

# RETHINKING THE REPRESSIVE HYPOTHESIS: FOUCAULT'S CRITIQUE OF MARCUSE

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*In The History of Sexuality, Volume One, Michel Foucault ostensibly sets out to reject the "repressive hypothesis" as an inadequate characterization of the relationship between sex, power and knowledge. Given the obliqueness of his polemical attack against this hypothesis and its representatives, however, some commentators have attempted to elucidate and assess his position by situating Herbert Marcuse's critique of sexual repression within the ambit of Foucault's argument. The following essay contributes to this investigation by highlighting Foucault's implicit and explicit remarks against Marcuse in the first volume of The History of Sexuality and the series of interviews surrounding the publication of this text. I will concentrate on his claim that, by reducing power to a purely "negative," repressive force exercised against the majority of individuals, Marcuse misses the "positive" or "productive" operations of power that constitute the sexual subject. To address this charge, I depart from the usual procedure of explicating Marcuse's analysis of sexual repression in Eros and Civilization and turn, instead, to his later work on "repressive desublimation" in One-Dimensional Man, where his emphasis on the productive dimension of repressive power comes into full view. By challenging Foucault's dismissal of the "repressive hypothesis" on the basis of a more faithful reading of Marcuse, I hope to open up a space for further inquiry into the connections between these two seemingly irreconcilable positions.*

The series of oblique references to the left Freudian critique of repression contained within Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume One*, has led some commentators to question not only the substance and critical import of Foucault's confrontation with the "repressive hypothesis," but also his familiarity with the theorists he seems to subsume under this label. In the effort to clarify Foucault's position, often with a view to refuting it, scholars have attempted to situate Herbert Marcuse's work on repressive civilization within the framework of Foucault's argument. This should not appear surprising, since Marcuse was arguably the most influential representative

of the Freudian left in the years preceding the publication of Foucault's text—not simply by virtue of the rigour with which he historicized Freud's instinct theory, but also due to his tremendous involvement with the “anti-repressive” student movements of 1968 in both the United States and Europe. Indeed, Foucault once commented in an interview that although “the Frankfurt School passed by unnoticed for a long time in France,” Marcuse's “Freudian-Marxism” was discussed with “a certain intensity and frequency.”<sup>1</sup> While Marcuse does appear to be, at the very least, an implicit target of Foucault's polemic, recent commentaries on the connections between these two theorists have varied considerably.

In his essay, “The Foucaultian Impasse: No Sex, No Self, No Revolution,” Gad Horowitz argues that Foucault's “repudiation of the ideology of sexual liberation” rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of Marcuse's specific use of the myth of Eros and the vision of erotic freedom that he proposes. On the basis of his “excessive anti-essentialism,” Foucault is unable to make a distinction between necessary modes of power that construct “subjectivity” and historically unnecessary modes of power that construct “dominated subjectivity,” which Marcuse captures with his distinction between “basic repression” and “surplus repression.” Although Foucault does wish to criticize the complex operations of power over the body, Horowitz argues, he leaves us with “no ground” to stand on in the opposition to domination.<sup>2</sup>

In “Michel Foucault: A Marcusean in Structuralist Clothing,” on the other hand, Joel Whitebook argues that despite Foucault's polemical attack against the prospect of sexual liberation, his view that “bodies and pleasures” must be emancipated from their entrapment within the apparatus of sexuality is “exactly parallel” to Marcuse's “erotic utopianism.” In fact, Whitebook claims that since Foucault seems to construe “bodies and pleasures” as “pure, unformed matter which can be shaped and reshaped without constraint,” his position is actually *more* utopian than Marcuse's. If utopia involves the “omnipotent denial of our finitude,” then Whitebook wonders: “what

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse: Who is a ‘Negator of History?’” in *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, (tr.) R. J. Goldstein and J. Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Gad Horowitz, “The Foucaultian Impasse: No Sex, No Self, No Revolution,” in *Political Theory*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1987).

could be more utopian than the infinite malleability of the body and sexuality?"<sup>3</sup>

