

# james mcmahon

## The Role of Technology in Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*

By James McMahan, York University

**Abstract** *The focus of this paper is Herbert Marcuse's Eros and Civilization. Of concern is the manner in which this particular text contains a simple concept of technology, relative to the rich thoughts on technology that Marcuse provides elsewhere. Eros and Civilization's simple concept of technology undermines the balance Marcuse tries to maintain when he speculates about the creation of a less repressive society. Probably because Marcuse assumes the reader is already familiar with the ideas of historical materialism and the Frankfurt School, the role of technology, in Eros and Civilization, is under-theorized. This simple concept of technology, which suggests that technology could be the redeemer of political struggle in history, contrasts with one of Eros and Civilization's strongest arguments: the overcoming of alienated labor and any post-capitalist reconciliation of opposites, like Eros and Thanatos, will not make politics or basic-repression superfluous to a liberated society. On this point Eros and Civilization actually reworks the idea of technological determinism, to the benefit of Marxist theory.*

*Eros and Civilization* is a landmark in Herbert Marcuse's body of work. In this text we see Marcuse skillfully work with the late writings of Sigmund Freud. From his analysis Marcuse sharpens the critical edge of Freud's metapsychology. From Marcuse's perspective a critical interpretation of Freud is necessary because our general historical condition is a stepping-stone for the creation of less repressive, alternative social forms. On this point *Eros and Civilization* is consistent with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School: there is a historical materialist foundation to the argument that under post-capitalist conditions Eros could be liberated and fulfilled to a greater degree through less-repressive social relations.

*Eros and Civilization* is politically valuable, but it would benefit from the rich thoughts on technology that Marcuse provides elsewhere. Ultimately, *Eros and Civilization* works with a simplified version of his historical materialism, which assumes the reader is already familiar with the general tenets of the Frankfurt School. The simplified version of Marcuse's historical materialism is the product of *Eros and Civilization's* simple concept of technology. This simple concept of technology undermines the balance Marcuse tries to maintain when speculating about alternative social forms that do not yet exist. An optimistic pairing of technology and political liberation suggests that technology is the redeemer of political struggle in history, that technology in the last instance will deliver all of the goods. This is not to suggest that there is no

instrumental dimension to Marcuse's revolutionary project. Rather a simple concept of technology contrasts with one of Eros and Civilization's strongest arguments: the overcoming of alienated labor and the post-capitalist reconciliation of opposites, like Eros and Thanatos, will not make politics or basic-repression superfluous. A more dialectical concept of technology helps demonstrate how *Eros and Civilization* reworks the idea of technological progress, to the benefit of Marxist theory.

### Marcuse's Historical Materialism

*Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse's major work on Freud, is much like a tightrope walk. From one end to the other Marcuse balances his negative critique of Freud's metapsychology against his desire to preserve the general meaning of many of Freud's concepts. Thus, while *Eros and Civilization* is a text that has a sharp, critical edge, it also helps revitalize Freud's late theory of instincts, his metapsychology. At no point do Marcuse's critiques take him beyond the conceptual language that is originally given by Freud; Marcuse's new concepts—such as the *performance principle* and *surplus repression*—are meant to help push Freud's *pleasure principle* in new directions. Marcuse is friendly to the general framework of Freud's metapsychology because it takes us to the vantage point where it is possible to see the universal processes that underpin the development of the individual ego in society. Although *Eros and Civilization* reveals to what degree

Marcuse is not satisfied with Freud's answers, the former's book is a complicated balancing act because Freud is not wrong to investigate how repression, domination, productivity, and happiness are entangled on a larger, supra-individual scale.

*Eros and Civilization* is a revitalization of Freud, but with a twist. According to Marcuse, Freud's categories need to be injected with a theory about the historical nature of social organization. Left to its own foundations Freud's metapsychology is fatalistic to the extent that the configuration of repression and happiness is fixed throughout human history, as if this configuration were eternal. Marcuse concedes that Freud has good reason to be so general, to explain the long development of human history with a consistent set of universal concepts: "a repressive organization of the instincts underlies *all* historical forms of the reality principle in civilization" (Marcuse, 1966: 34). However, Marcuse must inject his critique because, with no historical relativity, the meaning of concepts like repression and scarcity never change with historical change.

