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Love and its Refusal: Love, Historical Memory, and the Meaning of
Perversion in the Fromm-Marcuse Feud

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Love and its Refusal: Love, Historical Memory, and the Meaning of Perversion in the

Fromm-Marcuse Feud

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2013

To Marina Roca Die and Kyle Scallon

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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This essay offers an intellectual history of the feud between the Frankfurt School philosophers Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. In the competitive space of their debate, both thinkers attempted to redefine the spiritual experience and practice of love in a modern society. While a criterion for both Fromm and Marcuse was that love must be politically and historically radical, their different visions of that historical radicalism - exemplified in their 1955 debate in *Dissent*, and the two texts published immediately after their debate, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and Fromm's *The Art of Loving* - parted ways at the idea of perversion. Perversion became a central procedure in Marcuse's praxis of a real "outlawed" love that could negate modernity's excessive sociability of guilt. For Fromm, perversion remained a "spiritual" form of regression away from love and maturity that he likened to violence. In both instances, the memory of German fascism was key to the (un)productive mistranslation of their ideas on love and perversion.

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Introduction

This essay reframes the 1955 feud between the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and the philosopher Herbert Marcuse as a debate over the possibility and ethics of love in contemporary Western society. Interpreting Fromm and Marcuse as competing Marxist ethicists, this essay explores their contradictions, and the historical imaginations that contextualize their feud. While Fromm defended an ideal of love that spiritually transcended sexual desire, Marcuse offered a critique of love on the basis of his politics of sexual liberation. Because sexuality had come to be seen by both thinkers as something with a certain historicity tied to the social experience of modern capitalism, they could not help but frame their dispute within recent history. What progressive or revolutionary role could love, an ancient moral category, have in the twentieth century, in the midst of what both Fromm and Marcuse perceived as a significant transition in sexual conventions? The answers depended on Fromm's and Marcuse's respective intellectual traditions and temperaments, to be sure. But the debate also makes little sense, this paper shows, without an account of the formative memory of the National Socialist revolution, which both thinkers experienced as a traumatic rupture. The results were contradictory: while his interpretation of the Third Reich justified Marcuse's specific defense of the perversions with historical urgency, the memory of Nazism lent credence to Fromm's rejection of the sexual perversions as expressions of immaturity and nihilism. In their debate on love, Marcuse and Fromm offered two very different answers to what they saw as modern intimacy's alienation, a crisis compounded, for them, by the memory of the German past, and their own communicative failures.

A decade after the defeat of Nazi Germany, both philosophers were busy forging ahead with their careers in the United States. More than usual for the members of the Frankfurt School who left Germany by 1934, Marcuse and Fromm embraced American society. Marcuse worked as analyst for the Office of War Information, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and after the end of the Second World War, the State Department. Though he eventually settled at UC San Diego in the mid-1960s, he had taught at Columbia, Harvard and Brandeis from the early 1950s. Fromm, too, held several professorships throughout the American Northeast, the Midwest, and Mexico City, where he helped put down psychoanalytic roots. In the United States, Fromm became involved in the founding of the William Alanson White Institute, and, with Karen Horney and Henry Stack Sullivan, was an important theorist in the movement known as Neo-Freudianism, which stressed cultural factors in the study of human psychology. When the International Psychoanalytic Association cut Fromm from their ranks, largely for his lay training and his Marxism, he had enough renown to be invited by the founders of the New York magazine *Dissent* - "A Quarterly of Socialist Opinion" - asked him to join their team of editors in 1954.¹ During that time, Fromm was working on the manuscript of what would be one of his best-selling books, *The Art of Loving* (1956).

After his service with the OSS as an analyst of Nazi society, Marcuse began to reorganize the strands of his thinking (influenced primarily by Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger, who was his teacher at Freiburg) into a study of Freud, *Eros and Civilization*

¹ Lawrence Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2013), 219-220.

