

EROS AND CIVILISATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY INTO FREUD

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Psychoanalysis and civilisation

1 | A BOOK I HAVE PARTICULARLY BEEN IMPACTED BY

I was young and enthusiastic, had just finished medical school and was anticipating a world that was beginning to open up after the austerity of the post-WW2 period. And I discovered Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud*. My edition was the second one, a paperback. This was 1967 in the midst of the revolutionary spirit, when we thought the world could be run differently, and . . . well, run better!

I was about to embark on a psychiatric career, and was already shocked by the way that psychiatric patients were "kept" in their wards, in those old-fashioned mental hospitals. I knew about therapeutic communities from my student day when I had visited the Henderson Hospital and the Cassel Hospital. I consequently knew about the movement to get rid of the traditional psychiatric services and was acquainted with the anti-psychiatry of Ronnie Laing (1960) and David Cooper.

2 | HOW THE BOOK SPOKE TO ME

Marcuse had been part of the radical Frankfurt School in the 1930s and had had to emigrate to the US when the Nazis came to power. His thesis, which particularly struck me, was that the inner world of the individual contains an often severe super-ego. This ego, Freud at first thought, was modelled on the parents by introjection. But later he was more precise and said that it is modelled on the parents' super-egos. Thus, there is a time-lag over generations before there can really be a modification of that super-ego. If that super-ego has as its ideal the Protestant work ethic, then the chances are that generations of people will be driven by their inner "voice" to work hard. Whereas we are now in an age of leisure (see, for instance, the "Primers for the Age of Plenty" by Lancelot Hogben, including *Mathematics for the Million* (1936) and *Science for the Citizen* (1938)), the inner voice urges us to work. That anachronism inside each one is beneficial to the accumulation of capital. The contrast between the reality of workers and their vision of how hard they should work had become a significant gap. This gap, Marcuse said, suited perfectly the entrepreneurial class that wanted to get as much out of the workers as they could in order to maximise profit for their companies and themselves. The greater accumulation of capital could be ensured by this psychological make-up of the individual human being.

It seemed a difficult argument to refute. But, more than that, what attracted me was something else, and rather more subtle. The inner workings of the unconscious mind of individuals could be seen to fit in with the prevailing modes of production and financial distribution in society.

Both psychological and social science approaches to contemporary work in society had come together. There was in this elegant theory no contest between the individual and social origins of contemporary society and individuality. There is a serendipitous matching between two factors—social and psychological. As I discovered much later in a book by someone who later became a member of the Atlee government (1945–1951): “Nor is there the least doubt that these sciences [Marxism and psychoanalysis] are directly opposites. The question is, are they dialectical opposites?” (Strachey, 1937, p. 7).

Marcuse's example I could eventually recognise as dialectical—indeed with a resultant that could define the whole of modern civilisation.

3 | WHAT THE BOOK TELLS US ABOUT PSYCHOTHERAPY AS A POLITICAL ACTIVITY

It put me onto a way of thinking about how forms of social culture and of individual psychology can interact. This is a model of how an influence in one domain depends on another. An economic determinism links up with a psychological determinism to create various mutually reinforcing possibilities. The psychoanalytic developmental perspective of the unconscious is essential here. A match between the two domains leads, as in Marcuse's model, to an enduring pattern of industrial work relations, or presumably a failure to fit leaves policies floundering so they will fail to take hold.

Much later I had occasion to think about these imprisoning cultures of the mental hospitals. In a paper I gave to a Conference of the Royal College of Psychiatry with the topic of “The Difficult Patient” (Hinshelwood, 1999), it occurred to me that there was something of this kind of matching together of two domains—in this case the hospital culture and the psychology of severe mentally ill schizophrenic patients. The culture tends to depersonalise the individual inmates. In fact, one of the shocking things is that in those days we used to refer to them as “vegetables”! They appeared to be deprived of a human life dedicated to expressing and using a developed personality. I knew that hospital cultures often depersonalise patients when there are high levels of stress. This had been vividly explained in a paper by Isabel Menzies written in 1959, “Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety”, in a general hospital (Menzies, 1960). There she produced empirical evidence from observation and interviewing to show how nurses protected themselves from the emotional contact with patients who are in pain, frightened, mutilated, or dying, etc. So it was, I thought, in mental health nursing (Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2000).

If the culture of the hospital was to depersonalise its inmates, then that social pressure met patients whose psychological condition was a profound identity problem, as their minds and sense of self disintegrated due to their own pathology. The depersonalising culture of the hospital met and fitted with the disintegrated egos of people in a schizophrenic state who had a matching loss of identity as a person. This achieved a complementarity which ensured the persistence of both—the institutionalising hospital and the chronicity of the schizophrenic. This seemed a variant of the same social science/psychology matching in the way that Marcuse's example spoke to me.

The same overall idea had led me to write a book 20 years ago, *Therapy or Coercion* (1997). The ability of the ego similarly to give up personal functions of autonomy and authority under social pressures increasingly seemed a fairly normal process under certain conditions of society. Leaders with authority need followers who give them the authority. Based on the knowledge of unconscious splitting processes that weaken the ego, a person can be shaped to fit social roles that are convenient for a government, a ruling elite, or even a group such as a soccer team. It seemed the kind of process that was involved in coercive political regimes and the disintegration of integrity under hardship or torture.

Subsequently, I was pleased to be invited to take part in the Psychoanalysis and Political Mind seminars organised at the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London and to have a chapter in the resulting book (Morgan, 2019). I was particularly interested in the fluidity of identity and self, the capacity of the ego to disintegrate and project parts of itself elsewhere (projective identification), under the conditions of work in modern society. This has powerful connections with political policy and action.

Hence Marcuse's central idea, which I encountered over half a century ago, has been around in my head leading to various attempts of my own to harvest a reluctant marriage between social science and psychoanalysis. Whether it could inspire others today, I don't think I can say. As I found, it was not so much its actual message, as the form of the model of the individual in society which helped me over the years to think through many things.

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