In *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse does not mention Karl Marx, but any reader familiar with the philosophy of historical materialism would recognize that here, in this particular text, Marcuse still appropriates the ideas of the 19th century political economist for the purposes of theorizing about social organization. Published in the United States in 1955, it may not be surprising that Marx is never explicitly named in either the body, or the index of *Eros and Civilization*. However, *Eros and Civilization* is a product of Marcuse's critical theory of society, and there are clear connections between this text and other works that openly affirm Marx's historical materialism. Marcuse's critical foil, which pushes against Freud's metapsychology in 1955, is first developed in the 1930s, when Marcuse was first contributing to what is now known as the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. In "New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism," an essay first published in 1932, Marcuse looks to show how Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* fundamentally challenges any theory that reifies its own historical conditions. Seeing the foundations of historical materialism in the picture painted by the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marcuse states:

If the objective world is thus understood in its totality as a "social" world, as the objective reality of human society and thus as human objectification, then through this it is also already defined as a *historical* reality. The objective world that is in any given situation preestablished for man is the reality of past human life, which, although it belongs to the past, is still present in the form it has given to the objective world.... Not only man but also nature "comes to be" in history, insofar as it is not something external to and separated from the human existence but belongs to the transcended and appropriated objectivity of man... (Marcuse, 2005b: 102)

Marx's theory about the historical nature of social organization—via the writings of Marx himself and Marxist philosophers

such as Lukacs—is the springboard that Marcuse uses to develop his critique of modern capitalism. Like Lukacs (1968), Marcuse wants to overturn the sentiment that capitalism is the natural endpoint of all historical development hitherto. Marcuse's presentation of the argument emphasizes how modern capitalist societies exist (what is actual) according to how historical alternatives are simultaneously marginalized and hidden from consciousness (what is possible). The dialectic between actuality and possibility necessitates this emphasis on the historical conditions of capitalism, as political liberation can "only come into being on the basis and through the sublation of an earlier form already in existence" (Marcuse, 2005b: 102).

With respect to what is actual capitalism certainly casts its shadow over most of the globe—it would be pointless to mention that capitalism is a dominant political-economic system were it not for the fact that so many facets of capitalism are consistently under-analyzed. Yet, notwithstanding the empirical core of critical theory, analysis must go beyond recognizing what is immediately present. For Marcuse, the powerful, totalizing nature of capitalism is best comprehended through the dialectic of actuality and possibility. In other words, the dialectical method is even necessary for the affirmation of capitalism's existence. Following from Hegel, Marcuse argues that nothing is actual "which does not sustain itself in existence, in a life-and-death struggle with the situations and conditions of its existence" (Marcuse, 2005a: 446). The predominance of capitalism is sustained through negation; to influence so many aspects of our social existence, including our sense of individuality, capitalist institutions must actively reproduce themselves and undermine the growth of political alternatives. Importantly, dialectics helps a theory of society establish a critical distance from present forms of social organization, which would become a fetish if they were swiftly affirmed. Under dialectics, the realm of possibility is never completely off the table because what is actual is determined through the negation of potentiality. Thus, when the "underside" is given attention, when the question of what is historically possible is honestly tabled for theoretical analysis, there is room to manoeuvre because capitalism is only one project, one choice among real alternatives.

Dialectics is necessary for Marcuse's critical theory because it allows him to speak to historical alternatives even when it *appears* there are none. More specifically, Marx's dialectical materialism is valuable to Marcuse because the latter must be careful to keep his feet grounded in historical circumstance when he puts so much emphasis on the possibility of actualizing a qualitatively different form of social organization. As a formal concept potentiality is an empty concept; potentiality is given content and meaning through an understanding of a historical condition. Marcuse is not searching for a metaphysical realm of potentiality, for a golden kernel that has been eternally repressed, which thus has been here always and everywhere. The condition of modern capitalism is the starting point, as Marcuse's critical theory of society is inherently materialist: "The actual course of the transformation

and the fundamental measures to be taken in order to arrive at a rational organization of society are prescribed by analysis of economic and political conditions in the given historical situation" (Marcuse, 1969b: 135). While Marcuse's critical theory is metaphysical to the extent that his political ideas about the possible future of humanity are presently unrealized, his critical theory is historical *at its core* because "it always derives its goals only from the present tendencies of the social process" (p. 143).