(1955). In that book, Marcuse imagined the creation of a new social world in which pleasure and play took precedence over aggression and instrumental reason. To realize this world, in which reason and narcissism, necessity and freedom would coincide, a new maternal reality principle had to be remembered into practice by individuals capable of recalling - through certain pleasures - their own early stages of psychosexual development, when maternal care guaranteed such an existence. Key to his theory's praxis were the sexual perversions. Marcuse's call for a new perverse reality principle met with aghast by many American readers, but his work would also be greeted with serious skepticism by the traditional and nontraditional left. Fromm would be his major critic. That opposition was due in no small part to Marcuse's singling Fromm out for criticism for what Marcuse saw as his accommodationist revision of Freud. Just before *Eros* was published, Marcuse printed his article, "The Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism" - what would be his monograph's epilogue - in the very pages Fromm's new magazine. This article was the first shot in their feud.²

The 1955-6 feud in *Dissent* brought into confrontation Marcuse and Fromm's seemingly radically opposed varieties of modern love outlined in each of their book projects. What is noteworthy about these two books were their practical outlines for forms of intimacy that would offer answers to modern social alienation through an odd fusion of Marxism and "self-help". In what follows, I hope to explore and explain the conflict sur-

² Herbert Marcuse, "The Social Implications of Freudian 'Revisionism'," *Dissent* 2 no. 3 (Summer 1955), 221-240.

rounding this publishing event, a conflict which exceeded and shaped the contradictions in their work.

What Marcuse called into question in Fromm's work was, by Fromm's own account, his emphasis on "the significance of value and ethical problems for the understanding of man."³ At the center of these values was love, the practicality and radicalism of which Marcuse aimed to undermine, threatening to expose not just a philosopher's argument, but the spiritual center of gravity of Fromm's life work. No doubt influenced by his former colleagues' dismissal of Fromm's work at the Frankfurt School of the 1930s (although Marcuse had only officially been posted in their Geneva offices) - Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, had disdained Fromm's psychoanalytic politics of hope, which they believed ignored the darker implications of Freud's insights - Marcuse offered a new critique of Fromm: that he did not read Freud *hopefully enough*.

Applied psychotherapeutically or politically, Fromm's ethic of love irritated Marcuse, since a practice of love risked affirming a state of existence, a culture and its alienation, by teaching subjects that they belong to the world as it stands. Successful lovers, for Marcuse, if they existed at all, became complicit functionaries of "one-dimensional society". In more damning terms, the ideal of love suggested the redemption of society's intolerable suffering through its provision of pseudo-loves and repressive coping mechanisms to libidinous subjects. Against love, which Marcuse critiqued as fundamentally repressive, guilt-inducing, and impossible, he argued for a liberation of perverse sexual desire.

³ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York, Owl Books, 1994), 18.

Fromm responded to Marcuse in *Dissent* in the fall of 1955 with his article, “The Human Implications of Instinctivistic ‘Radicalism,’” - the title a clever play on the title of Marcuse’s own attack.⁴ Fromm did not know quite what to make of Marcuse’s critique, for the most part because he did not have access to Marcuse’s new theoretical perspective, which he outlined in the as yet unpublished *Eros and Civilization*. Already thoroughly invested in work on his own manuscript on love, Fromm dug in his heels and defended his embrace of love. But in his initial response to Marcuse, he resorted to insults to dodge Marcuse’s dizzying criticisms. Given Marcuse’s aggression, Fromm’s strategy to denounce Marcuse as a “nihilistic” and “alienated” intellectual didn’t appear too out of line. After all, to attack “love” was to rise to a level of ideology critique not often heard in American political circles.

