetishes, or ‘abnormal’ object-choices, but is the result of the sexual drive’s exclusive focus on one avenue of discharge.

The reproductive function of heterosexual sex, although it only partially accounts for the emphasis on monogamy, clearly has a bearing on object-choice.⁴ Men and women fulfill their procreative ‘destiny’ and combine forces to care for their helpless infant. Freud asserts that it is in the transition from infantile to adult sexuality that the drive and object become reproductively-focused and ‘soldered’. ‘The sexual instinct of adults arises from a combination of a number of impulses of childhood into a unity, an impulsion with a single aim’ (*TE*, p. 109), and ‘the normal sexual life of the adult [...] comes under the sway of the reproductive function’ (*TE*, p. 75). Infantile sexuality’s ‘individual component instincts are upon the whole disconnected and independent of one another in their search for pleasure’ (*ibid.*) – in other words, have not yet achieved object-based unity of aim – but, confusingly, ‘the choice of an object, [...] characteristic of the pubertal phase of development, has already frequently or habitually been elected during the years of childhood’ (*TE*, p. 77). Initially this seems contradictory, suggesting at once that infantile sexuality has no particular object and that object-choice is settled in these early years. However, Freud is claiming not that infantile sexuality is fixed upon a single object, rather that it is in the pre-pubertal years that the conditions are laid down for a later restriction of object-choice.

To summarise, the infant’s first sensual experience is with its mother’s breast⁵ and therefore ‘the whole of the sexual currents have become directed towards one person’ (*TE*, p. 77). However, it is only with the removal of the object that the baby becomes aware of its separateness and identifies the breast *as* an object rather than a part of itself. Resultingly, the object is lost and the sexual currents it brought into being seek to reclaim it. In the quest for pleasure and the search for the original source of it, though, infantile sexuality is, as it were, not fussy about the substitutes it finds along the way. When infantile sexual developments give way to the latency period ‘children learn to feel for other people [...] a love which is on the model of, and a continuation of, their relation as sucklings to their nursing mother’ (*TE*, p. 100). At the same time ‘the mental forces which are later to impede the course of the sexual instinct and, like dams, restrict its flow’ are strengthened and the barrier against incest erected. Thus, ‘with regard to the mother, sensual love becomes *aim-inhibited* and transformed into *affection* (tenderness). Sexuality and affection are divorced; only later

³ Josh Cohen, *How to Read Freud* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p.16.

⁴ Freud’s declared *Three Essays* to be ‘deliberately independent of the findings of biology’ (p. 10); due to space constraints I follow suit.

⁵ Freud was very literal about this, but for ‘mother’s breast’ read ‘physical proximity with primary caregiver’.



they are to meet again in the love of the wife which is sensual as well as tender, aim-inhibited as well as aim-attaining'.⁶ Increasingly 'the sexual instinct has to struggle' against these mental forces, 'which act as resistances and of which shame and disgust are the most prominent' (*TE*, p. 40), leading to a further decline in acceptable objects. Freud observes that disgust is 'often purely conventional' (*TE*, p. 30) and the incest taboo is 'essentially a cultural demand made by society' (*TE*, p. 103), but asserts that the restrictive dams are not the product of education, rather are 'determined and fixed by heredity' (*TE*, p. 56). He acknowledges, however, that there has been a cultural shift with respect to sexuality, and that 'the ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honour even an inferior object, while we despise the instinctual activity in itself, and find excuses for it only in the object' (*TE*, p. 28, footnote). Heredity, then, can only account for so much, and an explanation for this reversal of priorities is not provided by *Three Essays* – but this is a matter I shall return to later.