Following from the general tenets of his critical theory, Marcuse looks for tendencies in capitalism and argues that the opportunity for historical alternatives is determined by the "inherited level of material and intellectual culture"—in other words, technology, broadly defined (Marcuse, 1991: xlviii). Differentiating between "form and content, essence and appearance, the concealed and the obvious" a historical materialist approach brings nuance and complexity to the technological basis of modern society. More specifically, these differentiations illuminate how the logic of capital abuses and sabotages "the actual process of production and reproduction, based on a given level of productive forces" (Marcuse, 1969a: 82). Sabotage occurs because many possible non-capitalist functions of our intellectual and material powers are circumscribed and made to resonate with the primary end of modern business: the accumulation of profits. Often this sabotage of technology manifests as a contradiction: developments in automation, for example, increasingly demonstrate that a more ethical utilization of our productive capacity—i.e., to ameliorate the human condition—would only be possible beyond capitalism and its vested interest in scarcity. Marcuse's argument that the accumulation of capital is not exhausting what is materially possible is corroborated by the work of Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy. With respect to technology it appears capitalism is a progressive system, maybe even a revolutionary system that is constantly innovating and destroying obsolete creations. However, as Baran and Sweezy (1966) point out, each new technological development under capitalism is entangled with the state of monopoly pricing and it is not possible "to utilize the fruits of increasing productivity for the benefit of society as a whole" (p. 71). Individual firms certainly benefit from any technological development that can help reduce costs, yet in the aggregate capitalism must control and choke productive capacity so as not to undermine profit rates. Baran and Sweezy describe modern capitalism as a long-standing state of stagnation; capitalism chronically underutilizes "available human and material resources" (p. 108).<sup>1</sup>

## Technology and Eros and Civilization

Marcuse's critical theory attempts to theorize how a break of connection between technology and capital would allow the former to blossom under a horizon of "real possibility" (Marcuse, 1969a:

1 Baran and Sweezy make an important contribution to a topic that is studied by other heterodox political economists. For instance, see Veblen (2004), and Nitzan and Bichler (2009).

83). The possibility that our current intellectual and material capacities could be used otherwise in a post-capitalist society illuminates how these very capacities are repressed under capitalism. Potentiality is in conflict with our current organization of technology (p. 81). Where does *Eros and Civilization* stand in this project?

*Eros and Civilization* is Marcuse's attempt to link his critical theory to certain aspects of Freud's metapsychology. This link of historical materialism and psychoanalysis is productive: Marcuse demonstrates that a reified concept of the reality principle can be overcome, which frees Freud's own ideas about the pleasure principle from this reification. Pushed in this direction, aspects of Freud's thought can contribute to the philosophical and political task of upholding alternative, less repressive socio-political formations. How does Marcuse do this? *Eros and Civilization* is built from the combination of two arguments: "first, Freud's theoretical conception itself seems to refute his consistent denial of the historical possibility of a non-repressive civilization, and second, the very achievements of repressive civilization seem to create the preconditions for the general abolition of repression" (Marcuse, 1966: 5). Each argument needs its other: a philosophical inquiry into Freud would be pointless if there was no room to manoeuvre in his metapsychology; conversely, if play with Freud's ideas are to produce something more than abstract, utopian speculations, the technological capabilities of capitalist societies must be a primary factor in the question of how a post-capitalist society could ever be less repressive.

However, of the two fundamental arguments that shape *Eros and Civilization*, the first is given much more attention than the second. Almost all of its pages are dedicated to an analysis of Freud's concepts. This is no less the case in the second half of the book, when Marcuse begins to develop his own speculations on Eros. While he begins the last half with the reminder that the present reality principle has come up against its own historical limits, Marcuse's major concern in the text's last half is how his new constellation of ideas and outside references is compatible with Freud's framework. Marcuse's argument that phantasy has a cognitive value; his appropriation of Kant and Schiller to relink aesthetics to the world of Logos; the replacement of the Promethean myth with the images of Orpheus and Narcissus; and the concept of non-repressive sublimation—all are connected back to the underdeveloped layer of Freud's general theory of civilization.

Is this imbalance of attention problematic? Marcuse seemingly avoids running into problems because *Eros and Civilization*'s second argument—that our contemporary historical conditions have created the possibilities for qualitatively different, less repressive social relations—is the source of one of Marcuse's key psychoanalytic concepts: surplus-repression. The concept of surplus-repression helps de-mystify the notion that all delayed gratification for work and productivity is necessary because scarcity is a natural fact of life. For Marcuse, scarcity is a histori-

cal concept, something which is better understood in the terms of political economy. The meaning of scarcity is contingent on the political and technological circumstances of a society, of how that society organizes in light of its historical conditions: “The excuse of scarcity, which has institutionalized repression since its inception, weakens as [our collective] knowledge and control over nature enhances the means for fulfilling human needs with a minimum of toil” (Marcuse, 1966: 92). The developments of modern technology have made our contemporary excuses about social inequality that much more disingenuous: “The still prevailing impoverishment of vast areas of the world is no longer due chiefly to the poverty of human and natural resources but to the manner in which they are distributed and utilized” (92). Consequently, surplus-repression is the concept that highlights what is actual from the contrasting point of what is possible. Forms of surplus-repression are “the restrictions necessitated by social domination,” which is “exercised by a particular group or individual in order to sustain and enhance itself” with respect to the current “organization of scarcity” (pp. 35-36).