Months after Fromm’s article came out, the editors of *Dissent* hosted one more round of debate, publishing “An Exchange on Freudianism,” which featured two smaller but more adamantly critical mutual attacks.⁵ This second round, a mere four pages split between the two of them, offered few insights or attempts to bridge the divide that had grown. As Fromm’s most recent biographer, Lawrence Friedman, tells it,

Fromm never forgave Marcuse for his aggressive posture in the *Dissent* exchange or [the editors] for facilitating the debate. Up till then, he had not been apprehensive over discussions and dialogues with scholars and social critics. But after the perceived drubbing Marcuse had given him, Fromm determined never to put himself in a similar situation again. He became especially cautious in Marcuse’s pres-

⁴ Erich Fromm, “The Human Implications of Instinctivistic ‘Radicalism,’” *Dissent* 2 no. 4 (Autumn 1955), 342-349

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, “A Reply to Erich Fromm,” *Dissent* 3 no. 1 (Winter 1956), 79-81; Erich Fromm, “A Counter-Rebuttal,” *Dissent* 3 no. 1 (Spring 1956), 81-83.

ence. When Marcuse and Fromm wound up traveling on the same train a few years later, Fromm ignored him.⁶

This would not be the end of the story.

The debate in *Dissent* concerned more - too much more - than the theoretical problem of how to read Freud, and, as mentioned, it was neither experienced nor remembered as a civil affair. The reasons why were clear: its terms lost concrete meaning to polemical force. Its incivility was its most prominent and perhaps puzzling feature. This was largely due to the pressure of historical experience. But an additional clue can be found in the force of their different historical memories, their contrasting understandings of German fascism as a mass libidinal catastrophe. The story of Nazism's relationship to sexual pleasure became a mark of meaning in their debate on love.

Thus, at stake in Fromm and Marcuse's confrontation over love seemed to be the persistent need to find a "non-German way to love," to twist the title of the first chapter of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's later *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* (*The Inability to Mourn*).⁷ For Marcuse, non-repressive, polymorphous forms of sexuality took central place in his political theory and in his search for a renewal in revolutionary politics, but these demands would also, in theory, produce new ways of loving. As he admitted in his debate with Fromm, it is "not the values themselves [that] are spurious" in Fromm's philosophy, but the inevitable alienation or "impossibility" to which present social conditions condemn those values.⁸ Love, it might be suggested, remained transcendentally im-

⁶ Friedman, 197.

⁷ "I. Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern - womit zusammenhängt: eine deutsche Art zu lieben" in Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (München: Piper, 1967), 13.

⁸ Marcuse, "Social Implications," 233.

portant for Marcuse as he attempted to reconfigure its contemporary form along the lines of his erotic, polymorphous ethics. Fromm, meanwhile, saw in sexuality - and especially in the perversions, which he also identified with capitalist consumptive gratification - a limitation to human freedom and spiritual progress, a problem to be transcended through love. For Fromm, it was not that sex or flesh were sinful; rather, it was that perversions like sadomasochism, coprophilia, and the anal orientation distorted the possibility of “inner relatedness” by refusing to recognize that a respectability of equality between partners was the basis for lovers’ emergence from their traumatic origins into free spiritual communication.

The problem of perversion thus also distorted the potentials for communication between Fromm and Marcuse. This philosophical conundrum was a lived conundrum, with a live background. Apart from Nazism, one of these live backgrounds was the legacy of Marxism. By the 1950s, if either Fromm or Marcuse’s positions on love, sex and Eros sounded radical for their time, this was by virtue of their new American context, and in the historical shade of the failure of both liberal democracy and democratic socialism to stand against fascism in Germany. A major context for this case study was the general crisis in which revolutionary had come to a decisive halt in Western Europe and the United States. These political failures heralded the 20th century’s “crisis of Marxism,” and the breakdown in sociability that made Fromm and Marcuse’s debate so memorable was symptomatic of that political and theoretical rupture.⁹ As Perry Anderson has written,

⁹ Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 6-7.

“the hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole is... that it is a product of defeat.”¹⁰

Yet neither Fromm nor Marcuse can really be understood to have turned to a politics of despair as a result. Quite the opposite. In their eyes, the main feature of Marxism’s fundamental theoretical imperative was that it “presents itself as part of the historical process, claiming that its concepts articulate the movement and direction of history.”¹¹ It is in this context of “defeat” that Fromm and Marcuse sensed the creative opportunities, and the urgency, for new means of revolutionary action.