Despite the differences between these comparisons, they each reveal possible connections between Foucault's and Marcuse's respective arguments concerning the encroachment of power over the individual, as well as their mutual concern to overcome the ways in which various societal mechanisms constitute the sexual subject. In this connection, however, commentators focus almost exclusively on Marcuse's arguments concerning repression in *Eros and Civilization*, published in 1955. In this text, Marcuse attempts to overcome Freud's ambivalent critique of repressive civilization by identifying the historical character of instinctual renunciation and the possibilities within the given reality to fundamentally transform human life. Defining repression "in the non-technical sense to designate both conscious and unconscious, external and internal processes of restraint, constraint, and suppression," he argues that most forms of repression have been exercised in the specific interests of domination and exploitation, which he labels "surplus repression."<sup>4</sup> Applying Karl Marx's notion of "surplus labour," Marcuse claims that surplus repression can be seen in the rationalization of "scarcity" as a barrier to human need satisfaction, the "spatial" dismemberment of pleasure to limited zones of the body and the "temporal" reduction of gratification to the few waking hours outside the demands of socially required labour. In response to this unnecessary repression of individuals' capacity for pleasure and the subsequent "sublimation" of energy into alienated labour, Marcuse attempts to reveal the historical and theoretical possibility of overcoming this repression in order to achieve "polymorphous" modes of gratification in a qualitatively transformed society.

While the connections between Marcuse's earlier work in *Eros and Civilization* and Foucault's *History of Sexuality* have been treated in much detail by other commentators, the present inquiry will consider Foucault's position in relation to Marcuse's later critique of "repressive desublimation" in *One-Dimensional Man*, published in 1964. I begin by highlighting more explicitly Foucault's critical confrontation with Marcuse's diagnosis of repressive civilization through a consideration of Foucault's implicit and explicit arguments against the left Freudian critique of repression in *The History of*

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<sup>3</sup> Joel Whitebook, "Michel Foucault: A Marcusean in Structuralist Clothing," in *Thesis Eleven*, no. 71 (2002), 69.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 8.

*Sexuality, Volume One*, as well as the series of interviews that surrounded the publication of this text. In this connection, I will address Foucault's central claim that Marcuse operates with a purely "negative" understanding of power that misses the "positive" or "productive" mechanisms of power that construct the subject. Next, I will problematize Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis by demonstrating how Marcuse's notion of "repressive desublimation" does, in fact, capture the productive operations of power.

### **Marcuse's Place in Foucault's Critique of the "Repressive Hypothesis"**

In the opening pages of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault offers a broad characterization of the "repressive hypothesis," which designates those theories that explain the "relationship between sex and power in terms of repression."<sup>5</sup> Over the past three centuries of Western civilization, they maintain, various power mechanisms have been employed to suppress any discussion of sexuality and to constrain the individual's ability to achieve gratification. Power on this view functions as a force acting over and against the majority of individuals from the outside, stifling their desires through strict prohibitions. According to proponents of the repressive hypothesis, "repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see and nothing to know." (HS, 4) Recognizing the explosive nature of sex, the dominant power-holders within contemporary society have sought to keep sexual themes and desires at a distance from the consciousness of the subordinate classes.

Foucault begins by voicing two related suspicions concerning these discourses on repression, both of which speak, in important respects, to Marcuse's diagnosis of repressive civilization. The first suspicion concerns the historical explanation that advocates of the repressive hypothesis *choose to adopt*: sexuality becomes stifled under capitalism "because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative." Without suggesting that this position is entirely mistaken—that capitalism does not demand delays in gratification—Foucault suspects that this historical perspective is a

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume One*, (tr.) R. Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 6. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HS.

tactical manoeuvre which makes the “repression” of sexuality easily analyzable and which associates the “liberation” of sexuality with the “honor of a political cause: sex too is placed on the agenda for the future.” (HS, 5–6) Rather than penetrating into the historical depths that might explain the multifarious, “productive” operations of power on the individual’s sexual life, such positions often attempt to force an immediate synthesis of Freud’s transhistorical antagonism between pleasure and civilization and Marx’s critique of capitalist exploitation—historicizing the former using the conceptual tools of the latter.

Foucault’s second suspicion also concerns certain theorists’ motivation for advocating the repressive hypothesis, which he labels the “speaker’s benefit.” “If sex is repressed,” he writes, “then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression.” (HS, 6) By accepting the historical explanation that links sexuality and the repressive capitalist apparatus, the theorist who “challenges” this repression seems to assume a privileged position beyond the operations of power and elevates his or her theory to a subversive act from the outset. On this basis, one can then envisage the overthrow of the “repressive” system itself:

What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights. (HS, 7)

If power is understood as that force that merely represses sex, and if this repression is connected to the development of capitalism, then the overthrow of capitalism and the liberation of the repressed will be accomplished simultaneously.