However, the concept of surplus-repression does not rectify the imbalance of attention mentioned above because it is not a substitute for a concept of technology, which is a prominent point in Marcuse’s theoretical constellation. To be sure, Marcuse’s historical materialism is present, but it appears in a simplified form because *Eros and Civilization*, on its own, provides no more than a simple concept of technology. The importance of technology appears in a simplified form because the dialectical nuances of Marcuse’s thinking are absent on this point. Devoting the majority of attention to an analysis of Freudian concepts, Marcuse assumes that the reader of *Eros and Civilization* already has some knowledge about the place of technology in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Consequently, technology, a key factor in *Eros and Civilization*, becomes, in the language of dialectics, a positive concept. Interestingly, Marcuse acknowledges this point in the book’s 1966 preface:

*Eros and Civilization*: the title expressed an optimistic, euphemistic, even positive thought, namely, that the achievements of advanced industrial society would enable man to reverse the direction of progress, to break the fatal union of productivity and destruction, liberty and repression—in other words, to learn ... how to use the social wealth for shaping [our] world in accordance with [our] Life Instincts, in the concerted struggle against the purveyors of Death. This optimism was based on the assumption that the rationale for the continued acceptance of domination no longer prevailed, that scarcity and need for toil were only “artificially” perpetuated—in the interest of preserving the system of domination (Marcuse, 1966: xi).

Marcuse is specific when he reflects on how *Eros and Civilization* was the product of “positive thought.” His optimism about the technological achievements of advanced industrial society

is related to this absence of dialectical nuance. In dialectics an overly positive concept is a simple concept, and a simple concept is abstract, empty, and impoverished because a concrete concept “depends on the negation and mediation of something else” (Yovel, 2005: 81). As Marcuse notes in *One-Dimensional Man* dialectical thinking is a nuanced, complex type of thinking because mediation and negation are its primary tools. For dialectics “concepts have a transitive meaning: they go beyond descriptive reference to particular facts.” Dialectical thinking works through “the tension, the discrepancy, the conflict between the concept and the immediate fact—the thing concrete...” (Marcuse, 1991: 106). Conversely, a simple, positive concept is the product of any manner of thinking that rejects or neglects the task of analyzing an object through its multidimensional relationships with other objects and universal conditions.

On the problem of positive thought there is much to be taken from the works of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno and Horkheimer. Their arguments for a *negative* dialectics are supplemented with repeated critiques of what they find to be the many manifestations of positive thought. Positive thought is a broad, encompassing category, even if *positivism*, the modern philosophical trend that originates with Saint-Simon, stands as a prominent example. With no intention to efface the differences between the examples of positive thought—from philosophy to mass culture—there is a fundamental point that separates the critical theory of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School from any positivist method: behind the particulars of different forms of positive thinking is a commonly shared conformist and ideological quality.

The conformist and ideological quality of positive thought is not unrelated to a weak presence of dialectical mediation. To open the “established universe of discourse and behaviour” to critique requires a form of thinking that will not *in the last instance* affirm this established universe (Marcuse, 1991: 170). Dialectical mediation and the concepts that are produced by it are integral to resist the pitfalls of reification. Dialectics moves between appearance and essence, the particular and the universal, and the actual and the potential in order to know a particular thing to be more than how it appears immediately. Mediation is at the heart of Marcuse’s definition of a (concrete) concept, which is

“taken to designate the mental representation of something that is understood, comprehended, known as a process of reflection. This something may be the object of daily practice, or a situation, a society, a novel. In any case, if they are to be comprehended, they have to become objects of thought, and as such, their content and meaning are identical with and yet different from the real objects of immediate experience. ‘Identical’ in as much as the concept denotes the same thing: ‘Different’ in as much as the concept is the result of a reflection which has understood the thing in the context (and in the light) of other things which did not appear in the imme-

*mediate experience and which "explain" the thing (mediation)" (Marcuse, 1991: 105).*

Mediation widens the scope of what is referenced. To arbitrarily arrest the process of mediation in thought is to indirectly affirm what is not included in the mediation between objects.

Take, for example, the habituation of instrumental rationality. Although instrumental rationality has a real purpose for technical tasks, where the end of a task is already presupposed in the operational question itself, thinking must beware of positively affirming an operational context that is historical. A thing, be it a knife, a human being, or society itself, when considered instrumentally according to a specific historical project, is framed within an operational context according to the practical, functional goals of that project. Instrumental rationality, for Marcuse, needs to be opened up to negative critique—which attempts to be reflective about one-sidedness, contradictions, and inadequacies—because the former is inherently positive. In other words, instrumental rationality merely reaches a level of mediation where it is sufficient to carry out a functional operation; consequently, the transitive meaning of a concept is deemed unnecessary at a certain point. For instance, to overlook the universality of alienated labour and uncritically ask how a wage labourer can come in today and help manufacture  $x$  number of pens, only some functions and capacities of the human species (our species being) are deemed to be valuable in this narrow, particular context. The more complex question of "What is...?" is suppressed as excess, and is superseded by the question of "How...?"; the latter, on its own, does not direct thought to the broader historical conditions of which the practical problem is a part.