The central thesis of *Three Essays* is that with the fusion of the sexual drive and affection, object-choice becomes limited. In addition to being its first sensual experience, 'a child sucking at his mother's breast has become the prototype of every relation of love' (*TE*, p. 99).⁷ For this reason 'the finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it' (*ibid.*) and 'a child's affection for his parents is no doubt the most important infantile trace which [...] paves the way to his choice of object' (*TE*, p. 106). However, there is some confusion here regarding the object; as Jonathan Lear notes, 'the earliest object of the sexual drive cannot be the mother's breast *tout court*; it must be the mother's breast as psychologically experienced by the infant'.⁸ In light of this it seems necessary to draw a distinction between the sexual drive as an aimless, pleasure-seeking imperative that can achieve discharge in a multitude of ways with a variety of objects, and the sexual drive as psychically invested, seeking the replication of its earliest discharges in which sexuality and affection were undistinguished. It is perhaps in this demarcation that Freud's soldering can be seen most readily – the sexual drive does not, per se, require affection to be gratified, and nor can it only be sated by objects fit for the procreative 'purpose' of sex. The sexual drive is quite satisfied by pleasure for pleasure's sake but has been squashed into a template of relations that links the discharge of the drive to emotional investment in the object – a template that replicates the integration experienced in the child's relationship with its parents. In Freud's words, 'a normal sexual life is only assured by an exact convergence of the affectionate current and the sensual current, both being directed towards the sexual object and the sexual aim' (*TE*, p. 85). Therefore we could see the drive as being soldered to the object by love. However, if the drive selects its sexual object not because of its intrinsic attractions – if the drive is not ignited by the object itself but is already alight, its fire having been stoked by consumption of the original

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: Philosophical Enquiry Into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 76 [original italics].

⁷ I have retained the universal 'he' in direct quotations, avoiding interruptive 'sic-ups', but employ a gender-neutral alternative in my own commentary.

⁸ Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 130.



object, and is searching for an effigy of it to burn – then this also has implications for the love-object. As Lear observes, ‘no matter how distinctive a later love relation may appear, for the persons involved there will be psychic resonances with the earliest, most primitive emotional-sexual bond’ (p. 130).

Accepting that the sexual drive and the sexual object are independent of one another requires recognition that the emotional drive is also independent of the emotional object inasmuch as it has been forced to renounce its initial target and seek a suitable substitute. The two drives approach from opposite ends, their tenuous union ‘like the completion of a tunnel which has been driven through a hill from both directions’ (*TE*, p. 85), but arrive at a similar dilemma. The sexual drive has the capacity for discharge with a range of objects but its desire has been shoehorned into a cramped aim; the emotional drive can only be completely answered by one object, which it has necessarily relinquished, and must diversify in order to be satisfied. In neither case is the attraction of the object the origin of the drive, thus proving what Leo Bersani calls ‘the Lacanian dictum according to which the object of desire is not the cause of desire’.⁹ This is best demonstrated by Freud’s theory of transference.

In ‘The Dynamics of Transference’ Freud posits that ‘each individual, through the combined operation of his innate disposition and the influences brought to bear on him during his early years, has acquired a specific method of his own in his conduct of his erotic life – that is, in the preconditions to falling in love which he lays down’.¹⁰ However, ‘only a portion of these impulses [...] have passed through the full process of psychic development’ and are ‘directed towards reality’; ‘another portion of the libidinal impulses [...] is unknown to the personality’s consciousness’ (*DT*, p. 100). Freud concludes that ‘if someone’s need for love is not entirely satisfied by reality [...] this cathexis will have recourse to prototypes’ (*ibid.*). The prototypes, reproduced as ‘stereotype plates’, are the formative infantile relationships that ‘teach the child to love’ (*TE*, p. 101). Thus choice of love-object is inflected both by the ways in which it already resembles the prototype, and the extent to which it can be appropriated as a screen for the subject’s projected desires.

Freud’s writings on transference are primarily concerned with transference-love in the analytic relationship, where the analyst becomes the stereotype-plate and love-object for the patient. The analytic context foregrounds transference especially clearly because the analyst is a figurehead about whom the patient has little personal knowledge, highlighting the disproportionately passionate feelings of the patient. However, the consultation room is not the only environment in which transference takes place. Furthermore, not all transference comes in the form of love, and not all prototypes are parental – other archetypal childhood relationships can become stereotype-plates upon which a spectrum of responses can be conferred. That said, Freud’s treatment of love-transference is most relevant here, although differentiating

⁹ Leo Bersani, “‘Arden Masturbation’ (Descartes, Freud, and Others)”, *Critical Enquiry*, 38 (2011), 1-16 (p. 10).

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Dynamics of Transference’ in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XII, 1911-1913, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 97-108, p. 99 [henceforth *DT*].