According to Foucault, proponents of the repressive hypothesis operate with a number of unacceptable assumptions. Proceeding from Freud, they assume a strict binary opposition between “sex” and repressive power, pleasure principle and reality principle. Accordingly, Foucault believes, they adopt the traditional view of the subject as one who *possesses* certain desires and pleasure strivings prior to the imposition of the purely “negative” operations of power; even where power produces desire, it does so by dictating its law to sex, at most creating limitations, all the while saying “no” to individual demands for gratification. Foucault claims that the “juridico-discursive” conception of power, which is held in common by those

who believe that sexuality is repressed *and* by those who hold that the “law” is constitutive of desire, “never establishes any connection between power and sex that is not negative: rejection, exclusion, refusal, blockage, concealment, or mask. Where power and sex are concerned, power can ‘do’ nothing but say no to them.” (HS, 83) This traditional conception of power must be challenged on the basis of a more detailed consideration of the historical conditions under which sexuality has been addressed, managed and ultimately, as Foucault will argue, “produced” discursively.

Before proceeding to the historical trends which call the repressive hypothesis into question, or indeed, in anticipation of them, it is useful to consider a remark Foucault made in an interview conducted roughly one year prior to the publication of *The History of Sexuality*, entitled “Body/Power.” In this discussion, Foucault elaborates upon the problems with the “negative” conception of power with direct reference to Marcuse. After distancing his analysis from the Marxian focus on “consciousness” and “ideology,” instead shifting the emphasis to the operations of power acting directly on the body, Foucault writes:

I would also distinguish myself from para-Marxists like Marcuse who give the notion of repression an exaggerated role—because power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, in the manner of a great Superego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire—and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it. If it has been possible to constitute a knowledge of the body, this has been by way of an ensemble of military and educational disciplines. It was on the basis of power over the body that a physiological, organic knowledge of it became possible.<sup>6</sup>

These remarks do not deny that power often operates in a negative way through prohibitions, censorships or concealments; indeed, the history of civilization attests to these various methods of political oppression and subjugation. However, Foucault questions the one-sidedness of the Freudian-Marxist interpretation of power as that which merely stifles pre-existing desires and pleasure strivings.

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, “Body/Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, (ed.) C. Gordon, (tr.) C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham and K. Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 59.

Furthermore, he challenges the strict disarticulation of power and knowledge that seems to underlie Marcuse's attack on repression. That the counterattack against the complex network of largely "anonymous" operations of power on sexual life could be leveled from an extra-discursive standpoint of untainted knowledge is an illusion. Knowledge is made possible by—and, in turn, reinforces—power. (Indeed, the preceding sentence can be expressed simply as "power/knowledge.") Thus, the reduction of power to repression, and the belief that liberation would consist in the negation of power through a "knowledge" that is radically divorced from and opposed to power, is deeply problematic for Foucault.

The inadequacy of the purely "negative" theoretical conception of power can be seen in light of certain historical trends, which suggest that, far from being stifled, silenced or kept out of consciousness, sexuality has been "produced" through various discursive practices. Indeed, Foucault claims that the practice of confession in medieval Christianity, the medical production and control of perversions in the eighteenth century, the isolation of a "sexual instinct" separate from the body in the nineteenth century and, later, the psychoanalytic demand that patients reveal the deepest "secrets" of their repressed sex, show that sexuality has, in fact, undergone processes of "incitement." The various religious, political and theoretical apparatuses surrounding the body have served to: constitute "sexuality" as a domain of inquiry; invest the body with various qualities and attributes (the "perverse implantation"); devise rules for speaking about sex; and, in the last analysis, attempt to construct its "truth." The past several centuries of Western civilization, rather than denying or concealing sexuality, can be characterized by the "wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it." (HS, 34)

