EROS AND THANATOS: A Nondualistic Interpretation: The Dynamic of Drives in Personal and Civilizational Development From Freud to Marcuse

Maria Kli

The Freudian theory of drives gave prominence to the idea that there is an inherent principle of entropy, a tendency for dissolution of life, referred to as the Death drive, or Thanatos. Freud recognized a counterbalancing tendency for sustaining life, known as the Life drive, or Eros. The psychoanalytical expounding of the struggle of Eros and Thanatos in the context of the civilizational process sparked the philosophical critique of civilization. Although Freud tended to consider repression an indispensable dimension of this process, the author proposes in this paper that Herbert Marcuse’s political critique took Freud’s metapsychology further philosophically, suggesting a nondualistic interpretation of Freud’s position.

The topic of this paper concerns the unfolding of the dynamic of drives within the individual’s psychic development and the civilizational process. It focuses on a problematic initiated by Freud’s critique of civilization, which was elaborated further by Herbert Marcuse, who integrated the topic in a political context. There are two objectives herein: first, to explicate Freud’s metapsychological approach in ontological terms, through an interpretation that recognizes three stages in the formation of his theory, from the highest to the lowest degree of determinism, and, second, to reconstruct Marcuse’s critical interpretation in order to demonstrate that, in psychoanalytic terms, the individual psyche is not considered a cut-off entity or the isolated core of a biological entity restricted to several inherent tendencies. As an embodied being, it is subject to dynamic mental and environmental processes as it develops through its connection with the world. The psyche is interdependent, shaped sociohistorically, but simultaneously it is also an active agent characterized by a great degree of independence and multiplicity.
This paper challenges the conventional Freudian approach of the instincts, positing a nondualistic interpretation of Freud’s metapsychology, an interpretation less deterministic and, in fact, more plausible than the dualistic approach. Freud recognized two basic, apparently counterbalancing, currents of drives: the Erotic drive, usually related to the instincts of life, love, and creativity, and the Death drive, associated with a tendency toward aggression and destructiveness. A nondualistic interpretation, defended herein, is based on Marcuse’s (1955) view that both drives are manifestations of one central current of energy defined as libido. Marcuse attributes to this term a content more akin to Jung’s understanding, which is compatible with the definition of a vital energy found in other cultures, such as the Chi energy of the Chinese or the Kundalini of the Indian. This actual form of bioenergy is what animates being and is subjected to multiple dualities of the instinctual drives, and, through these transformations, is manifested in various expressions of human beings.

FREUD’S METAPSYCHOLOGY: TWO OPPOSING MANIFESTATIONS OF ENERGY FLOW—DUALITY OR MONISM?

Freud applies the hypothesis of the Death drive in many of his works and tries to find a solution to the following problem: Can the Death drive be an isolated current of drives or is it dependent on other drives, such as those associated with life or sexuality? A central aspect of this problem is that, in his efforts to prove the existence of an autonomous Death drive, Freud failed to provide psychoanalytic proof, deducing its existence from symptoms in which a certain dissolving quality of life appears as an expression of an inherent principle of entropy. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (Freud, 1920), he deals with this problem. Freud appears to be committed to his dualistic view, which advocates two distinct drives, thereby rejecting Jung’s monistic solution of a general libidinal energy. From the viewpoint of Freud’s apparent dualistic thought, there are only two possibilities: Either two equally distinct and opposing drives exist, or the Death drive has to be abandoned. The latter course, according to Freud, would suit religious advocates and idealists, who naively seek to reject the notion that such a negative concept could be “inherent.”
However, if we are bound to commit to an autonomous Death drive, we must be ready to accept all the implications that this would entail in psychoanalytic, existential, and sociopolitical terms. In the first part of this paper, following Marcuse’s way of interpretation, I argue how a nondualistic understanding of Freud’s problematic can be sustained, taking into account, primarily, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). This approach suggests that we can analyze Freud’s theoretical hypothesis in three gradual stages, with the final one leading to a more liberating and less deterministic view, which should in all probability emerge from nonduality, but without rejecting the emerging manifestation of duality. These stages are not defined in temporal terms, but rather in theoretical ones. This solution actually seems the most feasible, since the idea of an autonomous Death drive derives from a not-fully elaborated, simplistic theoretical position.

In Freud’s metapsychology two poles appear to constitute the human being: the internal necessity for fulfillment, and the external necessity determinant for self-preservation (Freud, 1920). These two principles can be seen as complementary or as conflicting. The psychic mechanism directed by the pleasure principle seeks to avoid unpleasant stimuli in order to achieve satisfaction, serving thus the economy of the psychic apparatus in the best possible way. The pleasure principle, according to the principle of Constancy or stability, which Freud draws from Fechner (1873), arises in the organism with the elimination of instinctive stimulation (Freud, 1915). Freud recognizes the instinctive tendency toward stability aimed at reducing stimuli as the principle of Nirvana (Freud, 1920), a concept that refers to the tendency to return to the undifferentiated primordial condition; this is why it can be seen as a regression to the state that precedes even the state of life itself. Within instinctual life, drives (*trieb*) seek to maintain this regressive inertia in ways that vary, either for the destruction or the preservation of the energy of life. The demand for pleasure collides with the principle of reality, for the latter conflicts with the pursuits of pleasure.