This "thing" called technology is certainly not an isolated fact, and a concrete concept of technology is produced from a dialectical mediation with the social structures that condition modern technology. Therefore, what are the consequences of *Eros and Civilization* having a positive concept of technology? Modern technology has less of a role in negating Eros and Civilization's concept of non-repressive sublimation. Non-repressive sublimation is Marcuse's concept and it makes explicit what Freud partially suggests: that sexuality is not automatically "antisocial" or "asocial" (Marcuse, 1966: 131). How we change the "aim and object of the instinct" in order to repress what is incompatible with social values depends on the condition of these values. The question "What realistic social alternatives are there?" unfreezes the tripartite relationship between work, repression and sublimation. Non-repressive sublimation is the concept that allows Marcuse to link his liberatory ideas about Eros to its socio-historical content. But if a dialectical concept of technology is not carried over into *Eros and Civilization*, the remaining obstacle to the realization of non-repressive sublimation is not the technology of modern civilization but the control and ownership of this technology in capitalism. To be sure, Marcuse is striking at the heart of the issue—the ownership of production—but too much of a

separation between capitalist ownership and the material world of science and technology suggests that the hegemonic principle of capital accumulation does not affect the content of our technological world. In this sense, *Eros and Civilization* is partly inconsistent with other writings of the Frankfurt School, including those of Marcuse himself. Let us now highlight this inconsistency by looking to some of Marcuse's other writings. By doing so we can get a better sense of how *Eros and Civilization* is too optimistic relative to the dialectical concept of technology that Marcuse develops elsewhere.

### Marcuse's Dialectical Concept of Technology

*Eros and Civilization* is too optimistic not because it looks to launch its critique from the material conditions of capitalism, nor because it pushes against psychoanalytic concepts to the point where there is a visible theoretical discrepancy between what is actual and what is possible. *Eros and Civilization* is too optimistic because, as repeatedly argued by the Frankfurt School, our hitherto accumulated intellectual and material capacities are in fact not isolated and protected from the political and economic demands of our contemporary societies. In its attention to the details of Freud's metapsychology, *Eros and Civilization* does not carry over a dialectical concept of technology. In other texts Marcuse offers a more comprehensive picture of technology, where technology is never isolated from the form of social organization under which it develops. To be sure, at some level technology is a flexible power—Marcuse is suggesting that technological apparatuses produced under capitalism can be used for socialist purposes. However, there is an essential qualification attached to this grand political project because technology is not simply a world of physical objects. In the article "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology" Marcuse establishes that technology is a "social process in which technics proper (that is, the technological apparatus of industry, transportation, communication) is but a partial factor" (Marcuse, 2005c: 138). As a social process technology is just as much an ideology as it is a material world: "Technology, as a mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices, and contrivances which characterize the machine age is thus at the same time a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behaviour patterns, an instrument for control and domination" (p. 139).

What *Eros and Civilization* does not develop comprehensively is a theoretical picture of how technology, as a material apparatus, is tied to a web of social relationships—to the point where it is understood that technology has always been a social relationship. Without a concrete social dimension, especially an ideological dimension, it is easy to infer that we can pool all of capitalism's mechanical products and retain them for life under socialism. Such an attitude overlooks how physical objects of technology are the objectification of established social relations. The dialectical rela-

tionship between the subjective and the objective elements of social life can be found in one of Marcuse's influences: Marx's 1844 Manuscripts. Marx gives primacy to labour when he outlines a concept of human nature because he wants to emphasize how our essence is attached to the material and intellectual processes that produce a social world. The production and consumption of a social world is the "realization or the reality" of human beings (Marx, 1988: 103). Our sensibility, for example, is expressed subjectively through an orientation to an object: "not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses—the practical senses (will, love, etc.)—in a word, *human* sense—the humanness of the senses—comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanized* nature" (p. 108).