This chronology of the various productive devices surrounding the body and sex is intended to undermine the two great historical ruptures put forward by representatives of the repressive hypothesis. On their view, Foucault claims, the first rupture occurred in the seventeenth century and involved prohibitions against sex in order to establish a labour force—reducing pleasure to a minimum, channeling the individual's energy into socially productive work and tabooing as perversions all manifestations of sex that did not serve the immediate purpose of reproduction. While Foucault agrees that the "ruling classes" did attempt to control the sexual lives of the majority of citizens for the purposes of political and economic subjugation, he discredits the view that they did so merely by repressing

individuals' desires and "instincts." Rather, Foucault claims that the upper classes began by producing their own sexuality, endowing their "sex" with a special status and employing "rigorous techniques" on their own bodies and pleasures. (HS, 120–21) These discursive practices included the long, arduous processes of self-examination, the problematization of the sexuality of children and the medical treatment of "feminine sexuality." It was on the basis of this "deployment of sexuality" that the bourgeoisie "foisted" its sex upon the lower classes, which "the working classes managed for a long time to escape." (HS, 121)

According to Foucault, advocates of the repressive hypothesis locate the second historical phase in the twentieth century, "where the politics of the body does not require the elision of sex or its restriction solely to the reproductive function," but "relies instead on a multiple channeling into the controlled circuits of the economy—on what has been called a hyper-repressive desublimation." (HS, 114) The latter term is a direct reference to Marcuse's notion of "repressive desublimation," which, as we shall see, denotes the productive (and destructive) mechanisms which enable individuals to achieve *sexual* gratification in an environment that is still largely characterized by alienated labour and the effective manipulation of human needs. Yet, at this point Foucault does not explore the possible affinities between this term and his own critique of the deployment of sexuality. Instead, he dismisses the critical import of repressive desublimation entirely, claiming that we must "doubtless abandon the diffuse energetics that underlies the theme of a sexuality repressed for economic reasons." (*Ibid.*)

Although Foucault uses the terms "sex" and "sexuality" somewhat interchangeably throughout the text, he later rehearses the view—attributable, in part, to the Freudian left—that although "sexuality" might refer to the normalized, discursively constructed forms of sex made possible by various "incitements" and "deployments," beneath these socially constituted forms lies "*sex in itself*," the "natural given" which serves as the "anchorage point" for the manifestations of "sexuality." (HS, 152) This notion of "sex" includes "anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures," and designates a set of causal forces that animate the body itself. (HS, 154) According to Foucault, this distinction serves a number of crucial purposes for those who employ it. To begin with, it enables certain theorists to posit "sex" as the truth of our being, as that which must be discovered in order for the individual to gain "access to his own intelligibility." (HS, 155) Discourses positing this naturally given dimension of the human being do so in order to legitimate their own



practices, raising their search for the truth of sex to the status of a scientific enterprise ("*scientia sexualis*"). Consequently, representatives of "anti-repressive" social struggles often make use of this imaginary notion of "sex" as that which is truly repressed in civilization and as that element which must, in turn, become "liberated."

Reflecting on this distinction between sex and sexuality in an interview, Foucault claims that he rejected the standard "idea that power created sexuality as a device to say no to sex." Instead, he "postulated the idea of sex as internal to the apparatus of sexuality, and the consequent idea that what must be found at the root of that apparatus is not the rejection of sex, but a positive economy of the body and of pleasure."<sup>7</sup> In doing so, Foucault is able to situate both those who attempt to reveal the "truth" of sex by applying a quasi-scientific method to it, as well as those revolutionary theorists who link the liberation of sex with the overthrow of the repressive capitalist system, within the general deployment of sexuality. Far from concealing, silencing or repressing "sex," the apparatus of sexuality acts directly on the body in order to produce its truth. "Sexuality," in short, is

a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (HS, 105–106)

Foucault seeks to overcome the inadequacies of the "juridico-discursive" theory of power—which makes possible the view that "sex" can oppose and overcome repression—by offering his own "analytics of power." Rather than construing power as something levelled *by* one person or group *against* another, he attempts to honour the complexities of "power relations" as they are "exercised" within society. Far from theorizing power as something external to certain social, economic and political relationships—or, indeed, as a force operating outside the revolutionary movements which seek to "negate" power<sup>8</sup>—power relations should be described as "the