The individual psyche in Freudian psychoanalysis appears in constant conflict between, on the one hand, recollection (an idea that resembles the platonic *anamnesis—ἀνάμνησις*) of the integral satisfaction represented by the pleasure principle and, on the
other hand, the necessity to abandon this objective for the sake of reality and self-maintenance. This confrontation often ends in the replacement of fulfillment by the feeling of lack and by repression. However, this restriction of desire is considered necessary for the survival of the organism and also for the constitution of the social self. The totalizing character of the pleasure principle in infancy is progressively restricted under objective circumstances that constitute the reality principle, while, for the sake of self-preservation, the Ego takes over by arranging the different principles of the personality and their active roles in the establishment of the self (Freud, 1920, 1923).

The theory of drives evolves in respect to the dynamic that develops between the two main forces that rule psychic life. On the one hand, the Erotic drive is manifested through sexual urges aimed at unifying disparate life forms, and at constantly extending the units of life. Attributed to this tendency is not only its ability to establish the bonds that hold people in mutual relations, but its role in the creation of the greatest achievements of the human intellect and inspiration. On the other hand, Freud assumed the existence of an urge tending toward destruction or the dissolution of life, and he perceived this to be an expression of a force of entropy in human beings, which aims at a return to the primordial undifferentiated condition of nonarising and nonceasing. This tendency to obey the principle of Thanatos (θανάτος), or the Death drive, may be manifested energetically, as destruction, aggression, and negativity, or, passively, as mental dullness, apathy, and a general abstention from life (Freud, 1920, 1930).

As mentioned earlier, the third principle relevant to pleasure and reality is the principle of Nirvana, a term Freud (1920) borrowed from Barbara Low (1920). As in the primordial state, in the state of Nirvana desire is considered to have been fulfilled, so that there is no desire or impulse toward an object, and thus there is no interest in attainment, mobilization, creation, and so forth. Likewise, in Eros’s most intense state, the boundary between the “I” and the object tends to be eliminated. Relevant to conditions of the principle of Nirvana, it appears to harmonize with the sense of unification that Freud (1930) described as the “oceanic feeling”: “a feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole” (p. 9). However, the state of Eros diverges from the Nirvanic to the extent that it represents
a situation that tends always toward actualization but without being totally actualized; this means that it cannot be conceived as having come to an end. And in this sense, the erotic state need not necessarily be considered an active condition in an absolute sense; it may well be receptive, but is not completely passive. Consequently, it can be seen as a “fighting” element, a “moving” or transmutable energy, a purely libidinal element (Marcuse, 1955).

Libido represents the inherent creative tendency of the human being as a force of formation (vis formandi) and is, as such, libido formandi, and passion for creation, as it is found in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis and others. This power of libido formandi, the energy of the human being that manifests itself through the ability to create forms, as a ruling principle of the human psyche, should be correlated to another principle that defines the human being, and this is the imaginative capacity. However, the principle of destruction should be perceived as an integral part of creation. As one of Castoriadis’s commentators notes: “No notion of creativity can be configured without a simultaneously enacted destruction” (Gourgouris, 2010).

Thus, the hypothesis of an autonomous Death drive affirms an inherent aggressive and destructive tendency in the human being. This approach has often given prominence to the defense of conservative regulations and repressive controls. Initially, Freud (1914), while studying the phenomenon of sadomasochism in his significant though nonetheless transitional paper On Narcissism: An Introduction, discovered the Death drive as an indistinguishable element, fused with the erotic drive. A tendency toward violence and dissolution was apparent; nevertheless, it could not be manifested as clearly distinct from the erotic drive. From this perspective, the erotic element would seem to be opposed to the instincts of life represented by the Ego, for it was thought to obey only the pleasure principle, and therefore unable to conform to reality (Freud, 1914).

Still, a more progressive phase of Freud’s theory could be acknowledged in his view that it is not the libidinal current itself that contradicts life, but, oddly enough, an aspect of it alleged to serve the self-preservation principle (Freud, 1920). Therefore, in Freud’s hypothesis the dualistic perspective that advocates an autonomous impulse for destruction is restricted by the introduction of the narcissistic libido. The latter term is used as an equiva-
lent of the psychic energy as a whole, which undergoes different kinds of multiple dualities of the drives. The emphasis of the role of narcissism in aggression as the agent of hatred in object relations, which has rendered it “a servant of the death instinct,” often overshadows the fundamental motive of self-gratification in narcissism (Crockatt, 2006), which could render it a possible ally with the erotic and life drive. This is the aspect more elaborated by Marcuse (1955), whose analysis of narcissistic love suggests that there is a dimension in it which is not necessarily pathological, and that it has a creative and transmutative character. In the following section, a brief presentation of the basic principles of Freud’s personal psychology will expound (1) the way he perceived the struggle of the drives, (2) how instinctual conflict affects the different layers of the personality, and (3) how this dynamic structure is connected to the civilizing process.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY OF PERSONALITY: THE STRUCTURE OF THE FREUDIAN PSYCHIC APPARATUS

In Freud’s analysis of personality the psychic apparatus is structured in three distinct layers: the Id, which stands for the unconscious; the Ego; and the Superego. This structure is known more or less through the modern psychology of personality. I feature it in order to examine the application of the metapsychological analysis in respect to the psychic and mental activity, or interaction, of these different layers of personality. However, a dynamic perspective is required, for psychological principles are subject to different adaptations in the developmental stages of Freud’s work.