‘transference-love’ from simply ‘love’ becomes an increasingly arbitrary endeavour that leads Freud to ask, ‘can we truly say that the state of being in love which becomes manifest in analytic treatment is not a real one?’.¹¹ After all, although sexual desire can manifest as transference also, it is nonetheless ‘real’ desire. As Cohen recognises, ‘what the transference-love of patient for analyst reveals is that all love is transference’ (p. 86), thus Freud’s question could perhaps be more pertinently formulated, ‘what is “real” love?’

The ideal perpetuated by western culture’s narrative is that finding ‘true love’ is the only acceptable ending for the story. As Torben Grodal observes, ‘love stories are concerned with personalized bonding’,¹² feeding the common belief that ‘love is only love as long as it retains its connection with the personality and individuality of a human being’.¹³ Formulaic love tales also wheel in the fantasy of love at first sight and its emphasis on the ideal of The One to brighten the brilliance of the stellar qualities that constitute Mr or Mrs Right. Perfect love is characterised not an affective state but a person; however, clichéd phrases such as ‘it was like we’d known each other all our lives’ or ‘I felt that I’d met them before’ belie the fantasy. Transference is couched as karmic connection; the lovers act as simulacra of the lost object and in this sense *have* ‘met before’ and ‘known each other their whole lives’. This narrative is culturally inscribed at conscious and unconscious levels, creating a need for – and expectation of – a love that can never be satisfied by reality. The breast as prototype sexual object is mirrored by parental relationships (both parent-child and parent-parent) as prototypes for loving, making every subsequent love just a facsimile, hot off the press. This blurry copy, though, does not assuage the need, which can only be realised by the unattainable original, thus our ‘real’ love can only ever be another transferred, projected image.

There is an apparent dichotomy, however, created by Freud’s assertion that transference-love ‘is lacking to a high degree in a regard for reality, is less sensible, less concerned about consequences and more blind in its valuation of the loved person than we are prepared to admit in the case of normal love’ (*OT*, pp.168-69). Such rash disregard of ‘reality’ and eschewal of sensibility characterises to a large degree one of the foundational tenets of the love ideal – that we do not simply fall in love like a casual feather wafting gently to the ground but shoot into a dizzying plummet towards the magnetic attractions of our object. We could also call on the phrase ‘love is blind’ to support a case that actually, we are perfectly prepared to admit that ‘normal’ or ‘real’ love necessitates wild abandon. However, there is a subtle distinction here. Where Freud attests that these features ‘constitute precisely what is essential about being in love’ (*OT*, p. 169) he means not that being in love makes us blind, that the force of love for the other, *of* the other, causes a kind of insanity that disavows reality, but that our blind recklessness in searching for the prototype conditions loving. This

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Observations on Transference-Love’ in *Standard Edition*, vol. XII, pp. 157-171, p. 168 [henceforth *OT*].

¹² Torben Grodal, ‘Love and Desire in the Cinema’, *Cinema Journal*, 43 (2004), 26-46 (p. 26).

¹³ David West, *Reason and Sexuality in Western Thought* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), p. 124.



impulsive myopia is essential to being in love inasmuch as that without it ‘falling in love’ would not be possible; the love-object would never retain its appeal under the scrutiny of reality and forever fall short of the ideal. We must already be under the sway of delusion, prepared to overlook, overlay, substitute, supplement, and gloss the other to suit our purpose. After all, ‘doesn’t the state of being “madly” in love consist above all in the lover’s mistaking the reality of his beloved for his own self-serving phantasies of who she is?’ (Cohen, p. 98).

The fantasies created around the love-object are self-serving in several ways. Firstly, as demonstrated above, by satisfying the need for love not met by reality via projection of the infantile relationship ideal onto the object. In this respect ‘psychoanalysis has conceptualized desire as the mistaken reaction to a loss’: desire is a search party out to retrieve the missing object, but a party that will accept forgery and turn a blind eye to the dodgy hallmarks in order to avoid registering the absence.¹⁴ Secondly, Freud observes that ‘a passionate demand for love is largely the work of resistance’ (*OT*, p. 162). In the analytic context resistance ‘makes use of’ this consuming transference-love just as the patient is about to ‘admit or remember some particularly distressing and heavily repressed piece of life history’ (*ibid.*). Stripped of insight and perspective the patient is ‘swallowed up’ (*ibid.*) and the unconscious buries the repression even as it rises to consciousness, avoiding exposure and discomfort. In this sense, transference-love enables us to leap out of our self and into our object, obscuring awareness and providing an escape route from addressing difficult feelings, relocating the psychic focus with immediacy and intensity. Thirdly, in addition to projecting our fantasised other onto the object we narcissistically make it manifest our ego ideal. This can also take three forms: appropriation of qualities in the other that we wish to have; recognition of the self in the other; and realisation of our ego-ideal by viewing our object-bolstered self from the outside. No love can escape such identification, even parental love, which is ‘nothing but the parents’ narcissism born again’.¹⁵ Already a replication, the child is also a blank canvas ready to be daubed with aspirational paints, a potential portrait of its parent ready to have its lines drawn straight where the original’s are wonky. The parent can vicariously correct their mistakes and augment their achievements through ‘identificatory appropriation of the other’,¹⁶ supporting Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips’s view that ‘psychoanalytically speaking the loved one is little more than a prop’.¹⁷ As Freud observes, ‘what possesses the excellence which the ego lacks for making it an ideal, is loved’ (*ON*, p. 101).