Yet, because Fromm and Marcuse shared this theoretical background, their sudden conflict on the American scene carried dramatic overtones. When Marcuse suggested that Fromm’s career in America had witnessed his turn away from revolutionary politics, Fromm dismissed Marcuse as a faux-radical without leftist political muscle:

Marcuse is not even concerned with politics; for if one is not concerned with steps between the present and the future, one does not deal with politics, radical or otherwise. Marcuse is essentially an example of an alienated intellectual, who presents his personal despair as a theory of radicalism.¹²

But the debate was also much more and much less than a vitriolic tiff between Marxist radicals over their radicalness. There was a deeper historic substance to the debate - a serious set of concerns for the status of love in revolutionary politics, true, but also in Western thought and culture. These concerns, in turn, were rooted in Marcuse and Fromm’s

¹⁰ Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 43.

¹¹ Kellner, 6.

¹² Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 8-9.

responses to larger social shifts like secularism and the sexual liberalization of the 20th century.¹³

In his 1976 *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, the French historian Michel Foucault launched what remains to this day a highly influential rethinking of psychoanalysis, modern “sexuality,” and what he termed the “repressive hypothesis” (often understood as a criticism of Marcuse). Building on his powerful insights into the peculiar ways modern knowledge is produced through “discourse”, Foucault argued that “When long ago the west discovered love, it bestowed on it a value high enough to make death

¹³ Fromm had a unique relationship to these two phenomena. His secularism was deeply spiritual, rooted in his Jewish origins and connected with the influences on him of Neo-Kantian universalism. As a teenager, Fromm was enraptured by the socialist and Jewish community in Frankfurt, where he was raised. There, he became a close pupil of the Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel, who was a student of Hermann Cohen. Nobel’s mysticism, Hasidism and Neo-Kantian universalism had a deep impact on the young Fromm’s early ethical orientation. The long-term influence Nobel had on Fromm was prefigured in Fromm’s 1922 obituary of Nobel, which honored his teacher’s focus on love (Friedman, 8-12). In the early 1920s, Fromm finished his dissertation on Jewish law with Alfred Weber, received a training analysis with Frieda Reichmann (the two married soon thereafter), and became engaged in an intellectual friendship with Salman Rabinkow. Together, the two came to stress that Jewish law could be understood as a “living covenant” between the autonomous individual, the historically evolving social body, and God (Friedman, 16-17). In 1930, Fromm joined the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Its director, Max Horkheimer, hired him to direct the Social Psychology tank, where Fromm’s expertise in psychoanalysis - which he had developed over the past decade in partnership with his wife and former analyst Frieda Reichmann, and under Georg Groddeck’s training in Berlin - would help produce the *German Workers Study*. There, Fromm had personal and intellectual differences with many of his colleagues, especially Adorno. Those conflicts revolved in no small degree around Fromm’s intellectual attitude rooted in his particular Jewish philosophy. After the Frankfurt School’s flight to the United States, this conflict would re-emerge in Fromm’s debate with Marcuse - but in unique terms. Fromm’s spirituality, too, had intellectual affinities with sexual emancipation. For example, the Hebrew word for “knowing” - *jada* - provided him with a descriptive definition of a kind of knowledge useful for dealing with people as against things, the difference, he notes, “between the Hebrew and the Greek ideas of knowledge”. *Jada* meant, according to Fromm, the “active experience of a person, a concrete and personal relationship rather than an abstraction”. This kind of knowledge, he thought, had gone missing in the Western tradition. Thus, Fromm’s notion of love, connected to *jada*, had a kind of experiential texture and approached, he insists, “penetrating sexual love” (Fromm, *The Revision of Psychoanalysis*, [Boulder: Westview Press, 1992], 20). It was from this perspective that Fromm read Marx and Freud, and the sociology of Max Weber, into his wide synthetic fold.

acceptable; nowadays it is sex that claims this equivalence.”¹⁴ More recently, Foucault’s adieu to love was echoed in the German writer Sven Hillenkamp’s *The End of Love: Feelings in the Age of Unlimited Freedom*, which argued that the freedom afforded modern social organization, and its attendant “paradox of choice”, has meant that modern love fails in advance of its consummation.¹⁵ Distracted by the infinite possibilities of fantasies realized, “consumers” give up on the attentional burdens necessary for the now outmoded relational device called love. Foucault and Hillenkamp handily undermine certain myths about love in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and in their writing, they build on a tradition of love-skepticism that Marcuse had begun much earlier.