The Id is the darkest, least explored, and mysterious aspect of the human being, and it is the primary ground for manifestation of the drives. It is most closely connected to the energy that comes from the libido as sexuality and the death drive. The Id is the main “field” on which the battle between the Death drive and Eros is fought, and where the tendency to reduce stimuli threatens to annihilate the erotic impulses encouraged by the pleasure principle (Freud, 1923). The main pursuit of the Id is the attainment of pleasure, and it is so much committed to it that it may even jeopardize the system’s self-preservation. The Id is not concerned
with social constraints, rules, or ethical precepts; it ignores postponement. It is the part of the self that is most connected to the distanced past; it is the carrier of the inherited tendencies of the species, the locus of both personal and phylogenetic inheritance. Freud’s understanding of the Id is strongly grounded in a biological context; for him the Id is primarily the place of expression of the organic and bodily instinctual forces. For this reason, he has often been criticized for his biological and deterministic organic thinking (see Sulloway, 1979). But, however restricted Freud’s understanding of the Id might be—for example, compared to Jung, who clearly attributes a cultural agency to the unconscious—it allows for a capacity for inherency, and hence can be understood beyond a restricted biological context. This means it can also be perceived as historically constituted and progressively articulated throughout generations. In Freud’s work, these two aspects of the sociohistorical and biological formation of subjectivity are usually conflated. Nonetheless, that which in Freud’s mature work can be identified as “object relations,” points to the social relations that shape the child’s personality, whereas his explication of subjectivity is also developed in terms of physiologically predetermined processes that bring biological partial instincts, related to oral and anal erogenous zones, under genital control (Abromeit, 2011).

The Ego is perceived as a more evolved aspect of the self, having emerged from the necessity for survival. It is a kind of “negotiator” between the unconscious self and its desires, and the conditions of the outer world. As the most active agent of the personality, it guides the person’s actions. As Marcuse (1955) states, the Ego assumes the responsibility to save the image of the world for the sake of the unconscious, for, under its guidance, the self in quest of pleasure could lose the sense of reality and be extinguished. The Ego does not restrict itself to the perceptive and conscious processes, but perceives, interprets, and recasts reality according to its interest. The mediating role of the Ego toward reality is twofold: On the one hand, it is obliged to reject the urges that cannot conform to reality, and, on the other hand, it must achieve the actual attainment of as much pleasure as possible.

The Superego is considered the most progressive state of the self, but even so, it is not always assumed to be conscious. The Superego is occasioned by the primary dependence of the child
upon the parents’ authority. It is primarily formed by the parents’ determination of what is “right” and “wrong,” and is further developed and confirmed by external factors, including social and cultural ideals, and thus solidified into a single unity as an expression of ethical precepts and higher values. Progressively, what has been imposed by parental influence and the cultural environment is integrated, and becomes part of the Ego and the person’s consciousness. However, the strictness with which the Superego is imposed on the individual originates from unconscious processes. This strictness produces the ethical consciousness and promotes social adjustment. The conversion of this process into a consciousness of guilt was for Freud (1930) the most prominent problem of the individual and the collective process of civilization. In Freud’s work, the Superego progressively becomes the main agency of the Death drive (Freud, 1923), and, as shall be further analyzed, denotes the dependence of the processes of social control on the Death drive.

Therefore, even though the Superego is involved with more complicated functions and is connected to social factors, to a great extent it is employed unconsciously. Insofar as the Superego demands obedience, the Ego produces repression for its sake. The internalization of rule, the desire to break it, and the unconscious guilt that results are all primarily products of the Superego (Freud, 1930). The Superego and the Id have one thing in common: They both represent influences of the past. The Id bears the influence of reality and the Superego bears the influence of other people and the environment. By contrast, the Ego is determined by the experiences of the individual, accidental incidents, and ongoing situations. Thus, Freud defines the actual sources of the Superego and the origins of ethical consciousness in relation to the primitive function of the unexplained fear of the primitive “taboo” (see Freud, 1913). Furthermore, what is important in Freud’s understanding of the Superego is that the processes of repression become automatized. External demands tend to be taken for granted as part of consciousness (unconsciously internalized), and a great part of the guilt remains unconscious, producing in this way pathological implications.