On this point Marcuse needs to be read against himself; in some of his writings he is impressively cognizant of how a *technological* ideology is instrumental in the reproduction and habituation of modern social relations. To be sure, in his more nuanced thoughts on modern technology, Marcuse never settles the matter once and for all. But that is the point. In "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," for example, Marcuse wants to heed the following two propositions: (1) "Technics hampers individual development only insofar as they are tied to a social apparatus which perpetuates scarcity, and this same apparatus has released forces which may shatter the special historical form in which technics is utilized" (Marcuse, 2005c: 160). (2) The "laws and mechanisms of technological rationality spread over the whole society, they develop a set of truth values of their own which holds good for the functioning of the apparatus—and for that alone" (p. 146). It appears that technological rationality is a separate substance because the word "rationality" suggests it may be the product of a *res cogitans*, an epistemological stance, or a psychological attitude. Yet, regardless of an idea's independence from action, the significance of technological rationality stems from the degree to which social values circumscribe and determine the ends of science and technology (p. 146). In other words, physical technological objects bear the marks of technological rationality. Technological development and scientific discovery develop in tandem with a larger social system; the merits of industrialization and the scientific world view cannot be judged as if their utility exists independent of its social context. The co-constitutive relationship of science and capitalism needs to be explored because one is perpetually puzzled how industrial society is richer, bigger, and better, yet is also destructive, violent, and wasteful (Marcuse, 1991: xli).

It must be considered how a post-capitalist society will be less repressive when it inherits a technological world that was developed under our current mode of production, which institutes repressive and alienating social practices. As Marcuse states: "A harmony prevails between the "spirit" and its material embodiment such that the spirit cannot be supplanted without disrupting the functioning of the whole" (Marcuse, 2005c: 149). The purpose of *Eros and Civilization* is to theorize how the negation of surplus-

repression represents a major qualitative break with respect to the foundations of our social and political relationships. However, the surplus-repression of capitalism is putting demands on both the scientist and the labourer, the artist and the entrepreneur, and one cannot neglect to what degree various elements of our social world is a reflection of an instituted division of labour. Any new nomos, worldview, or rationality "can fully develop only in social groups whose organization is not patterned on the apparatus in its prevailing forms or on its agencies and institutions" (Marcuse, 2005c: 149). The rejection of the capitalist "spirit" necessitates that a new critical spirit would need to harmonize with a technological apparatus that would not in turn undermine and vitiate this spirit. We must therefore ask: what aspects of modern technology only hold good for capitalist ends?

### Despite All This, Why Should We Still Read *Eros and Civilization*?

Importantly, a positive concept of technology conflicts with one of *Eros and Civilization*'s strongest contributions to Marxist theory. Marcuse's pairing of Freud and Marx is not a one-sided relationship, where Marx simply corrects Freud. For those determined to challenge the power of capitalist institutions, Marcuse emphasizes how Freud's dialectic of civilization is a cycle of domination and repression powered by the guilt feeling of failed liberation:

The crime against the reality principle is redeemed by the crime against the pleasure principle: redemption thus cancels itself. The sense of guilt is sustained in spite of repeated and intensified repression: anxiety persists because the crime against the pleasure principle is not redeemed. There is guilt over a deed that has not been accomplished: liberation (Marcuse, 1966: 68).

Freud's concept of the primal horde is a figurative lesson about how the repressive past is carried forward into the struggles for a liberated future. It is a lesson that suggests to Marcuse that we can "avoid the fate of a Welfare-Through-Warfare State only by achieving a new starting point," where we have "the good conscience to make life an end-in-itself, to live in joy a life without fear" (p. xiv). For Marcuse a good conscience will only come about when the repressive past will one day no longer define the present.<sup>2</sup> Thus, as noted by Asher Horowitz (2008), because there is a desire to break the continuity between the repressive past and the present, it would be incorrect to infer that Marcuse is creating his own philosophy of history, where past sacrifices are finally redeemed by a liberated society (p. 348).

With respect to the concerns of this article, there is certainly a level of instrumental reasoning to Marcuse's argument that modern technology can serve as a foundation for social alternatives.

2 "The past defines the present because [humankind] has not yet mastered its own history" (Marcuse, 1966: 58).

However, an optimistic pairing of technology and liberation is out of place precisely because Freud helps Marcuse avoid setting up his own eschatology. To be sure, more than the other members of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse theorizes about new forms of subjectivity that could be actualized under qualitatively different social relations. And, because of his philosophical style, this part of Marcuse's critical theory appears to be utopic—his style opens the door to possible misreadings. For example, in *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse wants us to think of how play and work, Eros and Thanatos, reason and aesthetics can reconcile with each other. Yet, *Eros and Civilization* is also one of the best texts to discern how Marcuse keeps mindful of how the reconciliation of opposites will not make politics superfluous, as a theoretical, idealist reconciliation of conceptual opposites is not meant to suggest that this reconciliation cleanly translates into new social practises. For example, he turns to Nietzsche at the end of chapter five, titled "Philosophical Interlude", in order to emphasize how ideas of eternal peace, joy, happiness and even Logos are repressive because they are held out as substitutes for our finiteness, which includes death and suffering (Marcuse, 1966: 118-124). Therefore, Marcuse is paradoxically attempting to uphold a higher form of subjectivity, but without a teleology. In a new state, previously alienated human beings will not finally restore their lost identity. The negation of alienated labour is the negation of the surplus repression that is specific to capitalism. Basic repression is the remainder left, which is meant to signify how a life of peace is not a life without struggle or even death, but one that is less guilty and anxious.