The type of narcissistic love in which ‘each partner rejoices in finding himself or herself in the other’ is a game of reflections.¹⁸ The resonances we feel with our object legitimise those aspects of ourselves, supporting our ego-ideal as we gaze into the bewitching pool of water we take for our object. However, there is also a sense of

¹⁴ Leo Bersani, ‘Sociality and Sexuality’, *Critical Enquiry*, 26 (2000), 641-656 (p. 644).

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, ‘On Narcissism’ in *Standard Edition*, vol. XIV, pp. 67-102, p. 91 [henceforth *OM*].

¹⁶ Bersani, ‘Sociality and Sexuality’, p. 644.

¹⁷ Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 73.

¹⁸ Bersani, ‘Sociality and Sexuality’, p. 656.



belonging attained through similarity, a safeguard against what Erich Fromm terms ‘alienation’. The subject, ‘in order to overcome his sense of inner loneliness and impotence, [...] chooses an object onto whom he projects all his own human qualities: his love, intelligence, courage, etc.’.¹⁹ Here, love is confirmation of acceptance, a way of soldering ourselves to society.

Fromm posits that ‘the most frequent and obvious case of alienation is perhaps the false “great love”’ (p. 41), in which our yearning for connectedness is gratified by our lover. The misery endured at the end of such a relationship, like the love itself, does not have its basis in the object but the loss of what it represents. For a subject with little awareness the depression is transferred onto the lost object to disguise the fact that ‘he was never capable of loving actively, of leaving the magic circle of his own ego. [...] What he did was to transfer his longings for love to the girl and to feel that being with her he experiences his “loving” when he really experiences only the illusion of loving’ (Fromm, p. 42). The private and public demonstrations of loving and being loved inflate the fantasy of connection – a fantasy that is reflected back and reinforced by its perpetuation in ‘reality’. Thus ‘losing her is not, as he thinks, losing the person he loves, but losing himself as a potentially loving person’ (ibid.). The theatre is staged because ‘these illusions make the misery of real life bearable’ (Fromm, p. 10) and this deception is maintained through ‘a mixture between repression of facts and acceptance of fiction’ (Fromm, p. 94). However, for Fromm ‘the most powerful motive for repression’ is ‘fear of isolation and ostracism’ (p. 94), the state of separation caused by relinquishing one’s cosy spot in the bosom of society in favour of ‘reality’. In Fromm’s reading, Freud also ‘wanted to free man from the chains of his illusions in order to enable him to wake up and act as a free man’ (Fromm, p. 11), but this interpretation is problematic.

Fromm seems very certain that beyond the chains of illusion lies reality. Beyond the ‘false’ transference-love lies a possibility for ‘true’ love. Beyond the unconscious lies consciousness. In fact, Fromm’s plan for liberating humanity of its pedestrian obtuseness is rather simple. ‘If, so Freud found, the patient can gain insight into the fictitious character of his conscious ideas, if he can grasp the reality behind these ideas, if he can make the unconscious conscious, he will attain the strength to rid himself of his irrationalities’. (p. 11). The issue here is made clearer in light of the earlier question of ‘real’ love and Freud’s conclusion that there is no love free of the ‘illusion’ of transference and ‘no such state which does not reproduce infantile stereotypes’ (OT, p. 168). As Cohen notes, ‘the truth of human beings is found *in* their masks, not behind them’ (p. 29). This applies both to the masks we don ourselves and those bestowed upon us, so although it may be true that ‘lovers begin as prolifically inventive, producing enthralling illusions about each other (recycled from the past), only to be disappointed into truth’, there is not a compelling case to prove that truth and reality are neatly divisible from the chains binding them.²⁰ Furthermore, the bondage has a preservative as well as restrictive action, for ‘one of the earliest and

¹⁹ Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 40-41.

