
Thanatos and Civilization: Lacan, Marcuse, and the death drive

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ABSTRACT During the 1950s and 1960s two thinkers, Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Lacan, were conducting a 'return to Freud' for very similar reasons. If the differences between them are often advertised, their affinities are less so. In this article, I examine how their 'return to Freud' and fidelity to psychoanalysis serves as a common ground to read each in conjunction with the other. Specifically, the Freudian figure of the death drive marks a deep homology within Marcuse and his ethic of 'The Great Refusal,' with Lacan's notion of living in-between 'two deaths.' Reading each as the dialectical complement of the other, this article concludes by provocatively reversing Marcuse's thesis in *Eros and Civilization*: 'Today the fight for *death*, the fight for *Thanatos*, is the political fight.'

Introduction: enter Marcuse

Herbert Marcuse was perhaps the most significant and important Marxist philosopher not only to come out in support of the New Left and countercultural movements but of the entire turbulent period of the 1960s. His *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964) was undoubtedly central to the student movements, and Marcuse's pedagogy and mentorship fully encouraged his students' radical social and political commitments.[1] Setting the stage for Marcuse's relationship to the New Left was his invaluable text *Eros and Civilization* (Marcuse, 1966), in which he issued the challenge for a 'return to Freud' in order to better grasp the stakes of contemporary society as well as the historical manifestations of capitalism.[2] Through an in-depth inquiry into Freudian psychoanalytic theory (to be sure, Marcuse was interested in Freud in so far as philosophical inquiry was concerned and not at all as a clinical model), Marcuse set out to defend Freudian concepts but only after fully framing them within a historical context. Marcuse's conclusion was that the fight for Eros – the fight for Life – is the political fight par excellence.

Manifesting Marcuse's conclusion might be stated thus: all parts of society must fight for Eros by refusing to allow its resources to be used in such campaigns of death as war, concentration camps, and capitalist exploitation. In the words this motto was written in *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse's slogan for life certainly was in the environment of the 1960s, seemingly free floating and ubiquitous. But to understand its origin properly, one must take into account the particular biography of Marcuse, as well as the entire collective of theorists known as the Frankfurt School, as an emigrant to the USA in order to escape the Holocaust. The Frankfurt School had seen the rising tide of fascism, the conduction of Nazi death camps, as well as the overall death and destruction of World War II. To see the presence of Thanatos (that is, the death drive) everywhere is certainly understandable with his biography in mind. That, in the 1960s, the students would be the ones to take up Marcuse's challenge with the greatest fidelity and seriousness should, then, not surprise us, for the students were the ones being conscripted to fight in the Vietnam War. From the pages of *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse's mandate to struggle for Life must have moved and inspired the

protestors; and it would make sense that Marcuse became something of a guru to these movements.

But several years later, in a truly self-reflexive move, Marcuse would revisit and reconsider his conclusions in *Eros and Civilization*, in the 'Political Preface of 1966.' In this move, Marcuse began investigating how death or Thanatos no longer serves as society's tendency and momentum, but, in a dialectical reversal, Eros became capitalist society's theme. Or, more precisely put, the problem now is that capitalist society has an Eros all of its own. The newly emergent affluent society of late capitalism in the post-World War II era seems now to project an Eros that manifests concretely in a burgeoning consumerist and advertising culture. With the rise of this late capitalist society, the historical grounds of the Eros/Thanatos dyad had effectively shifted since the original writing of *Eros and Civilization*, thus robbing the 'fight for Eros' of its critical and political efficacy. What Marcuse was attempting to do by self-reflectively reconsidering his conclusions was to reconstitute the subjective grounds for struggle within this new affluent terrain. Was the fight for Life indeed an effective strategy against late capitalism? And if not, then, what new strategy can be suggested?

Necessary, in the face of late capitalism, however, is not an abandonment of Marcuse's original mandate to fight for life but, more to the point, to recognize that the historical terms on which that fight takes place have now shifted significantly. Keeping with Marcuse's original insight that Freudian psychoanalysis provides intellectual resources for theorizing late modernity – if anything, we have yet to fully catch up with its insights – I want to suggest that a 'return to Freud' will be necessary to this restrategization effort, and we will recruit another of Freud's disciples – namely, Jacques Lacan – for this purpose. Marcuse concluded the 'Political Preface 1966' with this motto, which, in many ways, could be seen as a retraction from his deepest insight that late capitalism had co-opted Eros: 'Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the *political* fight' (Marcuse, 1966, p. xxv, original emphasis). In this historical moment of late capitalism – a moment that projects an Eros of its own making – it seems, however, that Marcuse's concluding motto must be reversed; thus, in contrast, I want to suggest the following: Today the fight for life, which is the *political* fight, is the fight for Thanatos.

Who's Afraid of Civilization?

Eros and Civilization represents, perhaps, the most sustained effort by the Frankfurt School to engage with Freudian psychoanalysis. Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno had already made 'the psychoanalytic turn' in their seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but even in that work, psychoanalysis is secondary only to the critique of Enlightenment. In *Eros and Civilization* – what Rolf Wiggershaus (1994) has described as Marcuse's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – psychoanalysis is drawn into the center and made into the primary object of inquiry. What Marcuse sets out to do, in this work, is confront and wrestle with Freud's contentious claim that civilization co-extends with and requires man's self-renunciation – hence, the state of discontentedness inherent within civilization.