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, "The History of Sexuality," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, (ed.) C. Gordon, (tr.) C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham and K. Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 190.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Breines elucidates this point nicely: "When Foucault stresses that power relations are not in positions external to other (apparently nonpower) relations, he is reminding the New—and old—Left of unsettling things. That, for example, power relations are as operative in the revolution and the revolutionaries as

multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization.” (HS, 92) These relations are both “intentional and nonsubjective” in the sense that while power is exercised in accordance with various objectives and strategies, it does not depend upon the conscious choice of a particular individual. Extending Nietzsche’s hypothesis of the “will to power,” Foucault claims that power relations are not exercised “from above” by a specific group who holds power over another, but “from below”: it designates the relations of force that operate within and between various networks, producing a framework of possible actions and engendering potential resistances. (HS, 95–96) In short, wherever there is an exercise of force within or between power networks, Foucault argues, there are innumerable possibilities of confrontation, opposition and struggle.

While Foucault believes that modes of resistance are always possible within and between various power networks, his proposition that “sex” is merely a product of the deployment of sexuality is intended to overturn the prevailing view that the liberation of sex would constitute an opposition to “Power” as such. In what is perhaps his most frequently cited (and fiercely debated) claim in *The History of Sexuality*, he writes:

We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. (HS, 157)

Without interrogating the ontological or epistemological status of “bodies and pleasures,” it is necessary to highlight a few key features of Foucault’s opposition to the Freudian left before proceeding to a

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they are in the state and the police. And that power relations are not outside the bodies/minds of those who oppose power. And that when power is thought of as being located only ‘out there’ in capital, bourgeois property, and the state, that very way of thinking is itself entwined in power relations; it is, indeed, a vital mechanism of sustaining the invisibility of power’s position of interiority.” Paul Breines, “Revisiting Marcuse with Foucault: *An Essay on Liberation Meets The History of Sexuality*,” in *Marcuse: From the New Left to the Next Left*, (ed.) J. Bokina and T. J. Lukes (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 47.

consideration of Marcuse.<sup>9</sup> To begin, since the notion of “sex” is constructed through the deployment of sexuality, the Freudian left’s reliance on this biological substratum as the site of resistance to power does not overcome the apparatus of sexuality but, rather, persists within this framework. In turn, the sexual liberationists run the risk of ignoring the power relations operative within their own theory and practice. Furthermore, Foucault distances himself from the view that sexual liberation would require a wholesale “great Refusal” (HS, 95–96) of the established system, focussing instead on particular sites of resistance which are always possible within power relations.<sup>10</sup> The belief that power *as such* must be negated is not simply a misunderstanding of the complexities of power relations, but also a dangerous manoeuvre insofar as it loses sight of the possibilities of resistance that are possible within society.

### **Marcuse on the Productive Dimension of Power: Repressive Desublimation**

One crucial passage from Foucault’s interview, “Truth and Power,” will set the stage for the following discussion of Marcuse. Taking up the purely negative view of power supposedly held by advocates of the repressive hypothesis, Foucault asks:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault does not elaborate upon this notion of “bodies and pleasures” until the subsequent volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. For a more complete interrogation of “bodies and pleasures,” see Whitebook, “Michel Foucault: A Marcusean in Structuralist Clothing,” 66–69.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, Foucault offered this clarification in an interview: “I am not positing a substance of resistance versus a substance of power. I am just saying, as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy.” Michel Foucault, “Power and Sex,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, (ed.) A. Sheridan et. al., (tr.) L. D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988), 123.

body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.<sup>11</sup>

As we recall, Foucault dismisses the view that the twentieth century ushered in a new set of restraints on the individual's body and pleasures for the sole purpose of economic domination. Consequently, through his historical analysis of the productive mechanisms through which sexuality is produced in discourse, he attempts to dismiss Marcuse's notion of "hyper-repressive desublimation." By failing to develop his critique of this term more fully, however, Foucault avoids a direct confrontation with Marcuse's position and ignores the ways in which the notion of repressive desublimation attempts to account not only for how individuals in contemporary civilization are "brought to obey" certain exercises of power, but also the "productive" dimension of power relations as Marcuse understands them. As such, Foucault's polemical attack against this Marcusean term dilutes its critical descriptive force and obfuscates the possible links between Marcuse's critique of the "liberalization of sexuality" and Foucault's critique of the deployment of sexuality.