²⁰ Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 40.



most important functions of the mental apparatus is to bind the instinctual impulses which impinge upon it, to convert freely mobile energy into quiescent cathexis'.²¹

Being as it may that the nature of accepted reality is ideologically conditioned by dominant discourses it nonetheless seems naïve to suggest that we can slough them off like a blanket someone cast over us while we were asleep. Fromm explains that for 'man', 'real desires are unconscious, and what is conscious is a rationalization which hides completely what he does not want to know' (p. 71). This repression of desire occurs on both a personal and collective level. Fromm posits that 'what man considers true, real, sane are the clichés accepted by his society, and much that does not fit in with these clichés is excluded from awareness, is unconscious' (p. 94). This collective unconscious he terms the 'social unconscious'. The clichés are expressed through metanarratives, dominant discourses, ideologies that 'are impressed on the people from childhood by their parents, by the schools, churches, movies, television, newspapers, and they take hold of men's minds as if they were the result of men's own thinking' (Fromm, p. 93). Whilst I am not inclined to argue with Fromm's depiction of the hegemonic effect produced by the repetition and reinforcement of culturally-produced ideas that pose as truths, there lingers a sense that this process is somehow an external imposition. However, as John Fiske states, 'ideology is not [...] a static set of ideas through which we view the world but a dynamic social practice', so we might wonder what benefit our self-created narratives afford us, and our reasons for telling them.²²

It so happens that our acquiescence to cultural ideals does tend to benefit the big fish at the top of the capitalist food chain, but we are nonetheless complicit in producing and maintaining this structure. We cannot simply remove ourselves from the matrix; enmeshed in that web we contribute whether or not we refuse permission, and Fromm's assertion that in making the unconscious conscious we can rid ourselves of irrationalities is contradictory. If 'the gaps which exist because we refuse to see many things around us must be filled so that we may have a coherent picture' (Fromm, p. 93) then it follows that without the solder of fiction to hold the shrapnel of our reality together we would have a chaotic cubist picture rather than a rational realist one. It is also worth noting that the priority given to rationality is itself a product of ideology: it is one of the many traits, like uniformity, that constitute the ever-shifting line dividing healthy behaviour from pathology.

Fromm sees repression as engendered by fear of difference, and servitude to dominant ideologies as a method of avoiding alienation. As a collective phenomenon this too comes under the dominion of transference. Transference is 'to be found in all forms of idolization' (Fromm, p. 41), but our ignorant 'stupidity is most apparent in the views most people have about personal relationships and social affairs' (Fromm, p. 119). In this sphere 'people cannot see the most obvious facts [...] and, instead, cling to clichés which are endlessly repeated without being questioned' (ibid.). However,

²¹ Peter Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', *Yale French Studies*, (1977), 280-300 (p. 294).

²² John Fiske, 'Culture, Ideology, Interpellation' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology, Revised Edition*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 305-311, p. 307.



the focus on gaining freedom from such clichés obscures the more interesting question of why we have constructed them.