Let us turn, for a moment, to what is perhaps Freud's most famous 'sociological' work, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud, 1961a), in which he lays out his contentious theory of civilization. *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud tells us, really arises from a reaction a friend of his had to his earlier book *The Future of an Illusion* – Freud's devastating critique of religion. 'He answered,' Freud writes, 'that he entirely agreed with my judgment upon religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the true course of religious sentiments' (Freud, 1961a, p. 10). What, then, did Freud, according to this anonymous friend, misdiagnose? Freud continues, 'It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of "eternity", a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, "oceanic"' (Freud, 1961a, p. 11). Freud insists right away that his friend's criticism is unfair in so far as 'feelings' are, for Freud, incomprehensible. How could one take a feeling, which is entirely subjective, into account and under heavy criticism? Nevertheless, Freud honors this criticism and tries his hand at accounting for this 'oceanic feeling,' which is supposed to be universally striven after. What Freud argues is that this ambiguous 'oceanic feeling' can be described, from the psychoanalytic perspective, more concretely, as a longing for 'primary narcissism,' which, in other words, is a state of primary wholeness: 'The ideational contents

appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe – the same ideas with which my friend elucidated the “oceanic” feeling’ (Freud, 1961a, p. 15).

From this, the longing for primary narcissism – what, for Freud, is the original and actual upshot of religion – Freud argues that the only ‘purpose’ in life is to seek after pleasure, or, put more precisely, to *restore* one’s lost pleasure. ‘Purpose’ appears in quotation marks because the phrase ‘life’s purpose,’ for Freud, still reeks of religious illusion. If Freud must speak in these terms to be understood, then, he does so reluctantly, all the while trying to lay bare the reality it encodes. ‘As we see,’ Freud writes, ‘what decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle’ (Freud, 1961a, p. 25). The primacy placed on ‘the pleasure principle’ – that is, the rule according to which we seek to recover our lost wholeness or pleasure – stems directly from Freud’s interpretation of the oceanic feeling. Having lost primary narcissism – to be sure, Freud is unclear whether the state of primary narcissism actually ever existed or whether it exists as a construction of the psyche – people obey their oceanic feeling and seek the best possible life for themselves.

Yet, if things are indeed the way Freud tells us they are – that is, life’s purpose is to obey the pleasure principle – then, why is unhappiness much more common than happiness? And why does civilized society – with all of its technological innovations and niceties – seem to bring greater unhappiness while simultaneously bringing greater comfort? Freud considers these questions to be the true riddle of civilization, and, as such, they serve as his point of departure. Before brining civilization into the picture, let us first take a closer look at the drive of life according to the pleasure principle.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1961b), Freud describes further the pleasure principle itself: ‘We believe, that is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension – that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure’ (p. 3). Pleasure, in other words, is attained from releasing tension by expending energy. According to this construction, the most articulated expression of life would be the absolute expenditure of energy with its concomitant obliteration of tension. This articulation, however, reaches a paradox as it would amount to nothing more than the inability to repeat pleasure – that is, such a state is death. Appropriately, Freud gives this drive – the drive to the zero-point of tension and energetic store – the name ‘the death drive’, or, ‘Thanatos.’ For this reason, Freud, quoting Schopenhauer, states, ‘The aim of all life is death’ (Freud, 1961b, p. 46).

If complete obedience to the pleasure principle results in one’s own death, then how does life continue to go on? One thing is for sure, life does not, on Freud’s account, continue by simply progressing forward against the grain of the death drive – he writes, unequivocally, ‘There is unquestionably no universal instinct towards higher development observable in the animal or plant world’ (Freud, 1961b, p. 49). Positing such a ‘progressive instinct’ would be too easy. Instead, Freud theorizes the development of a different drive:

For a long time, perhaps, living substance was thus being constantly created afresh and easily dying, till decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated *detours* before reaching its aim of death. These circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept to by the conservative instincts, would thus present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life. (Freud, 1961b, p. 46, original emphasis)

This drive rebuilds the tension, which the death drive seeks to undo, by ‘conjugating’ with an external object. Because this drive achieves its purpose by unifying, or cathecting, with external objects, Freud gives it the name ‘sexual drive’, or ‘Eros.’ What is important to keep in mind is that Eros does not combat Thanatos, but rather, extends the latter’s direct path to absolute expenditure. Taken together, then, life – in so far as it is made up of the both Eros and Thanatos – is a constant dance of tension’s building up and eventual release: ‘The emergence of life would thus be the cause of the continuance of life and also at the same time of the striving towards death; and life itself would be a conflict and compromise between these two trends’ (Freud, 1960, p. 38).

In the state of Nature, the pleasure principle could exercise itself without inhibition. The upshot would be the most direct and aggressive path to the acquisition of pleasure, that is, the store and expenditure of tension. In a world of others, absolute obedience to the pleasure principle can be nothing but dangerous, even suicidal, to the self. The result, for complete obedience, would be

anarchy: Eros would demand that everyone acquire all objects to placate Thanatos. Thus, instead, we enter into a pact called civilization in which, of course, we agree to renounce part of our drives to preserve some security: 'Civilization is build up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means?) of powerful instincts' (Freud, 1961b, p. 52). No wonder Freud's thesis is that civilization is coterminous with man's unhappiness, for civilization is nothing but the requirement to sacrifice one's freedom. 'The liberty,' Freud writes, 'of the individual is no gift of civilization. It was greatest before there ways any civilization, though then, it is true, it had for the most part no value, since the individual was scarcely in a position to defend it' (Freud, 1961b, p. 49). Elsewhere in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud writes, 'If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security' (1961a, p. 73).