The study of melancholy, a condition caused by the loss of a beloved “object,” revealed to Freud (1920) what an innermost tormenter the self can become. This severity could be attributed to
possible identification with an authority of the past. The quest for the unconscious foundations of this self-punishing condition is what led to the hypothesis of the Death drive, and points to its bond with the Superego. The semi-neurotic establishment of the Superego in the position of accuser, prosecutor of the “Other,” assumes a function, which, even though useful socially, becomes the main carrier of the Death drive. In some cases, the intervention of the Superego in the psyche serves in a way that renders harmless the aggressive tendency, originating from the destructive drive, at least for others. Thus, this aggressiveness is projected toward the self, is internalized, and is actually sent back to the source from which it originated, and against the person’s Ego. From this position, it may exert toward the self the same aggressiveness that the individual would have unleashed toward others under the influence of anger and desire for revenge (Freud, 1930).

The psychological motivation for this unconscious, violent, and, in fact, extrinsic influence on the self is found in its desire for love, in its weakness, vulnerability, and dependence on others. Anxiety in the face of the loss of love is the primary agent of the individual’s alignment with social commands. Thus, social anxiety over the loss of the other forms the consciousness of guilt (Freud, 1930). There is a point at which the difference between the enactment of a forbidden act and the mere thought of it is extinguished. Social obedience is hence considered by the person as a given. At this point, the connection between renunciation of the urge and consciousness of guilt is evident. While primarily the relinquishing of an urge is caused by fear of the loss of love, and though we would expect that someone would be released from the feeling of guilt, it is quite the opposite, since desire does not disappear, but is instead repressed. As the Superego establishes itself in the form of an imposed external consciousness, the feeling of guilt as automatized keeps growing, filling the person with dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Freud, interpreting this in political terms, would state that the aggressiveness of consciousness preserves the aggressiveness of power (Freud, 1930). This means that, while at first consciousness causes the relinquishing of the urge, later this is inverted. Consequently, every renunciation increases the intolerance of consciousness. Feelings of guilt and hatred express the ambivalent conflict of the eternal struggle between Eros and Thanatos, whereas guilt generates in the indi-
individual the need for control, thereby preserving social conformity and political obedience.

Marcuse’s (1955) interpretation of Freud’s metapsychology asserts, on its surface, a not so commonly accepted view. Freud, in the last phase of his theory on the nature of drives, conceived the Ego beyond its role as an agent of adaptation, and related it to the narcissistic libido. Even though, for him, the Ego was considered an instrument of “biological function” in 1909, it was no longer when it was considered a mediator between the unconscious and the Superego and an agency of the instincts of life. Because of its role in the process of identification and repression, the Ego supports the urges of the Death drive within the Id, in order to subjugate the libido. Nevertheless, following this mode of action, the Ego runs the risk of becoming itself the focus of the Death drive and thus being annihilated. Hence, it is summoned to transform into a representative of Eros, that is, to invest itself with libido, which results in the desire for love and life (see Freud, 1920, 1923). Narcissism is charged with the mission to resist the Death drive. Marcuse pushes this view to the limits, and bridges the Freudian dual and the Jungian nondual concepts of libido. According to Marcuse (see Freud, 1920, and Marcuse, 1955), given this recognition of the narcissistic libido, the dualistic perception of two autonomous principles—namely Eros/love, and Death/destruction—cannot be sustained. The common “conservative” nature of the drives renders this hypothesis scientifically and philosophically weak. Thus, all drives are found to emerge from a common root or source-energy, which is the erotic or libidinal.

Marcuse (1955) draws on Fenichel’s statement that Freud moved much further with his assertion of a neutral “commutative” energy, which may either ally with an erotic or a destructive urge. However, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle it is obvious that Freud insisted on a dualistic perspective, differentiating himself from Jung. Another aspect that Marcuse points out is the sociohistorical production of instinctual processes. Freud himself mentioned that the unconscious is accessible to the influence of life’s incidents, which renders possible the inherited transmission of particular attributes of the unconscious from one generation to the other. This view differs from the biological perspective that Freud often maintained, rendering the destiny of instinctual life more flexible, as sociohistorically formulated and cultivatable.
As mentioned earlier, according to Marcuse’s nondualistic interpretation, the recognition of the antithesis between \textit{Eros} and \textit{Thanatos} denotes a differentiation that arises from one primarily common root. If the cause of the inclination that enforces regression is the quest for an indestructible tranquility, then the infliction of Death assumes a different meaning. According to this approach, the Death drive is energy that aims not necessarily to externalize destruction as such, but that is a means toward relief from the tension. The entropic descent to Death constitutes the unconscious escape from pain and necessity. This is a process that goes on in very distinct ways within each individual, and the formation of this process is dependent on a multiplicity of factors generated by the individual’s singular experience. However, there is also a collective constitution of the instinctual processes. The social constitution and the collective forms of living and thinking affect this internal conflict, as well as the configuration of the instincts of individuals in general. This makes sense, if we consider society as a structured collective form of life, expected to provide subjects with objects of investment for instinctual energy; such objects could be values and practices related to truth, beauty, compassion, competitiveness, money, consumption, and so forth (see Castoriadis, 1978).