Throughout his work on the "cruel affluence" of contemporary society, Marcuse maintains that the technological achievements of advanced industrial civilization have created the material preconditions for the complete abolition of toil, hunger and poverty on a global scale. However, in the face of this historical possibility to "pacify" human existence, society mobilizes itself against the specter of a world where basic needs could be satisfied and enriched for the free play of human faculties and capabilities. "Faced with the possibility of pacification on the grounds of its technical and intellectual achievements," he writes, "the mature industrial society closes itself against this alternative."<sup>12</sup> Rather than being used to beautify the natural and social environment, the current technological capacities are largely used to produce superfluous commodities, military weapons and excessive quantities of waste. In Marcuse's terms, the liberating potential of society's productive forces is effectively "contained" and pressed into the service of the established system.

Given the general contours of Marcuse's critique of advanced civilization, one might pose the Foucauldian question: if these life-destructive operations of power are as nightmarish as Marcuse

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge*, 119.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 17. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ODM.

portrays them, then how could individuals possibly accept them? For the present purposes, Marcuse offers two explanations, both of which illustrate his view that power does not merely “say no,” but produces certain effects at the level of thought, value and need. To begin, he argues that the current society operates in accordance with “technological rationality.” Building upon Max Weber’s notion of “formal” or “instrumental reason,” Marcuse describes this historically specific form of rationality as a “dimension” of thought by which individuals are encouraged to “operationalize” all aspects of material and social life; human interactions are reduced to calculated exchanges between alienated labourer-consumers and the value of any idea or practice is determined by its ability to contribute to the continued functioning of the apparatus.

Although human beings have been able to control the forces of nature to an unprecedented extent by employing this form of scientific, “operational” thinking, technological rationality eventually functions as the paradigmatic form of thought. Accordingly, modes of thought and experience that extend beyond and challenge the given reality are either dismissed as irrational or become effectively contained, neutralized and controlled. Furthermore, oppositional forms of thought and action are disqualified by the sheer productivity of the advanced capitalist apparatus itself.<sup>13</sup> On this point, Marcuse claims that “positive thinking”—which serves to perpetuate the apparatus and to counteract the possibility of negative or “transcendent” views and beliefs—is “enforced not by any terroristic agency but by the overwhelming, anonymous power and efficiency of the technological society.” (ODM, 226) The dominance of this form of rationality marks the “one-dimensional” character of Western civilization.

A second explanation for individuals’ voluntary compliance with the given society involves the establishment of “false needs,” which are produced through various social mechanisms and internalized by individuals. While Marcuse puts forth the view that all distinctively *human* needs—apart from the basic needs we share with nonhuman

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that Foucault would later praise the Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental reason in an interview: “As far as I’m concerned, I think that the Frankfurt School set problems that are still being worked on. Among others, the effects of power that are connected to a rationality that has been historically and geographically defined in the West, starting from the sixteenth century on. The West could never have attained the economic and cultural effects that are unique to it without the exercise of that specific form of rationality.” (Foucault, “Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse,” 117)

animals — are *historically constructed*<sup>14</sup>, he argues that some needs “are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice.” (ODM, 5) These needs include the “need” for mindless comforts, gadgets, and leisure activities created by the culture industry. In *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse argues that under the influence of these administered needs an individual’s autonomy “asserts itself in the right to race his automobile, to handle his power tools, to buy a gun, to communicate to mass audiences his opinion, no matter how ignorant, how aggressive, it may be.”<sup>15</sup> While some of these activities are enjoyable to a certain degree, they become “false” if they are the sole means of expressing individual imagination and creativity. By identifying themselves with these prescribed needs, individuals become dependent upon the goods and services that promote conformity and submission to the system.

According to Marcuse, contemporary civilization can be characterized as “repressive” when measured against its unexplored material and technical possibilities to pacify human existence. Through the widespread implementation of instrumental rationality, the endorsement of a hyper-individualistic value system and the promotion of needs that bind individuals to this apparatus, advanced industrial society effectively “contains” such possibilities. In turn, individuals’ ability to recognize the experiences of poverty, slavery and suffering both at home and abroad is severely weakened. As Marcuse puts it in *One-Dimensional Man*, contemporary society is “repressive precisely to the degree to which it promotes the satisfaction of needs which require continuing the rat race of catching up with one’s peers and with planned obsolescence, enjoying freedom from using the brain, working with and for the means of destruction.” (ODM, 241) The comforts and luxuries generated by the advanced capitalist system thereby stifle the ability to recognize systemic social problems.