Civilization, to be sure, does not eradicate the Eros/Thanatos dialectic. Rather, it recruits it for its own purposes. The renunciation of direct access to instinct is compensated for by the extension of Eros in a tamer manner. Eros, the drive to object cathexis, is used to bind its population. But, now, Eros cannot manifest in the explosive form of direct and uninhibited sexual union. Instead, it is weakened by its diversion onto a multitude of peoples in the form of friendship, thus making the concept of friendship simply a more diluted form of sexual union itself. This is why, on Freud's account, civilization imposes such lofty social injunctions to love one's neighbor etc.: these forms of ethics are nothing more than a subduing of its population. The name Freud gives to this toned down version of the pleasure principle is 'the reality principle.' In the face of reality, the drives strike a compromise in which they do not directly attain their aim in return for at least some release.

Historicizing Freud

Marcuse's contention, in *Eros and Civilization*, is with Freud's belief that civilization is coterminous with the repression of the drives: 'The notion that a non-repressive civilization is impossible is a cornerstone of Freudian theory' (1961a, p. 17). However, Marcuse goes about his argument not by disagreeing with Freud's construction of civilization and the dynamic of Eros and Thanatos within its domain. Marcuse's strategy, rather, is to insist upon the historicization of Freud's argument, such that the repression of the drives only occurs within certain historical limits, therefore leaving open the future possibility of this non-repressive civilization. Even more subtle is that, seen in more detail, Marcuse's precise argument is that Freud's theory of civilization already contains historical elements of which Freud himself is unaware. Thus, the task Marcuse sets out for himself is to recover and underline Freud's historical unconscious, if you will, rather than impose upon it from the outside: 'The "unhistorical" character of the Freudian concepts thus contains the elements of its opposite: their historical substance must be recaptured, not be adding some sociological factors (as do the "cultural" Neo-Freudian schools), but by unfolding their own content' (Marcuse, 1966, p. 35).

The first point of contention Marcuse raises with Freud is the very presumption that absolute obedience to the pleasure principle becomes untenable in a space filled with others. Freud, in other words, posits in advance that the resources through which we attain pleasure are, by nature, scarce – a scarcity which makes impossible the unlimited satisfaction of the drives. 'According to Freud,' writes Marcuse, 'the repressive modification of the instincts under the reality principle is enforced and sustained by the "eternal primordial struggle for existence ... persisting to the present day." Scarcity (*Lebensnot*, *Ananke*) teaches men that they cannot freely gratify their instinctual impulses, that they cannot live under the pleasure principle.' He continues, 'This conception is as old as civilization and has always provided the most effective rationalization for repression' (Marcuse, 1966, pp. 16-17). Scarcity, for Marcuse, then, is an assumption, a rationalization, and not at all an eternal state.

Extrapolating Marcuse's contention from Freud is not by any means difficult. From the above discussion, we can see that, according to Freud, Eros, in obedience to the pleasure principle, will come in conflict with others, that is to say, conflict is thought to be inevitable. But a few quotations

will nonetheless suffice. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud writes on the sources of suffering and unhappiness: 'We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men' (1961a, p. 26). While reflecting on the injunction to 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' Freud writes, 'My love is something valuable to me which I ought not to throw away without reflection' (1961a, p. 66). And, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud evokes Schopenhauer's community of porcupines to illustrate the intolerability of others: 'According to Schopenhauer's famous simile of the freezing porcupines no one can tolerate a too intimate approach to his neighbor' (Freud, 1959, p. 41). On Marcuse's read, scarcity is everywhere in Freud writ large as the value of pleasure is predicated upon the difficulty with which it is attained.[4]

With scarcity firmly entrenched, Freud is free to go on and lay out the conflict of Eros and Thanatos as the struggle to maintain the constancy of life, neither going beyond the pleasure principle nor completely denying it. Indeed, if scarcity prevents the absolute gratification of all members of society, then civilization must involve the renunciation of instinct – for there would be no other compromise available. For Marcuse, this argument already smells something rotten as it possesses the potential to ideologically explain away the destitute socio-economic situation of some parts of society. Alternatively, Marcuse's position is this: scarcity exists only within the specific historical epoch of capitalism and its distribution of wealth into the hands of a few at the cost of building that wealth on the backs of the many. 'However,' Marcuse argues, 'this argument, which looms large in Freud's metapsychology, is fallacious in so far as it applies to the brute *fact* of scarcity what actually is the consequence of a specific *organization* of scarcity, and of a specific existential attitude enforced by this organization' (Marcuse, 1966, p. 36, original emphasis).

Having uncovered the historical frame assumed in Freud's construction of civilization, Marcuse offers the corrective that the renunciation of instinct discovered by Freud to be at work in civilization is actually the logic of domination: 'If he justifies the repressive organization of the instincts by the irreconcilability between the primary pleasure principle and the reality principle, he expresses the historical fact that civilization has progressed as organized *domination*' (Marcuse, 1966, p. 34, original emphasis). It is indeed the historical reality of domination that enabled its projection as a natural fact, deceiving even Freud himself: 'Precisely because all civilization has been organized domination, the historical development assumes the dignity and necessity of a universal biological development' (p. 34). At this point, Marcuse introduces his two terms – 'surplus-repression' and 'performance principle' – which are supposed to be the historical variants of Freud's concepts – 'repression' and 'reality principle.'