Interestingly, Marcuse even faults Nietzsche for preserving the repressive past: "Nietzsche's philosophy contains enough elements of the terrible past: his celebration of pain and power perpetuates features of the morality which he strives to overcome" (Marcuse, 1966: 123). Yet, the same type of charge can be directed at *Eros and Civilization's* celebration of modern technology. To be consistent with Marcuse's own intentions in *Eros and Civilization*, the repressive side of modern technology cannot be carried over into a new society that will consciously attempt to be less repressive, to be at peace. If the Life Instincts are to rule over the Death Instincts aggression must be reduced—and does that not suggest that many of our technological avenues for individual and social aggression need to be reformed or even rejected? It may be a simple example but surely modern weaponry, our advanced instruments of death, are incompatible with socialist principles because these weapons were never created to effect a *less-repressive* form of politics.

A rejection of parts of our current technological society does not mean that every technological object easily falls on one side of the split between surplus-repression and basic-repression; if the latter two concepts are at all dialectical then they contain traces of their opposite and do not facilitate analytic division. Marcuse does not pretend to offer an exact method, but he is clearly raising the issue when he puts his twist on the notion of technological progress.

In an attempt to counter-balance the optimistic tendency of *Eros and Civilization* he states in the 1966 preface: "The rejection of affluent productivity, far from being a commitment to purity, simplicity, and "nature", might be the token (and weapon) of a higher stage of human development, based on the achievements of the technological society" (Marcuse, 1966: xviii). The value of technology is tied to a historical context, and technological affluence on its own, separate from the question of social organization, does not negate domination, repression, or heteronomy. While technology is central to his historical materialist project, this particular thread in *Eros and Civilization* follows from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1961); the former likewise begins on a cynical note, from the assumption that the accumulation of more and more material stuff does not get to the root of repression.

This argument is carried over into *One-Dimensional Man*, which was written a decade after *Eros and Civilization*. It is important to note this consistency in argument, because in the time between the two texts it appears the bare facts disprove Marcuse: the repressive side of capitalist societies disappears from view as technological developments provide unprecedented levels of affluence and satisfaction through consumption. Capitalism appears to deliver the goods. Marcuse does not overlook this apparent fact and takes sexuality as an example: "It has often been noted that advanced industrial civilization operates with a greater degree of sexual freedom--"operates" in the sense that the latter becomes a market value and a factor of social mores. Without ceasing to be an instrument of labor, the body is allowed to exhibit its sexual features in the everyday work world and in work relations." One should acknowledge that this "is one of the unique achievements of industrial society—rendered possible by the reduction of dirty and heavy physical labor; by the availability of cheap, attractive clothing, beauty culture, and physical hygiene..." (Marcuse, 1991: 74). This explosion of liberated sexuality is also rampant in our art, in "O'Neill's alcoholics and Faulkner's savages, in the *Streetcar Named Desire* and under the *Hot Tin Roof*, in *Lolita*, in all the stories of Hollywood and New York orgies, and the adventures of suburban housewives" (p. 77). One only needs to watch television for a short while to confirm that sexuality is relatively uninhibited.<sup>3</sup>

3 With this specific talk about an explosion of liberated sexuality Marcuse meets Michel Foucault on thematic grounds. Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Vol. I is concerned with how modern technologies of power have implanted an "entire sexual mosaic" through a proliferation of discourse on sex (Foucault, 1990: 53). For Foucault the age of modernity is the "age of multiplication" with respect to sexuality. In modern times, especially in the last two centuries, there has been "a dispersion of sexualities, and strengthening of their disparate forms, a multiple implantation of "perversions." Our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities" (p. 37). Foucault's absence from this paper, however, is not a comment on his relevance. Rather, the differences between Marcuse and Foucault are significant enough that my omission of Foucault is more practical than anything else: considering that *History of Sexuality*, Vol. I challenges the Freudian concept of repression explicitly, and Marcuse's politics of liberation implicitly, the puzzle