The restrictive narrative of true love is as hegemonic as any other dominant ideology and can be subjected to just as much Marxian critique, but this does not mean it must be perceived as per se negative. For one thing, ‘to the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is “psychological”; they “organize” human masses, they form the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.’.²³ We are not simply in the servitude of ideology, it is also in our employ; as Slavoj Žižek notes, ‘reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification’.²⁴ Returning to Brooks’s comment regarding the binding of instinctual impulses (cf. p.12) there is a clue as to why this unstable relationship between master and servant might be necessary. To use Freud’s terms, the pleasure principle must come under the regulation of the reality principle to prevent an explosive gratification of drives that ultimately threatens the equilibrium of psychic life. In Cohen’s words, ‘the elaborate wiring of our nervous system is designed to uphold this economy of stimulus by keeping its flow as low and even as possible’ (p. 15). When it comes to restricting libidinal energy, ‘Freud sees man as motivated by contradictions, by the contradiction between his striving for sexual pleasure and his striving for survival and mastery of his environment’ (Fromm, p. 41). Conscious and unconscious must therefore negotiate a balance between the sexual drive’s imperative to fuck freely and the organism’s need for impulse control. As Herbert Marcuse conjectures, ‘left free to pursue their natural objectives, the basic instincts of man would be incompatible with all lasting association and preservation: they would destroy even where they unite’.²⁵ We could, then, see the hierarchical capitalist structure of western society as a tool for regulating and redirecting drives into more ‘productive’ channels, and the importance of authoritarian institutions such as the law and the government as an answer to our unconscious’s need for boundaries. The individual rationalises their desires and guides them into acceptable distributaries, assisted by and in compliance with the collective, morally-derived rationalisation of desire that dictates what is acceptable. As West acknowledges, ‘Freud’s theory of sexuality potentially explodes the dogmatic conviction, fundamental to Christian sexual morality and even (until well into the twentieth century) western science, that sexuality is by nature essentially reproductive and hence genital and heterosexual’ (p. 120). With this in mind I confess that my defence of ideology is partly a devil’s advocate stance. It may partially account for our need to control the flow of libido, but in order to explain why the parameters around acceptable sexuality are so narrow, and why acceptability should take the form of life-long monogamous heterosexuality, we must be a little more cynical.

In the postmodern west we are seduced into believing that ‘passionate love and sexual relationship are the necessary and sufficient basis of a happy and meaningful

²³ Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. by David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 199.

²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Sublime Object of Ideology’ in *Literary Theory*, pp. 312-325, p. 318.

²⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 11.



life’ (West, p. 181). This belief is exploited because love and sex have become commodities, and commodities have become sexualised. ‘Things’ become props for our ego ideal in much the same way love-objects do; we are not simply sold a product but sold the self we wish to be, the self we cannot be without it. We are sold the idea of love, the idea of sex, the ideal of The One, and, in true capitalist style, a need is created in order that it can be filled. Possession has become fetishised: we are aroused by having, owning, buying. As Bersani observes, ‘far from having profound roots in the history of each individual’s sexuality, monogamy would be the intimate arrangement most consistent with the more general social right to private property’.²⁶ Long-term monogamous relationship is conflated with ownership, is love on a capitalist model in which The One becomes a possession. We must snare Mr or Mrs Right to prove that we fit into the system and banish the loneliness of being a half-empty can of paint sitting gullibly on a dusty shelf waiting to be found by our complementary colour. However, in the absence of *the one*, a one will do – after all, what’s an article between friends? – but those ‘realists’ who recognise that The One is a phantom, a spectre, are slightly off the mark. The One does exist, for all of us, haunting our sexual and emotional lives whether we choose to search for it or run from it.

The problem with the cynical-realist stance is its knowingness, its sense that we can get outside an ideology simply by opposing it. It implies that because the cultural construction is visible to us we must have exited it and can see what is ‘really’ happening through our enlightened scepticism. But we are in another Chinese-box construction spinning another discourse and there is nothing ‘really’ happening: what is happening is what is happening. We have eschewed one ideology, but in opposition we only reinforce its boundaries with our deviance – much as so-called perversions maintain the sexual norm. This is an example of Žižek’s observation that ‘an ideology succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour’ (p. 325) and ‘cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironic distance, *we are still doing them*’ (Žižek, p. 322; original italics). Playing out of one set of hands is just to play into another and whilst every level of remove, to use Fromm’s terminology, breaks another chain, ‘how can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?’²⁷

Fromm identifies a tri-part ‘social filter’ that acts as a bouncer for the nightclub of consciousness. Language and logic prevent certain experiences from entering awareness, whilst the third part denies access to feelings. This part ‘is made up by the social taboos which declare certain ideas and feelings to be improper, forbidden, dangerous’ (p. 90). At the conscious level, ‘the affixing of moral categories [...] becomes a tactic of unavowed self-purification; it sequesters certain persons and

²⁶ Leo Bersani, ‘Against Monogamy’ in *Is the Rectum a Grave and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 85-101, p. 93.

²⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 6.



certain behaviors in a different universe' (Bersani and Phillips, p. 58). Divisions have been made, individually and collectively, internally and externally, consciously and unconsciously, between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Many such distinctions are upheld by law – much of which is propped up on 'morality' – but they are in many ways arbitrary. The law does not prevent illegal practices but allows us to monsterise those who transgress it, and social boundaries perform the same function, constructing an ideal that we forever fall short of. When it comes to the sexual arena the zone of permissiveness may be enlarging but we still uphold our time-honoured traditions of life-long monogamy and tame sexual practice as sticks to beat those who fail to comply with the cultural code. Far from breaking down barriers those who fall outside them form a disconnected, alienated minority that only tighten their weave.

Even taking into account increased sexual freedom, though, our remit is still very narrow. Previously unacceptable couplings are becoming increasingly normalised, as is a period of fuck-and-run promiscuity before settling into a suitable marriage, but we are still slaves to our objects and the teleological conception of sex and love. Ultimately 'normal' sexuality is bound irretrievably to 'normal' love and 'normal' object-choice and the three go hand-in-hand in search of the happily ever after (hoping no-one thinks they sleep together). We can consider Freud's assertion that the sexual drive and the sexual object are merely soldered together in much the same way we can contemplate our ideological bondage or ruminate upon necrophilia. Abstract thinking is a safe intellectual endeavour that translates practices into theories; Freud's momentous observation has few concrete implications because sexual life will never *be* practiced as if it were true. If consciousness differentiates everything that in the unconscious is undifferentiated the drive will never be able to freely attach itself to any available object and act independently of conscious categorisation. The reality principle will continue to ensure that the flow of libido will not overwhelm us. If this were not the case, Marcuse predicts that:

with the emergence of a non-repressive reality principle [...] the body in its entirety would become an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed – an instrument of pleasure. This change in the value and scope of libidinal relations would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family' (*Eros and Civilization*, p. 201).

In this hypothetical scenario the implications of returning to our infantile domination by the pleasure principle would be destructive of western capitalist culture but at a high price for the individual. If Marcuse's earlier assertion (cf. p. 14) that the basic instincts of man would 'destroy even where they unite' we would have little time to enjoy our new-found freedom.

In view of the above discussion's rather unromantic bent it might be fair to say that it represents a cynical conception of love and sexuality – not to mention western



culture, society, and possibly the entire human race. Certainly our unaware yet complicit subjugation to hegemonic ideals that only partially serve us in return deconstructs the rosy view of interpersonal relationships we may have been swindled into investing in. A surge of defeated futility is one of the possible implications of thinking too hard about Freud's revision of sexuality, but we do not have to see the relocation of desire from the object to the subject negatively, or abandon the idea of love. The negative, after all, is not necessarily more 'real'. We do still love, even if the beloved is a combination of a ripe site for discharge of our sexual drives, a stereotype-plate reconstructing our infantile relationships, a mirror for our narcissistic desires, an escape from our inner despair, and a screen for projection of our love ideal. Still, they are a unique hybrid of these functions and they bring their own personalities to the table, offering a smorgasbord of qualities that we will never find in quite the same configuration again. We may not get the fairytale ending, middle, or indeed beginning, but we can refuse to let our passions be a 'defeat for the treatment' (*OT*, p. 166) that constitutes living and bring some solidity to our unconscious's 'capacity for hallucination' (*DT*, p. 108). We may not be able to instantly change the culturally dominant, ideology-obliging discourses of love – or, for that matter, of anything else – but as 'all liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude' we can get one step closer to freeing ourselves.²⁸ However, we must greet the task with humility. Freud's theory of the drive and the object may never come to rule the way we conduct our sexual lives, but if we close the affected cynical distance that prevents a deeper consideration of his re-visioning, then the implications for our ego and identity are fierce. In confronting our perverted, narcissistic, self-serving motivations we must accept that we all fall outside the acceptable ideal. We are none of us, at core, the rational, moral, free people we think we are; if we relinquish our attachment to our ego-ideal and realise that the categories structuring it are arbitrary, though, this does not have to be a crisis-inducing disaster. We are both drive-driven and rationality-imposing; cynical and innocent; master and servant; unconscious and conscious; loving of self and loving of others. The first to gaze in Narcissus's pool and see an imperfect reflection will inevitably stand alone, alienated – but we are tunnels driven through from each direction, and if consciousness of servitude paves the way to liberation then acceptance of our contradictions and blind spots is our passport to explore both sides.

²⁸ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 7.



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