In this case, the death drive appears as a result of the absoluteness which comes from repression of the sexual urge, in its multifunctional and multidimensional aspects, beyond the strictly biological meaning of the term. This effect occurs through the instrumentality of reason—that is, through the prevalence of a narrow understanding of what can be viewed as “useful” and “functional.” The repression of the erotic drive—that is, its unsuccessful channeling toward an object—is often converted into aggression. Of course, it is not only the erotic, but also the destructive drive included in the processes of social oppression and subjugation. From the psychoanalytical perspective, every representation that causes discontent tends to be repressed. Repression constitutes a precondition of social oppression, but inevitably it is also a result of social oppression, nurturing further repression, resulting in a vicious cycle where the one reinforces the other. Freud consid-
eredit it inevitable that civilization progresses through repression at the expense of human happiness.

From the perspective of individual psychic development and that of the phylogenetic course, the unbound function of the pleasure principle, confronted by the environment, is restricted. Consequently, pleasure yields to the reality principle, inducing the realization that fulfillment and painless satisfaction are impossible. Even though Freud (1930) considers this transition necessary for the final preservation of pleasure, he recognized the sacrifices civilized beings are forced to make: “Civilized man has exchanged some part of his chances of happiness for a measure of security” (p. 92). The function of civilization to keep instinctual forces under control through the implementation of particular useful social norms and duties is considered necessary by Freud for the humanization of the individual, understood as primarily unconscious and instinctual. In this respect, history is the product of the diversion by the vast majority of the population, from pleasure to productive labor (Marcuse, 1955). The progress of the individual is dependent on the progress of civilization, and while the individual is forced to surrender some pleasure, this repressive process is necessary for biological and economic reasons. For Freud, the reality principle is understood as an objective factor governed by brute necessity and material scarcity, namely ananke (ανάγκη) and spane (σπάνη). According to Freud, there has never been a civilization that could have permitted an immediate satisfaction of instincts. For him, subjection to the reality principle is unavoidable (see Ocay, 2009).

However, with Freud’s contribution it became commonly accepted that psychic stability is ruled by specific processes and conditions. Psychoanalysis revealed that particular preconditions have to be fulfilled, in order for a person to maintain a balanced and satisfactory life. If those supposed demands, the fulfillment of which the human organization urgently asserts, are not covered, serious disorders should be expected. This function can expand in a twofold direction. On the one hand, it can obtain very solid forms, in which the human psyche is shaped as a neurotic mechanism constructed by contradictory principles, energized by the succession of repression and the increase of constant and renewable demands. On the other hand, more favorably, the instinctual organization can form a more fluid condition. In the lat-
ter case, an individual could interfere with and help to form these principles and interactions in more skilled and mindful ways, by means of different techniques and cultivation. Of course, in order to access these techniques, individuals would have to have been somehow socially activated. That is, techniques must have been constituted and in some way set in practice by society.

The reality principle, as mentioned, is the governing principle of the Ego. The Ego’s task is to direct and channel both the energy accumulated by means of the restriction of the pleasure principle and the energy that comes from the modified Death drive, according to the commands of the environment, and in conjunction with the Ego’s estimations and objectives (Freud, 1923). Therefore, an actual alteration emerges in the function that aims to relieve the mind from the excess of stimuli. This function was initially expressed by releasing itself kinetically from the energy accumulated under the influence of the pleasure principle. However, progressively, this process is converted into activity directed toward the development of intervention in reality situations. In that case, the person develops an important advantage—namely, the ability to intervene and convert the surrounding world, the capacity to transform reality according to one’s needs and desires.

At this point, one cannot avoid reflecting on the aspect of human consciousness that philosophers have often characterized as tragic. This is because, while the maturing individual develops knowledge that arms him or her for action, in fact, by adulthood, the individual does not absolutely follow his or her desires. In reality, one is not only in the position of affecting one’s own environment, but is now subjected to the influence of the surrounding world. The exercise of power, the exploitation of resources, and the activation of practical abilities appear often as compensations for surrendering happiness. The price of socialization is that individual desires are organized and directed by society, which assumes an increasing influence on the individual. This is the process by which repression and sublimation of primordial instinctual forces is enforced. Freudian psychoanalysis was revolutionary, because it revealed the repression of libidinal energy as the foundation of civilization, and the means of its material progress. However, as Marcuse (1955) states, while “psychoanalysis was a radically critical theory” (p. 140), within the revisionist schools it became an ideology that exalts the personality’s creative poten-
tial in a society, and cannot, in fact, bring about freedom from suppression, for it imposes abolition of criticism of any kind.

MARCUSE'S CRITIQUE OF THE HISTORICAL CONSTITUTION OF DRIVES AND RELATIVITY OF THE “REALITY PRINCIPLE”

For Marcuse (1955), the ambivalence of drives and their conversions are interconnected with the transitions of the mental apparatus within the progressive course of civilization. Drives are transformed into human instincts under the influence of external reality, which, for human beings, beyond the natural environment, is the sociohistorical constitution of relationships, which forms human nature throughout time. Since instincts are socially organized, the individual is not merely a biological organism in a cultural void, even at its most primitive stages. Although the basic position and direction of the organic function of drives may remain unchanged, their objectives and manifestations are subjected to change.