Thus the appearance of Eros within civilization as its driving force of libidinally binding the entire population within the link of friendship is, according to Marcuse, strictly historical. Within very different historical conditions, Eros could actualize its full potential for creating human social relations outside domination's demands of surplus-repression: 'This idea would imply that the *free* Eros does not preclude the lasting civilized societal relationships – that it repels only the supra-repressive organization of societal relationships under a principle which is the negation the pleasure principle' (Marcuse, 1966, p. 43, original emphasis). The dialectic of Eros/Thanatos, in which Eros only functions as a way of momentarily forestalling the downward plunge of Thanatos in order to prolong life, is, for Marcuse, only a tamed and weakened version of Eros, resulting from particular historical conditions. In its weakened state, civilization, under the capitalist mode of production and governed by the performance principle, makes Eros manifest itself in searching out only certain kinds of outlets that are presumed to be socially useful for the furtherance of capitalist competition and the prolongation of alienated labor. For this reason, also, Marcuse finds in Eros the basis for a political program that runs up against capitalist society and its performance principle: for, if Eros, at a fundamental level, constructs new outlets for fulfillment, and if it must be tamed by civilization, then, surely, Eros at its most complete and uninhibited would be able to break free from the constraints of civilization, which is precisely why it must be held under shackle in the first place. Marcuse writes, 'In a world of alienation, the liberation of Eros would necessarily operate as a destructive, fatal force – as the total negation of the principle which governs the repressive reality' (Marcuse, 1966, p. 95). The basic impulse of Eros is the fulfillment of man's happiness, and as such,

it wants to overthrow the domination of surplus-repression. For that reason, Eros, for Marcuse, represents the model of his political stance of 'the Great Refusal' – an uncompromising political stance that refuses to accept the terms of an oppressive society: 'This Great Refusal is the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom – "to live without anxiety"' (Marcuse, 1966, pp. 149-150).

Periodizing Eros

If Marcuse's gesture was not to abandon or discredit Freud's thesis on civilization but, rather, to draw it within a historical framework, then Marcuse's own thesis on Eros must be held to the same standard. This time, however, we will want to investigate what happens to the dialectic of Eros/Thanatos within our contemporary moment of late capitalism. Does late capitalism, which is usually marked by an increase in aesthetic forms and commodities, continue to morph and shape Eros for its own purposes? Can Eros still be the basis for a radical political program in the time of late capitalism?

One of the themes that interested not only Marcuse but the entire Frankfurt School was an analysis of 'affluent society' – or to use a more contemporary term, late capitalism, which, as Ernest Mandel (1983) has argued, is the third mutation in capitalism's historical trajectory. In *Eros and Civilization*, this theme had yet to fully gestate. Instead, Marcuse was combating another foe – namely, Thanatos, to which he attributed the overwhelming presence of death. Sometime after the writing of *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse recognized that, with the advent of affluent capitalism, the fundamental social problematic had changed to a radical extent.

What Marcuse came to realize was this: in late capitalism, the problematic shifts focus away from the overwhelming presence of death to a pervasive affluence and an intoxicating enjoyment. Contemporary theorist Fredric Jameson (1995) has captured the shifting stakes of late capitalism best: 'What has happened,' in late capitalism, 'is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally,' so that 'the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation' (pp. 4-5). To accommodate this explosion of commodities is the concomitant subjective adjustment in which the late capitalist individual is mandated to consume and enjoy – no longer holding onto Puritanical ideals of abstinence and self-renunciation. If anything, in late capitalism, we are commanded to ignore the overwhelming presence of death and, instead, to Enjoy! Or, put differently: Eros – hence, enjoyment – becomes the psychic dominant of late capitalism.

Though the idea that capital's cultural logic could ever incorporate Eros into itself never appeared in the original *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse begins to address this idea in the 'Political Preface 1966' written some years later. A model of exemplary critical self-reflexivity, Marcuse writes, 'I neglected or minimized the fact that this obsolescent rationale had been vastly strengthened (if not replaced) by even more efficient forms of social control.' He goes on:

In the affluent society, the authorities are hardly forced to justify their domination. They deliver the goods; they satisfy the sexual and the aggressive energy of their subjects. Like the unconscious, the destructive power of which they so successfully represent, they are this side of good and evil, and the principle of contradiction has no place in their logic. (Marcuse, 1966, pp. xi-xii)

Enjoyment: this is the logic that affluent society projects in order to 'plug' its population into the system. What we must remember, however, is that, for Marcuse, capitalism – though framed as the affluent society – is predicated on the death, destruction, and domination of a great majority of people. Therefore, the enjoyment that it propagates is always only available to a select few: 'The inferno is still concentrated in certain far away places: Vietnam, the Congo, South Africa, and in the ghettos of the "affluent society"' (Marcuse, 1966, p. xiii).