As a result of the various productive devices operating on and through the individual, contemporary society encourages immediate gratification on the basis of this preconditioning. On Marcuse’s account, the “sexual sphere” has become the site of a “sweeping desublimation,” which replaces “mediated by immediate gratifica-

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<sup>14</sup> Marcuse writes: “I have recurrently emphasized the historical character of human needs. Above the animal level even the necessities of life in a free and rational society will be other than those produced in and for an irrational and unfree society.” (ODM, 241)

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 12.

tion.” (ODM, 71) In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse identifies the dominant modes of “surplus-repressive sublimation.” Through the rationalization of scarcity and the repressive *organization* of the individual’s body and mind under the capitalist labour system, he argues that the individual’s potential to achieve fulfilment beyond the requirements of the surplus-repressive system is compromised. This is not to suggest, however, that Marcuse conceives of power as a purely “negative” force that stifles the individual’s pre-existing desires. Rather, the productive operations of advanced industrial society establish an apparatus that determines the types of pleasure, leisure activities and fulfilment individuals are able to pursue. Hence, the scope of sublimation—which, for the present purposes involves the channelling of energy into socially useful but not explicitly sexual activities—is determined by the *organization* of both the individual body and society as a whole. By overcoming unnecessary repression, Marcuse believes it would be possible to create a world in which individuals are able to achieve “self-sublimation,” whereby they would be enabled to determine their own pleasures, needs and life-horizons to a greater extent.

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse identifies a number of trends which point to the “desublimation” of sexuality on the basis of various methods of preconditioning: the manner in which the advertizing industry constructs the ideal sexual body and prescribes suitable desires, aspirations and erotic horizons; the ways in which scientific and medical discourse inform the prevailing conceptions of the normal and the pathological, often seeking to medicate individuals in accordance with the dictates of the pharmaceutical industry; and the extent to which “the body is allowed to exhibit its sexual features in the everyday work world and in work relations.” (ODM, 72) These trends are rendered possible by the productive power of the established society. As Marcuse remarks, the desublimation of sexuality is “practiced from a position of strength on the part of society, which can afford to grant more than before because its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens, and because the joys which it grants promote social cohesion and contentment.” (*Ibid.*)

Marcuse’s critique of this liberalization of sexuality complicates Foucault’s simplified picture of the “repressive hypothesis,” as well as Marcuse’s supposed place in the revolutionary Freudian movement that was formed “around Reich.” (HS, 131) To begin, Marcuse argues that repressive desublimation “is not contradictory but complimentary to the de-erotization of the environment. Sex is integrated into work and public relations and is thus made more susceptible to (controlled) satisfaction.” (ODM, 75) Contrary to

Foucault's characterization of the repressive hypothesis, Marcuse does not believe that the mere release of "sex" would serve to counteract the operations of "Power" *as such*. Rather, he invokes the myth of "Eros"—defined by Freud as the drive to "bind life into ever greater unities"—as the demand for lasting gratification in a qualitatively different social environment that has been repressed by the "one-dimensional" society. As Horowitz argues, the notion of Eros does not necessarily involve the drive for bodily pleasure grounded in a pre-discursive biological or metaphysical substance called "sex." For both Freud and Marcuse, Eros signifies the drive for both gratification and self-preservation, which gains full expression in the sublimated bonds of affection, love and solidarity—the ties that bind individuals to one another in non-hostile social relationships.<sup>16</sup> While Wilhelm Reich argues that genital satisfaction is the key to a healthy, unrepressed erotic life, Marcuse believes that erotic gratification not only involves bodily pleasure, but the construction of a life-enhancing environment in which individuals confront each other without unnecessary hostility and aggression.