Marcuse’s (1955) interpretation of Freudian theory ascribes a new perspective to instinctual forces. In his view, instincts are not defined in terms of their origination or organismic roles, but in terms of a force that instills a particular direction in life, and, as such, they are defined, rather, as principles of life. The repressive function activated by the civilizational process is what constitutes the biological structure of the organism. History is what governs the drives’ fate and this is the emphasized aspect underlying Freudian theory, in Marcuse’s view. Society becomes “nature” when the individual reproduces the reality principle through his or her own being and instincts. The repression of the individual produces, in turn, the progression of civilization. Nonetheless, according to Marcuse, the instinctual arché points toward a resolution of repression through a possible reconciliation of the reality principle with the pleasure principle.

In the conscious struggle for existence, ananke is the exogenous factor of repression. It enforces the imposition of repressive controls of the sexual instincts through the brute power of the primal father during the primitive stages, and through institutionalization, internalization, and transformation of the death instincts into socially useful aggression and morality in latter stages. This
organization of instincts, throughout a long process, produces the civilized structure of labor, progress, and “law and order.” On the one hand, civilization is based on the externalization of more or less aggressive energy, and its consequent channeling for purposes of construction and self-preservation; on the other hand, it utilizes the aggressiveness that is directed inward. This “negative” current of energy is usually internalized, and actually turned against the person’s Ego as analyzed earlier in this paper. Furthermore, moved by social anxiety, the individual is impelled to adapt conformist attitudes. When internalized representations of the Superego become an integral part of the Ego, to the extent that they supersede the person’s creative capacity, they form a mechanical reproduction of the self that eliminates spontaneity and improvisation. The latter characteristics, of course, constitute factors that contribute to expressing the genuine qualities of one’s psyche and to experiencing pure joy.

This chain of transitions is simultaneously responsible for the progressive weakening of Eros and the growth of aggression, which leads to unhappiness, as Freud (1930) proclaimed. Nevertheless, Marcuse (1955) does not consider this feature of unhappiness to be inherent in the struggle for existence as such, but, rather, in the oppressive organization of this process under the criteria of power and hierarchy. In Marcuse’s view the emphasis is transferred from the biological to the social conditions of existence. There are two arguments that can be used to justify the necessity of repression. The first one concerns the scarcity of resources, raising the need for a hierarchical organization of society. Freud considered scarcity as an inherent characteristic of the reality principle, but Marcuse is definitely opposed to this view. The second argument concerns the inherent tendencies in human beings that constitute an impediment to social life. So, in respect to the question of whether there are asocial forces in the instincts themselves that render necessary repressive constraints regardless of scarcity or plethora in the external world, Marcuse (1955) recalls Freud’s statement that the nature of the instincts is “historically acquired” (p. 138).

Reality is not an absolutely objective entity, unchangeable for all societies and times; it is a creation, dependent on social and historical conditions; it is also dependent on many unpredictable factors, relations, and games of power. Our perception of real-
It is constituted and mediated by language, power, and institutions; this constitution renders the reality principle relative and subject to multiple interests, dynamics, and social transitions. If Marcuse’s analysis demonstrates that the reality principle is sociohistorically constituted, this signifies also that what we call “reality” is not an objective, unquestionable category. The perception of reality is always a creation of subjectivity and one’s unique inner flux of representations, which gives form to reality. The latter cannot emerge without the imaginary and symbolic function, which, nonetheless, is mediated by society (see Castoriadis, 1975).

Marcuse’s critique of Freud seeks to clarify exactly this point of the subjective components of the reality principle, without falling into absolute relativism. In order to refer to the distinction between the biological and sociohistorical transitions of the instincts, Marcuse (1955) introduces the term excessive or surplus repression. This concept asserts that in a progressive stage of civilization, like ours, the conditions of repression are maintained and the struggle for survival still takes place within the context of scarcity and domination, while other possibilities could indeed take shape and be materialized. This anachronistic reality is related to the fact that the unjust and unequal organization of labor relations within the framework of the current financial system demands excessive repression from the masses, in exchange for maximization of profit for the elite. Therefore, it is a specific kind of prevailing rationality that preserves the social structure in a manner that corresponds to regressive states of humanity. The extent of repression is rendered extravagant if we take into account the possibilities that have been attained by the development of science and technology and the inappropriate, irrational, and unjust way in which these achievements are put into effect, considering that this organization could be inverted for the benefit of a larger number of beings and populations (Marcuse, 1970). Hence, Marcuse sets out to prove the obsolete character of excessive measures of repression. In this context, his interpretation of Freudian theory takes the form of a psychosocial and political critique of capitalist society, of its structure and prevailing form of life.

Another term used in analyzing the repressive controls of modern society is performance principle. According to this concept, under the power of the principle of efficiency, capitalist society is structured in layers, depending on the financial efficiency of its
members (see McKenzie, 2001). For Marcuse, the attribution of that which emerges as consequences of the hierarchical way of organizing the scarcity—and the specific existential spirit imposed by that organization—to the bare fact of scarcity actually conceals the actual fact that in the contemporary world the reality principle is artificially identified with the efficiency principle. Through this identification, people are inevitably impelled toward competitive and utilitarian practices. From the Marcusian point of view, in our society the performative principle has been identified with the reality principle itself, thus shaping the essence of what subjects perceive as sine qua non. This outcome, in Marcuse’s (1955) view, is the result of the naturalization and substantialization of a relative principle which is not a given, but which has been historically constituted.