However, to hold these facts against Marcuse forgets that he is honest about the scope of his analysis: the issue of general affluence relates to the richest capitalist states, especially the United States, and the rise of affluence in a few countries does not necessarily reduce the level of physical aggression that is channelled towards pockets of these affluent societies, or to less affluent areas of the world. Moreover, on Marcuse's own terms, the value of technological development cannot be separated from the question of social organization. *One-Dimensional Man* follows Eros and Civilization and asks how increasing opportunities for immediate gratification—i.e., desublimation—is nevertheless repressive. *Repressive desublimation* is a concept in *One-Dimensional Man* and its psychoanalytic name is not incidental. Repressive desublimation emphasizes once more that increasing satisfaction through consumption does not liberate Eros if the latter is nevertheless “deprived of the claims which are irreconcilable with the established society” (Marcuse, 1991: 75). The point is not to deny the modern level of affluence its kernel of truth: that the number of avenues for individual satisfaction has grown in the last hundred years. Rather, desublimated satisfactions are nevertheless repressive because the liberty of pleasure in capitalism is not the product of autonomy, but is instead instituted and controlled. Marcuse wants to remind us that with the increasing individualization of libidinal consumption “a whole dimension of human activity and passivity has been de-eroticized. The environment from which the individual could obtain pleasure—which [he or she] could cathect as gratifying almost as an extended zone of the body—has been rigidly reduced” (Marcuse, 1991: 73). It is not insignificant that atomized, immediate forms of satisfaction predominate in a system where technological innovation is often barred from satisfying the whole of society as one community.

## Conclusion

Therefore, in the interest of preserving the contributions of *Eros and Civilization*, the text would benefit from the rich thoughts on technology that Marcuse provides elsewhere—rich thoughts that help connect the form and content of modern technology to the logic of capital. A balance must be made somehow, where technology can still be the materialist foundation for Marcuse's project, yet where a simple concept of technology does not undermine *Eros and Civilization's* argument that social change is more of an ethical demand rather than an instrumental and remunerative con-

---

of what is reconcilable and irreconcilable between Foucault and Marcuse (and Left Freudianism) is complex enough that it is beyond the scope of this paper. The comparison, however, is important, as their theories of modern sexuality are each attached to programmatic ideas for political resistance—the comparison helps us ponder the political efficacy of transgression and the possibility of a transcendence of power. For a perspective that infers there is an opportunity for a favourable pairing between Foucault and Marcuse—primarily because of Foucault's argument for the emancipation of bodies and pleasures—see Whitebook (2002). Conversely, for a Marcusean critique of Foucaultian radicalism, in light of fundamental differences, see Gad Horowitz (1987).

sideration. An optimistic pairing of modern technology and liberation undermines the argument that post-capitalist society is not something to fight for because we will finally be able to satisfy all of the wants and desires that have been promised in repressive societies. Redemptive narratives about radical social change are problematic precisely because they often are not critical enough about how the sales effort of capitalism has institutionalized and manufactured many of our desires.<sup>4</sup> *Eros and Civilization* is remarkably conscious of this pitfall, yet carries a concept of technology that inadvertently suggests such a narrative. Under truly democratic control an inherited technological apparatus may be better suited to the realm of necessity—it may be too optimistic to hope that technology would be the redeemer in a non-alienated, post-capitalist realm of freedom. This point is emphasized when Marcuse quotes Baudelaire: “True civilization does not lie in gas, nor in steam, nor in turntables. It lies in the reduction of the traces of original sin” (Marcuse, 1966: 153).

## References

- Baran, P. and Sweezy, P. (1966). *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*. Monthly Review Press.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Volume 1. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freud, S. (1961). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Horowitz, A. (2008). *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press.
- Horowitz, G. (1987). *The Foucaultian Impasse: No Sex, No Self, No Revolution*. *Political Theory*, 15(1): 61-80.
- Lukacs, G. (1968). *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Marcuse, H. (2005a). A Note on the Dialectic, p. 444-451. In Arato, A. and Gebhardt, E. (eds.). *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005.
- Marcuse, H. (1966). *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, H. (2005b). New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism, p. 86-121. In Wolin, R. and Abromeit, J. (eds.). *Heideggerian Marxism*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1991). *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

---

4 “The sales effort” is a term I borrow from Baran and Sweezy (1966).



- Marcuse, H. (1969a). Philosophy and Critical Theory, p.134-158. In Marcuse, H. *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, H. (2005c). Some Social Implications of Modern Technology, p. 138-162. In Arato, A. And Gebhardt, E. (eds.). *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Marcuse, H. (1969b). The Concept of Essence, p. 43-87. In Marcuse, H. *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marx, K. (1988). *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books.
- Nitzan, J. and Bichler, S. (2009). *Capital As Power: A Study of Order and Creorder*. New York: Routledge.
- Veblen, T. (2004). *Absentee Ownership: Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Whitebook, J. (2002). *Michel Foucault: A Marcusean in Structuralist Clothing*. Thesis Eleven, 71: 52-70.

