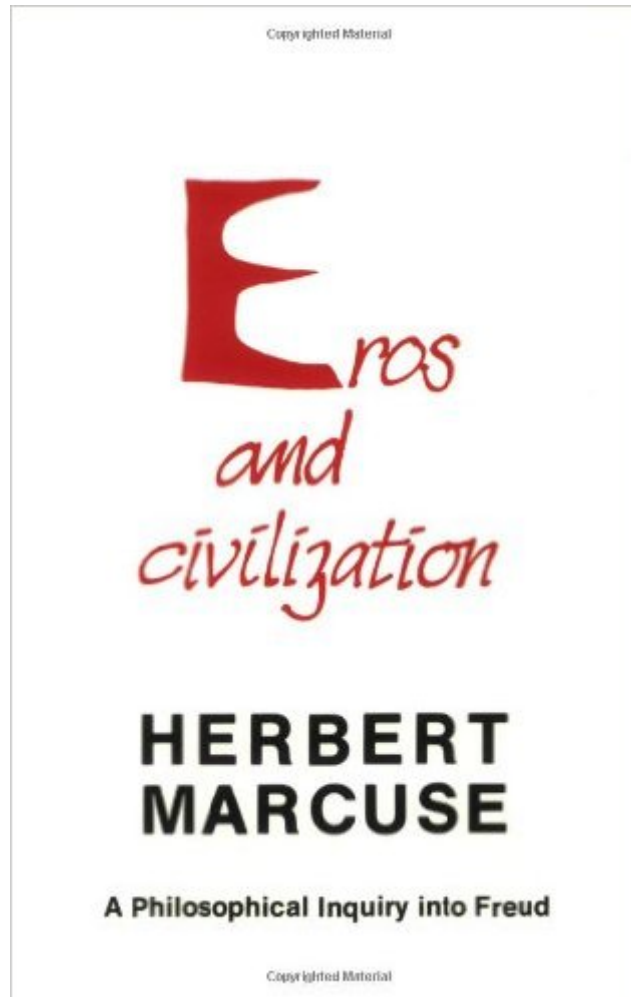


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Eros And Civilization : A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud



Synopsis

Â In this classic work, Herbert Marcuse takes as his starting point Freud's statement that civilization is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts, his reconstruction of the prehistory of mankind - to an interpretation of the basic trends of western civilization, stressing the philosophical and sociological implications.

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Customer Reviews

Herbert Marcuse's 'Eros and Civilization' is emblematic of the aspect of his work that integrates Freudian theory with Marxian doctrine. Although he primarily deals with Freud and the issue of society's use of repression (psychological and political) in the service of production, he deals with Marxist theory also when you read between the lines. The theme of alienation of labor is clearly one of the resounding and recurring notes in the symphony. As a psychotherapist intimately acquainted with developments in psychoanalytic theory in the fifty odd years since Marcuse wrote, this project involves some perils as well as some rich veins of thought. To philosophize on the basis of a theory which is derived primarily from clinical work in which two individuals share in a closed setting is always dangerous. In addition, to take Freud's formulations for granted, and then proceed to apply them to social and political systems is a big stretch. I would say primarily that the main flaw in Marcuse's thesis is his acceptance of Thanatos, or the so-called death principle, which is no longer accepted by any school of psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, Freud's own tendency to speculate both in the fields of anthropology and metaphysics, does not help Marcuse any. If one studies Talcott

Parsons and his brilliant work on social systems (The Social System) using social theory, one can see a great deal of resonance with Marcuse's analysis of repression as a cultural control mechanism. To balance the equation, I believe Marcuse brings to surface themes which have been abandoned in modern social discourse through sheer inertia and the grinding power of the repressive culture. The description of the role the inner agencies (i.e. the superego) play in integrating an individual into a particular society is a brilliant analysis. If our culture seemed "successful" as a consumer society then, the movement has only expanded to the point the culture in general has lost sight of how our citizens are enslaved by the very "American dream" we tell ourselves will bring happiness. The concept of an infinitely expanding economy, the measurement of the nation's well being by primarily economic and political indicators, the military displacement of aggression to an outside "evil" enemy, the frenzied pursuit of built-in obsolescence have all metastasized, and Marcuse has put them to the microscope. I would say that at a time when our country is having a resurgence of hope, Marcuse's work offers a very important analytic tool with which think about where we are and where we want to go as a people, and a void re-creating excessively repressive social structures.

So I'm the first one to tackle this one ?!? So be it: first published in 1955, "Eros" is a cornerstone of modern sociopolitical philosophy. It's a radical work, in the sense that Marcuse goes back to the roots and undertakes the task of carrying Freudian theory to its inescapable implications. (A task, by the way, set down by Herr Doktor Professor himself; if your edition of the Britannica still has the text originally written by Freud in 1926 for the "psychoanalysis" entry, check out his statement that "the future will probably attribute far greater importance to psychoanalysis as the science of the unconscious than as a therapeutic procedure".) As all true masterpieces, "Eros" is not flawless: in the latter part of the book, Marcuse falls into the trap of trying to describe / prescribe how a society freed from repression would organize itself for the common good, rather than self-destructing - and, of course, fumbles royally (a failure he admitted to in his later works). No matter; unless you've read it, you're like Dylan's Mr. Jones, and will have no inkling on how (and, most importantly, why) capitalism reinvented itself from industrial back into financial, much less on what the current "global crisis" is all about. I dare suggest that "Eros" be read back-to-back with Christopher Lasch's "The Culture of Narcissism". In a strange way, they complement each other

Marcuse's attempt to combine Marx and Freud, and his vision of a non-repressive civilization (as well as his views on phantasies, art, myths and even perversions as anticipations of such a society)

is one of the masterpieces of utopian thought. After reading it your daydreams will never be the same again. It is not an easy text: the first part is certainly dry at times, and presupposes some familiarity with Freud (it is useful to read his Civilization and its discontents along with Marcuse's text). But the second part is truly of masterpiece. Anybody interested in art, sexual liberation, ecology or psychoanalysis will find this essential reading. Far from being a rehash of Fromm, Marcuse accuses Fromm et. al. of removing the truly subversive elements from Freud. But read it, and find out for yourself.

I read it 40 years ago and it was time to revisit his vision of a psychological future (our today). He's not far off when he discusses the implications of a decline of privacy and breakdown of family bonds replaced by those of an extended social network. He treats Freud as an author rather than an ideology. Marcuse uses Freud's terminology, not an explicit model (a point he makes several times) to suggest new ways of looking at society. It's not an easy read and not all his points are clearly stated (or even intelligible) but worth the effort.

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