The position taken in this paper is that by politicizing the psychoanalytic aspect, Marcuse rearticulated and corrected the Freudian problematic under a Marxist historical perspective. Simultaneously, he enriched and restructured the restrained anthropological perspective of Marxist thought by delving into the depth of the human psyche through psychoanalysis (see Ocay, 2009). The “high price” of the sacrifice, which is required in order to have the optimum result and the highest degree of productivity in society, is that the individual loses the ability to express his or her creativity and to follow the path that would grant innermost happiness, the capacity for real intimacy, and the ability to spend time in everyday life with real joy—namely, to experience life in its full vibrancy. This is the point where civilization, unwisely, betrays its promise for an actually fulfilling life.

REPRESSION IN THE CAPITALISTIC CONTEXT

From Marcuse’s (1955) point of view, with the imposition of the reality principle in the cultural context of capitalism, Eros is no longer the instinctual force of life that rules the individual. It becomes a personal issue and assumes a “general” form under the generative function. Repression becomes the fundamental form of life in modern society. Marcuse acknowledges that with the restriction of the hedonic time, that is, time dictated by the pleasure principle, invested in activities motivated by and bringing about
pleasure, the production of work, and indeed alienated work, is rendered possible.

One of the psychological results of the dominance of the reality principle over the pleasure principle is, according to Marcuse (1955), the transformation of Eros into sexuality, initiated with the deflection of the Oedipus complex and the internalization of paternal power. Eros is primarily something wider, qualitatively differentiated from sexuality. It is not a partial instinct but rules the whole of the organism, and only later is placed at the service of the generative function and traced therein as sexuality. This decisive modification of Eros entails the de-eroticization of the organism and its transformation into an instrument of labor. In this way, the work the body is rendered capable of producing would otherwise be erotic energy (Marcuse, 1970).

Although since the 1960s prohibitions against sexuality have typically decreased, it is also the case that erotic instincts are mostly controlled through the arrangement of free time, the bigger part of which is devoted to ensure supplies, maximize productivity, and increase consumption. This means that erotic energy is confined in processes of self-preservation through the investment of time in certain types of activities, which constitute the heart of the prevailing form of life. According to Marcuse (1964), in the capitalist system the administration of desire by means of scientific knowledge feeds into consumerism and manipulation by assimilating libertarian assertions. It is also possible that our society has reached the very opposite of sexual oppression, forming what Marcuse called repressive desublimation in sexual relations. Even though this condition seems to contradict traditional patterns of life and types of relationships, it may, at the same time, conform to a neo-conservative phase of fully programming a typical marriage for a great majority of the population. This signifies that free sexual intercourse does not exclude a typical marriage that can be determined by a rationally calculated decision rather than a decision motivated by affectionate connections. “In contrast to the destructiveness of Éros, the relaxed sexual morality within the firmly entrenched system of monopolistic controls itself serves the system” (Marcuse, 1955, p. 95). Repressive desublimation expresses the technical rationality expanded in sexual relations (Ocay, 2009). The term corresponds to a model of sexuality, according to which sexual contact is no longer a taboo—something
reserved or that the individual is reluctant to indulge—since abstinence does not have a place in this model; however, sexual contact is usually restricted to bodily contact, to physical intercourse without emotional engagement and affection. Repressive sublimation thus usually serves as a means that reinforces repression, since it can hardly become the source of actual pleasure and fulfillment.

Marcuse’s critique departs from a twofold observed aspect of progression, one that leads to emancipation and one that calls upon control and increased repression. Progress constantly imposes demands on subjects, which tend to render them dependent on material and psychological conditions, canceling the possibility of a unity of happiness and freedom; this condition contradicts the utmost potential of individuals. In this respect, the problem of destructiveness appears to be a by-product of some kind of lack and frustration. Human history has often demonstrated that people act aggressively when they are deprived of the necessary conditions that tend to bring satisfaction, or when the erotic drive does not meet the conditions that would lead to love and creativity. As Lacan (1954-1955) has underlined, lack is integral to the human psyche. Even so, this fact does not imply that individuals are necessarily condemned to dissatisfaction or unhappiness. Nevertheless, in the contemporary constitution we encounter capitalist society’s ability to take advantage of this inherent lack, overstating and using it in order to serve the mechanisms of profit and manipulation, which, having been so deeply embedded in human perception and attitudes, have become “nature.”

Furthermore, in the Western context of technologically advanced civilization, the mode of relating to the world has been structured in such a way that profound psychic needs remain unsatisfied, forming what we would call “civilizational frustration,” in the sense both of a refutation of expectations, and a falsification of civilization’s ideals. Both of these lead to the reality of discontent that Freud referred to. Nevertheless, we are faced with generalized conformity: In capitalist society particular techniques have been developed by means of which opposition is effectively dissolved and perhaps does not even arise (Ocay, 2009). Psychoanalytically speaking, since contemporary society can never confront the status quo, it seems it would be incapable of challenging
the paternal principle; revolution, hence, takes the place of the primordial crime against patriarchal power (Marcuse, 1955).