The dominance of repressive desublimation thus involves "a localization and contraction of libido, the reduction of erotic to sexual experience and satisfaction." (ODM, 73) Since the individual's body and desires are efficiently coordinated with the productive apparatus of advanced industrial society, "sexual" gratification "becomes less 'polymorphous', less capable of eroticism beyond localized sexuality, and the *latter* is intensified." (*Ibid.*) Accordingly, the encouraged release of manipulated sexual energy within this efficient system of controls is consistent with the widespread release of aggression. Since the possibility of achieving gratification in a non-alienated, cooperative environment is precluded, and since the material means required to qualitatively transform human life are contained within a system of repressive satisfaction, the liberalization of sex functions as a means of perpetuating the destructiveness and self-destructiveness of this system. Thus, the desublimation of sexuality becomes one of the mechanisms by which the Western capitalist apparatus is able to legitimate its economic and political domination of human life.

Although Foucault rejects the view of repression as a unidirectional, purely negative force that stifles pre-existing desires and pleasure strivings, Marcuse employs the term to denote the productive mechanisms which, by modifying and controlling individuals' bodies and desires in various ways, serve to "contain" the life-

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<sup>16</sup> See Horowitz, "The Foucaultian Impasse," 70–71.



enhancing possibilities within contemporary society. In this regard, both agree that sexuality is not merely stifled, silenced or excluded from discourse, but that the individual body and mind are useful sites of manipulation within an efficiently coordinated apparatus intended to control individuals.

Yet, it is interesting to explore the implications of a remark Foucault made in his interview, "Body/Power," in which he echoes Marcuse's notion of repressive desublimation while distancing his analysis from the focus on repression. In his discussion of the social controls over childhood masturbation in the eighteenth century, Foucault writes:

The body thus became the issue of a conflict between parents and children, the child and the instances of control. The revolt of the sexual body is the reverse effect of this encroachment. What is the response on the side of power? An economic (and perhaps also ideological) exploitation of eroticization, from sun-tan products to pornographic films. Responding precisely to the revolt of the body, we find a new mode of investment which presents itself no longer in the form of control by repression but that of control by stimulation. 'Get undressed—but be slim, good-looking, tanned!' For each move by one adversary, there is an answering one by the other.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, Foucault describes the operations of power over the body in a way that mirrors Marcuse's description of the liberalization of sexuality and "repressive desublimation." Yet, while Marcuse believes these mechanisms of "incitement" can be considered repressive relative to the unexplored possibilities *within* the society that employs them, Foucault dismisses the view that these devices are linked to generalized interests in repression or domination over "sex."

Foucault's remarks also reflect his view that power always generates its own resistances and that those who endorse a wholesale rejection of the establishment miss these possibilities of resistance. In his allusion to Marcuse in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault claims that "there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances." (HS, 95–96) While Foucault's attempt to honour the complexities of power relations and the resistances they engender is instructive, the polemical nature of his

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, "Body/Power," 57.

attack leads him to simplify Marcuse's conception of the "Great Refusal" and the *substantive* possibilities of liberation that he envisages. Indeed, W. Mark Cobb argues that "Marcuse was famous or infamous, depending on one's perspective, for breaking away from the view that a single locus of change or revolution, such as the proletariat, could be the agent of radical social transformation."<sup>18</sup> Considering the effective "containment" of the working classes under the conditions of late capitalism, Marcuse argues that the Marxian view of revolution through class struggle has become historically unrealistic. Rather, Marcuse believes that the traditionally marginalized groups within the given society, as well as the young student radicals and working class intelligentsia, constitute the strongest "subjective" basis for challenging the unnecessary repression of individuals and identifying the unactualized possibilities within society. In short, Marcuse does not believe that liberation involves the negation of power itself, but rather that "[t]ranscendence beyond the established conditions (of thought and action) presupposes transcendence *within* these conditions." (ODM, 223)

Although Foucault ostensibly sets out to distance himself from the repressive hypothesis in order to emphasize the productive operations of power in discourse, his attack against Marcuse's notion of repression misses the essentially productive dimension of power relations as Marcuse understands them. Consequently, Foucault's polemical strategy leads him to offer a limited and problematic description of the repressive hypothesis itself and prevents him from recognizing the potential affinities between his own critique of the "deployment of sexuality" and Marcuse's critique of "repressive desublimation." While both theorists agree that resistance to power is possible, Marcuse's approach emphasizes the substantive limitations to resistance that result from the overwhelming productivity of the societal apparatus itself.

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<sup>18</sup> W. Mark Cobb, "Diatribes and Distortions: Marcuse's Academic Reception," in *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, (ed.) J. Abromeit and W. M. Cobb (New York: Routledge, 2004), 181.