Out of this concern for the affluent society came some of Marcuse's most famous and influential works: *One-Dimensional Man, An Essay on Liberation*, and *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. The problem becomes that in a society where people are freely encouraged to simply Enjoy, how do we convince them to fight for freedom?: 'The people, efficiently manipulated and organized, are free;

ignorance and impotence, introjected heteronomy is the price of their freedom. It makes no sense to talk about liberation to free men – and we are free if we do not belong to the oppressed minority’ (Marcuse, 1966, p. xiii). One can sense the ‘tongue in cheek’ tone in Marcuse’s scathing words for late capitalism’s supposed freedom. To enthrall people to fight for Eros no longer seemed to be a likely strategy – no wonder, then, that Marcuse’s attitude completely changes by *One-Dimensional Man*, as he now attempts, in that work, to show how freedom has become only single-faceted and thus unfreedom. Eros, now thoroughly discredited, no longer serves as the platform from which to launch a political program; thus Marcuse’s challenge becomes this: finding a base for political struggle against late capitalism’s enjoyment machine.

Strangely enough, Marcuse concludes the ‘Political Preface,’ by returning to and reaffirming the original argument of *Eros and Civilization*, namely, that a fight for life remains a fight for Eros: ‘Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the *political* fight’ (Marcuse, 1966, p. xxv, original emphasis). Our concern is that the development of late capitalism confronts our conception of political struggle with its own ethos of enjoyment so that we must rethink on what terms the fight for life will take place. In other words, we do not take issue with Marcuse’s important and correct insight that the political fight in the coming decades is the very fight for life; rather, the issue is whether or not Eros constitutes the grounds for this struggle. We might thus restate the challenge which Marcuse leaves for us in this way: what form will the fight for life take in affluent capitalist culture? Yet, Marcuse is the one who offers the key to searching out the answer: he does so, namely, with the Great Refusal. For Marcuse, as we will recall, necessary for the political struggle against the institutions of capitalism is first and foremost to *refuse* to allow one’s intellectual and material skills to be used by capital in its thinly veiled march towards death. In the original *Eros and Civilization*, affirming Eros was supposed to be just such a Refusal. But, in light of late capitalism, it seems we must revisit this thesis and affirm just the opposite: as the death drive and the capitalist mode of production do not essentially go hand in hand, their unholy union is a historical one. Thus, in a late capitalist consumer society and culture of enjoyment, political struggle must be a fight predicated on Thanatos, the death drive. The death drive, to put it another way, becomes, in late capitalism, a figure of Marcuse’s Great Refusal. To make this argument, we will read the death drive through a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. This will be our motto: Today the fight for life, which is the *political* fight, is the fight for Thanatos.

Enter Lacan

While Marcuse was making his ‘return to Freud,’ halfway around the globe, in Paris, France, still in the ‘60s, the spirit of Marcuse could still be felt. Again, it was the students. It was the student revolutions of Paris which came to be known simply as *May ‘68*.^[5] And when the faculty in the universities of Paris were conflicted and divided, Marcuse did not hesitate to throw his lot with the students. The students did not actually read Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* at that time, but this did not hinder them from considering Marcuse as their mentor, and, in the wake of May ‘68, the text was translated into French and widely read. In fact, Marcuse’s reflection on liberation – *An Essay on Liberation* – is dedicate to these ‘young militants,’ as he calls them, who ‘know or sense that what is at stake is simply their life, the life of human beings which has become a plaything in the hands of politicians and managers and generals’ (p. x).

In France there was another psychoanalyst conducting his own return to Freud who would associate with the students, though his relationship would be much more ambivalent – he, of course, is Jacques Lacan. At the start, Lacan did throw his lot in with the students, but as the movement progressed and as the universities reacted to contain and absorb the radicality of the students, Lacan would become much more cautious and, in the end, warn the students that all they wanted was another Master.^[6] If Marcuse wholeheartedly supported the Paris students because he was in tune with their political consciousness, then, Lacan’s caution stemmed from his being in tune with their unconscious.

During this time, Lacan’s position on May ‘68 could not be reduced to either total support for the students or outright dismissal of them; rather, his rebuke of the students was that they were not radical enough, and as such, their so-called radicalism was already caught within the university’s discourse. To be sure, the students had made a radical shift in engaging in revolt, but Lacan’s

proposition was that they make yet another radical shift – this time, to what he called ‘the analytic discourse’ (Lacan, 1988, 1991). What he means by this challenge is that the students give up their position as hysterics and, as the saying goes, ‘put their money where their mouths are’ – that is to say, his challenge is that if they are truly serious, then, rather than demand change from the authorities, the students themselves should get to work.

But if the students felt frustrated that Lacan was leaving them as revolutionary orphans and without any direction, then they could only blame their frustration on themselves, for a few years prior to May ’68, in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1992), Lacan had already laid out several suggestions for action. The complaints of Lacan’s tendency towards flamboyance and obtuse discourse are symptomatic of the fact that the students were not paying close enough attention to Lacan’s literal word. Among the important interventions Lacan gives in the *Ethics* seminar, perhaps the most radical is his reading of Freud’s theory of the death drive. What Lacan tells the attendees of his seminar is that the death drive actually is an ethical stance, and one that *must* be accepted in order to disrupt the superego bond that keeps the individual at bay in the community.[7] To underline his point, Lacan turns to Sophocles’ *Antigone*: confronted with the fact that her uncle, Creon, refuses to give her brother, Polynices, a proper burial on the charges that he is a traitor, Antigone goes against the Theban community and sprinkles dust over the dead body of Polynices, thus giving him a makeshift burial. This act of Antigone’s is not, for Lacan, any kind of hysterical transgression of the law; rather, it is *the* ethical act par excellence inasmuch as it causes the dismantling of the Theban community as well as Creon’s law – the very bases of her existence. This act of Antigone’s, Lacan tells us, is the embodiment of the death drive at its purest.[8]