INCITEMENT TO SETTING EROS FREE

The cause for the imposition of instinctive disruption is, according to Freud, the conservative nature of instincts, which renders them unproductive because of the absolute demands of the pleasure principle (Freud, 1920). However, since the sexual drive is defined as distinct from the Death drive, how could this approach keep pace with the interpretation of Eros as an “explosive force” in conflict with civilization? How could this concept of the asocial character of sexuality come to terms with the hypothesis that erotic drives in the form of affective bonds comprise the essence of the collective mind?

At this point, the solution Marcuse introduced is based not on the compromise of the two confrontational aspects of sexuality, but on the inner and uncompromising conflict that is expressed with Freudian theory itself. Against the idea of an unavoidable “biological contradiction” between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, between sexuality and civilization, Marcuse, as Freud himself in fact did in a latter phase (see Freud-Einstein, 1933), focuses on the notion of the erotic force with the ability to conjoin and offer joy. Marcuse maintains that Eros, free of repression, does not necessarily prevent free civilized relations with duration; it only rejects the over-repressive structure of social relations. This case has to be taken into account, for it has often been proven that, in respect to psychic reality, suppressive measures do not bring about salvation. High ethical expectation—without the creation of existential, cultural, and social conditions that enable ethical perceptions empathically and intuitively to emerge—is in vain, since mere canonical regulations and law cannot guarantee the restriction of evil and injustice.

What is usually not mentioned in the rhetoric about the advantages of the expansion of modern civilization is that at its greatest level civilization satisfies destructiveness more than Eros (Marcuse, 1955). However, from the Freudian perspective we see that in the developmental process of the individual, there are two guiding tendencies: the tendency toward happiness and the ten-
dency to unite with others (Freud, 1930). Integration in the human community is the necessary prerequisite to reach this state of happiness. By contrast, with the advancement of modern civilization, while this actual intention is not abolished, it is relegated to the background.

In the last phase of the articulation of his theory, Freud disengaged the sex drive from aggression. The role of the Ego is now defined with regard to the quest for control of the external world. Hatred is not connected to sexual pleasure, but rather to the Ego drives related to self-preservation. In civilized society, various methods directed toward a suspension of erotic relations are summoned. The alleged civilized world hopes it may escape the most severe deviations of raw violence with the state’s monopolized right to apply “legitimized” violence on criminals and delinquents. Nevertheless, the most hidden externalizations of human aggression cannot be captured by the law (Freud, 1930). The constant restrictions of Eros end up weakening the drives, while they release the same forces against which they were initially used. After all, Eros is charged with a mission to render the forces of destruction harmless for civilization. With the liberation of Eros, however, there lurks a “danger” for “civilization” itself; as Marcuse (1955) puts it: This power threatens to reverse the process that has so far turned the human body into an instrument of labor in favor of productivity, eliminating thereby its actual unknown potentialities.

CONCLUSION

According to the nondualistic interpretation of the dynamic of Eros and Thanatos, the elimination of the Death instinct is dependent on the qualitative rise and expansion of Eros. This transition can be energized by the individual organization of these insti-
tutional forces, but since individuals do not abide in an absolute void, dependent as they are on their environment, this shift is also related to the sociohistorical conditions that create collective patterns of psychic contexts. The personal and collective state of the psyche are mutually formed and transformed. Increase of Eros in a context of creativity and unity with others is pitted against Death as apathy, dissociation, or destruction. This coursepasses
through a nonrepressive organization of psychic life, which cannot obey blind commands coming from the Ego or the unconscious. Otherwise, this effort would be meaningless.

What tends to be repressed and forgotten, according to Marcuse, is actually the recollection (anamnesis) of the probability of an alternative solution: the recollection of play and joy, qualities that contradict the claims of the ethics of productivity, but which cohere with the principle of Eros. As Marcuse claims, there is always the risk that the “analytical” phantasy will merge with the political phantasy. For Marcuse, this recollection of integral pleasure, which Freud refers to as an infantile or primitive feeling, is not something that necessarily has to be placed in the past. Marcuse (1955) asserts that “Eros penetrating into consciousness, is moved by remembrance” (p. 233), and points to our civilization’s one-sidedness and unbalanced training of the memory. Nietzsche (1887) recognized in the training of the memory the initiation of civilized morality, which led especially to memory of obligation and contracts. In this direction of the development of memory, the memory of pleasure was linked to bad conscience, guilt, and sin. Therefore, instead of happiness and the will to freedom, unhappiness and the threat of punishment dominated the individual and collective psyche. But a restoration of memory is the most significant aspect in the struggle for pleasure, wholeness, and a return of Eros and vitality. This rehabilitation of Eros would require us to pass through a remediation of memory that goes as far back as possible. For, as Marcuse (1955) states, “without release of the repressed content of memory, without release of its liberating power, non-repressive sublimation is unimaginable” (p. 232).

REFERENCES


______ (1920). Beyond the pleasure principle. *Standard ed.*, 18:3-64.


---

Attikis 5
190 09 Rafina
Greece
E-mail: mariaklee@ppp.uoa.gr