To be a true revolutionary, Lacan’s challenge goes, then, the students of the Parisian universities must commit the Act in the footsteps of Antigone – an Act that would cause the dismantling of the very conditions of subjective being.[9] And, if not, then ‘hysteric’ is the name they must bear. What, then, is the connection of Antigone’s Act and death drive? And how precisely can it be thought as a political stance? We will answer these questions in what follows, but suffice it here to say, embracing the Act not only means to give up the enjoyment of a meaningful existence in the established order, but it also means to mark the point from which a new order is thought possible. Or, to put it within more Marcusean terms: Antigone’s Act was her Great Refusal to Creon’s order.

Enjoy!

The gesture of *Eros and Civilization* is to return to Freud’s theory of the drives, and, in so doing, to make out how Eros, the life drive, can become the basis of a political stance. Let us for the moment make this return to Freud’s drive theory with Marcuse. The place Freud spells out the logic of the drive most clearly is in his essay ‘Instincts and the Vicissitudes’ (Freud, 1915); let us quote Freud at length:

The aim of an instinct is in every instance satisfaction, which can only be obtained by removing the state of stimulation at the source of the instinct. But although the ultimate aim of each instinct remains unchangeable, there may yet be different paths leading to the same ultimate aim; so that an instinct may be found to have various nearer or intermediate aims, which are combined or interchanged with one another. Experience permits us also to speak of instincts which are ‘inhibited in their aim’, in the case of processes which are allowed to make some advance towards instinctual satisfaction but are then inhibited or deflected. We may suppose that even processes of this kind involve a partial satisfaction. (p. 122)

Thus, for Freud, the structure of the drive is such that it is ‘aim inhibited,’ and it is precisely due to this paradoxical structure that ‘a partial satisfaction’ can be attained. Since it is in this paradox that all the stakes are located, let us take a closer look at it.

The drive has the aim of satisfaction, Freud tells us, but this satisfaction is derived from removing the state of stimulation at the source of the drive and *not* necessarily to take satisfaction from an object per se. Lacan (1981) quickly picks up on the drive’s paradox: namely, it seems Freud is theorizing the presence of not one but *two* aims of the drive while at the same time maintaining that the ultimate aim of the drive, in every instance, is satisfaction. In other words, Freud appears to be stating that the drive has the (first) aim of satisfaction of removing the stimulation at its

source and the (second) aim of attaining satisfaction from objects that might serve as intermediate aim. Lacan's answer to this apparent confusion is that Freud is correct in both instances. Yes, the drive's ultimate aim in every instance is satisfaction, and yes, the drive attains this ultimate aim by paradoxically aiming at intermediary objects. Here, Lacan uses the analogy of goal versus aim in archery to explicate the dual aims of the drive: in archery one has the goal of hitting the bull's eye, but, at the same time, one does not aim the arrow directly at the bull's eye; rather, one must account for wind, gravity, etc. Thus the archer's aim must be different from the archer's goal; furthermore, the archer hits the goal only in so far as the aim and goal are different from one another. Likewise, the drive has the goal of removing the source stimulation and it achieves this goal by aiming at intermediary objects: 'If the drive may be satisfied without attaining what ... would be the satisfaction of its end of reproduction, it is because it is a partial drive, and its aim is simply to return to its circuit' (p. 179).

But, we have been contending, *the* problematic is the problematic of affluent late capitalist society. How, then, does the drive structure help elucidate what is at stake in its cultural logic? First, it is clear that in order to attain its goal of satisfaction the drive must maintain a certain ethical difference between its goal and its aim – that is to say, the drive must not aim directly at satisfaction or else risk losing it all together. But Lacan's point is that this unethical head dive into the abyss of satisfaction is entirely possible. The name he gives to the logic that conflates aim and drive is the superego. Of the superego, Lacan (1988) states this: 'Nothing forces anyone to enjoy except the superego. The superego is the imperative of jouissance – Enjoy!' (p. 3). In the superego logic, enjoyment is not simply an aim, nor a goal; rather, it is an imperative – an imperative that commands: Enjoy!

Because the superego aims directly at enjoyment, it compels the subject to pursue it directly. In this way, objects no longer have any dignity of their own – that is, objects are no longer the bearers of enjoyments, the things from which to attain one's enjoyment – rather, they become insignificant in light of the ultimate object of enjoyment. Lacanian theorist Alenka Zupancic (2003) illustrates the stakes with the literary figure of Don Juan: Don Juan pursues his enjoyment directly, and as such, to him, the numerous women he copulates with are not dignified in themselves but are merely apparatuses for his enjoyment. Zupancic writes: 'Don Juan can fuck as much as he likes, but, finally, it is he who is being fucked by the signifier, that is, by the famous list that he has to fill up with as many names as possible' (pp. 84-85). In other words, because he must use women precisely as enjoyment – that is, he directly aims at his enjoyment – enjoyment itself becomes his Master and he must obey it by forever pursuing more and more women. Likewise, today's affluent society faces the same conflict: though for some of us, sex may not be the issue (certainly, today, Don Juan is a kind of paradigm for the late capitalist subject), we are compelled by advertisements, commercials, and other aspects of culture to Consume! – and to Enjoy! Today, even something seemingly as innocent as knowledge has been commodified. Guy Debord (1995), in his seminal text *The Society of the Spectacle* (another text influential to May '68), recognized how in late capitalism – his term is, of course, 'the society of the spectacle' – knowledge has become a commodity; he writes: 'A culture now wholly commodity was bound to become the star commodity of the society of the spectacle The whole complex system of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge is already equivalent to 29 percent of the annual gross national product of the United States' (pp. 137-138, original emphasis). The pursuit of greater, more innovative amounts of knowledge can, in late capitalism, become a tireless pursuit of enjoyment – this is, of course, apparent in how the academic must commodify him or herself by etching out a niche, thereby turning oneself into a rare commodity. Thus, today, objects are not bearers of enjoyment but mere bumps on the road to enjoyment (a necessary evil if you will), which, in the end, enables enjoyment to become the Master that demands that we accumulate a never-ending list of objects.

Not One but Two Deaths

Lacan's reading of the superego as an imperative to Enjoy! must not be read against but with Freud. That is to say, Freud himself constructed the theoretical framework that could be adapted to our current historical moment of late capitalism. In *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1989), Freud gives his famous historical construction of the primal father and the horde: here, in this original society, the

primal father bars his sons from the women, leaving only himself, the father, to have unlimited access to enjoyment. As Freud's construction goes, the sons plot against the father and murder him in order to access enjoyment, but to their dismay, their parricide does not open the door to the women but, quite the contrary, puts the women, and therefore their enjoyment, further out of reach. How so? – because with the father gone the brothers come to realize that they are of equal status and fear risking a struggle with each other. Thus the sons erect the primal father once again in the form of the totem animal in order to institute the father's ban on the women, thereby circumventing any struggle between them. We should take notice of two points in Freud's construction: first, after their parricide, the brothers are barred from the women not by a father's 'No!' but precisely because the dead father now enables them to enjoy, and, in fact, incites them to enjoy; and second, the father's law to Enjoy! is what constitutes the brothers' social structure.

Of course, Freud does not mean for us to accept his construction as the original form of society in our historical trajectory. But this does not mean he intends his construction to be a myth. Rather, Freud's construction remains unthinkable from our historical social juncture precisely because it occurs at the moment of inauguration of our historical trajectory. That is to say, with this construction, Freud locates the structural cause for our social order, and as its cause, it remains unthinkable as such within the social order itself.

We can now see that Lacan's reading of the superego imperative is already at work in Freud's primal father construction: namely, the dead father's law is not a directly prohibitive one – it is not 'No!', but rather, a permissive one – it is 'Enjoy!' And the superego binds the community through its command to enjoyment.

Through a close reading of Marquis de Sade, in *Ethics*, Lacan suggests that there exist not one but two deaths: the first is the real bodily death, but the second is a symbolic death (for example, burial).[10] The ethical Act of Antigone is located in her willingness to accept the *second* death, or put differently, to become symbolically dead, or unrecognizable, to the community in which she lives. This second death of Antigone's constitutes her relation to the community as an *included exclusion*. She goes through this second death by renouncing Creon's edict and burying her brother's body. Creon's edict does not deprive the community of the enjoyment of burying Polynices and perhaps celebrating him as a hero, but rather, his edict compensates for this loss of enjoyment with the demand that we redeploy our enjoyment within the community itself thereby investing the community with a libidinal charge that binds it together. That is to say, Creon's edict, while consciously and overtly demanding the prohibition on burying Polynices, has within it a secondary and unconscious, but no less forceful, demand that the citizens of Thebes enjoy by being part of the resultant community. So when Antigone refuses to be held under Creon's law – that is, to undergo the second death – she not only refuses the law but refuses the very terms that hold together the community itself. Her appearing dead to the law, then, excludes her not only from the very community that is formed by the law but from the paradoxical position within it – or, included exclusion. In this way, we may read Creon's edict as a form of the superego, as it libidinally binds Thebes together, and Antigone's ethical Act is precisely her appearing as dead to this superego edict.

The ethical Act today does not differ in structure from that of Antigone's. Thus, for us, the ethical Act must be to fall into a second death by renouncing the superego edict to Enjoy! – this refusal to pursue enjoyment at the cost of reducing all objects to abject refusal is the Act par excellence. Indeed, such an Act would appear absurd to affluent late capitalist society. But we must at once take into account that Antigone's 'Great Refusal' of Creon's edict is not simply a transgression because a transgression can only be accomplished against the background of a law that can be transgressed in the first place. In this way, Antigone's Refusal is of a more radical type precisely because it seeks to dislodge the law itself and to make the law disappear. But at the same time, we must keep in mind that Antigone's Refusal is no act of willpower, which assumes a type of endurance against the odds that the law creates. Rather, it is more proper to conceive of Antigone's Refusal as 'beyond good and evil,' in so far as it cannot be registered against the measure of the law; it is precisely outside the law.

Lacan with Marcuse or, the Great Refusal as the Death Drive

Lacan calls Antigone's Act the embodiment of the death drive at its purest: 'When Antigone depicts herself ... what is she identifying herself with, if it isn't that inanimate condition in which Freud taught us to recognize the form in which the death instinct is manifest' (Lacan, 1992, p. 281), and 'Yet she pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such' (p. 282). Why does Lacan make this argument? Let us return to the drive structure that we explained a moment ago: because the drive structure has as its ultimate goal the elimination of its own stimulus, it can be said that the drive's ultimate aim – i.e. satisfaction – is its own elimination, a zero state of rest; or to put it another way, every drive has death within it. Using a Heraclitean fragment as an illustration of the drive, Lacan (1981) says this: 'To the bow is given the name of life and its work is death' (p. 177). Here, Lacan is playing on the oscillation of the Greek word *bios* from which meanings of 'the bow' and 'political life' are derived. Dual in its meaning, the bow is (political) life and its work is death. In other words, in Lacan's reading, the drive is the motor-force of life and its work is death – i.e. elimination of its own stimulus. Thus the drive is split in so far as it always already has death as part of its structure.

Far from reinterpreting Freud, Lacan's Heraclitean digression is a direct reference to him, that is, Heracitus is to Lacan as Schopenhauer is to Freud. For Freud, external conditions in the forms of pleasure and reality caused the drive to temporarily divert from its ultimate goal by finding a circuitous route to it. Pinpointing that reality itself is what derails the drive, Freud suggests that the installation of the reality and its logic of enjoyment is precisely what distracts the subject from death. But, of course, this 'gift' of reality's is not without its trappings, for the subject must now obey a new law, the law to Enjoy! if it wants to persist in its life. It is at this moment that Lacan asserts the necessity to conceptualize not one but two deaths: the death that would be to eliminate the drive all together as distinct from the death to the symbolic law of enjoyment in order to return to the track that puts it on the course towards the ultimate goal. To choose the second death, then, is to choose to embrace the death drive in a pure Act, and it is this move that is accomplished by Antigone. In a way, to embrace the death drive is to paradoxically die symbolically in order to return to living; or, borrowing Lacan's own formula: to the drive is given the name of death and its work is life! So, far from a solipsistic acceptance of death, the Lacanian death drive is immortality as such, that is, a literal life beyond death. To put it in a slightly different way: the Lacanian death drive assures us that there is something beyond the current symbolic order (which, of course, might be a truth that is paralyzing in its own way). Or to use Freud's own phrasing: the death drive is what enables us to posit a life that exists 'beyond the pleasure principle.'

Could we not rewrite Marcuse's ethical stance of the Great Refusal in terms of Lacan's own rewriting of the Freudian death drive? In this rewriting, does the Great Refusal not become a form of Lacan's ethical Act? When Marcuse calls the intellectual and material institutions to refuse to cooperate with advance capitalism and its military complex, is he not calling them to fall into a kind of second death in so far as a capitalist logic is what determines the social symbolic realm itself? It is my contention that at the impasse of his former advocacy of *Eros* in an era where the cultural logic of capitalism is precisely that – to Enjoy! – Marcuse reformulated his stance by calling for the Great Refusal to abide in that realm, and in so doing, he thought, in a primordial way, the necessity for *Thanatos*, the death drive. Thus we should read Lacan *with* Marcuse in their respective notions of the death drive qua Act and the death drive qua Great Refusal as mutual attempts to think up a political and ethical stance to be taken in our current era of affluent capitalist society (i.e. a society dominated by the superego's imperative to Enjoy!). I claimed earlier that today the political fight is the fight for death, and now we are in a place to fully flesh out this thesis: Marcuse's initial challenge for life still holds, though today it has taken on new terms such that rather than directly embracing *Eros* what is now necessary is to embrace *Thanatos* – such an embrace is a political stance – and by an Act to embrace the death drive we recover the terms necessary to fight once again for *life*. Thus we recognize that in a paradox the fight for life is the fight for death, but it is the political fight.

So, we are left with this challenge from Marcuse: all you who wish to be revolutionaries must embrace the Great Refusal against the capitalist logic that tempts you. We are also left with this challenge from Lacan: all you who wish to be revolutionaries must embrace the second death in a true Act. Together, it is clear, they are issuing this joint challenge: *the* revolutionary stance, today,

is that of Thanatos, the death drive. The only question that remains is: will we accept this challenge?

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Notes

- [1] For more on Marcuse's relationship to the student movements, see Kellner, 2005.
- [2] For an excellent critical account of *Eros and Civilization* that differs than mine, see Kellner, 1984.
- [3] See also Fromm, 1969; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002.
- [4] I must emphasize that it is Marcuse who claims Freud relies upon scarcity as a foil. For, it seems to me that Freud is concerned more with Necessity (*Ananke*), which makes for very different grounds. Though I lament that I cannot go further into the implications of exchanging scarcity with necessity, I must state my difference here with Marcuse.
- [5] For more on May '68 and for Marcuse's relationship to it, see Ross, 2004.
- [6] See, for example, Lacan, 1987. His *Seminar XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Lacan, 1991) was given at this time.
- [7] For more on Lacanian ethics, see Zupancic, 2000.
- [8] For other readings of Lacan and Antigone, see Copjec, 2002; Zupancic, 2000.
- [9] Slavoj Žižek has done much in developing the notion of the Act; see Žižek, 1989, 2000.
- [10] Lacan has analyzed Sade elsewhere than *Seminar VII*; see Lacan, 1989. For an excellent commentary on Lacan's difficult reading of Kant and Sade, see Reinhard, 1995.

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