Love has its perennial apologists and defenders, too. Perhaps it is safest to admit that love exists in perpetual crisis, often viewed as a free act, *yet* defined by historical and ethical limitations. Understood as a social and subjective phenomenon entailing intersubjective rupture and discovery, personal reorientation, and the threat of loss, love refuses any normal stability - or absence - of meaning. What made its mourning in the modern period certain or unique? How did Marcuse justify the claim that love was an obstacle to progress in Fromm’s work? How did Fromm defend his answer to this crisis of love?

The debate’s major themes would recur in both the philosophers’ writings following the feud. Its obviously infuriating personal impact died hard. While Marcuse largely avoided further discussion with or on Fromm, he would rehash the feud’s major arguments in debates with Norman O. Brown on love, and in the German context with Karl

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 156.

¹⁵ Sven Hillenkamp, *Das Ende der Liebe: Gefühle im Zeitalter unendlicher Freiheit* (München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag), 2012.

Popper on reform movements. Fromm's stunted responses in *Dissent* found fuller development in many of his later texts, including *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, *The Revolution of Hope*, and especially the posthumously published *The Revision of Psychoanalysis*. In these texts, Fromm betrays his deep concern for his intellectual preservation in the face of Marcuse's rejection. At times, this devolved into paranoid rants.¹⁶

Fromm, though often at odds with institutional authorities, always attempted, at least according to his biographer, to “overcome the affective contaminations and false intellectualizations” that inevitably entered academic discourse.¹⁷ How did such an evolved personality fall for Marcuse's provocations? Why was their conversation to go so

¹⁶ In 1968, thirteen years after their debate ran in the magazine, Fromm evidently still harbored bitter feelings against his rival. The publication that year of *The Revolution of Hope* provided Fromm greater opportunity to respond to his rival in the broader context of the publication of Marcuse's even more pessimistic *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). In *Revolution*, Fromm attacked Marcuse as an example of an intellectual who offers his readers only hopelessness, “disguised” by the radical chic of a sly rhetorician whose political theory consists in “forcing what cannot be forced.” This example of Fromm's feelings toward Marcuse, thirteen years after the debate, expresses well his lingering anger and unhealed wounds: “All traditional values, like love, tenderness, concern, and responsibility, are supposed to have had meaning only in a pre-technological society. In the new technological society - one without repression and exploitation - a new man will arrive who will not have to be afraid of anything, including death, who will develop yet-unspecified needs, and who will have a chance to satisfy his ‘polymorphous sexuality’ ...; briefly, the final progress of man is seen in the regression to infantile life, the return to the happiness of the satiated baby. No wonder that Marcuse ends up in hopelessness... those [...] who attack or admire Marcuse as a revolutionary leader [are wrong]; for revolution was never based on hopelessness, nor can it ever be. But Marcuse is not even concerned with politics; for if one is not concerned with steps between the present and the future, one does not deal with politics, radical or otherwise. Marcuse is essentially an example of an alienated intellectual, who presents his personal despair as a theory of radicalism. Unfortunately, his lack of understanding and, to some extent, knowledge of Freud builds a bridge over which he travels to synthesize Freudianism, bourgeois materialism, and sophisticated Hegelianism into what to him and other like-minded ‘radicals’ seems to be the most progressive theoretical construct. This is not the place to show in detail that it is a naïve, cerebral daydream, essentially irrational, unrealistic, and lacking love of life” (Fromm, *Revolution of Hope*, 8-9). This kind of borderline language typified Fromm's reception of Marcuse; by comparison, Marcuse's skeptics of distant political persuasion, like Allan Bloom or Lionel Trilling, sounded warm. See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 78, 223-6, 147; Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 161-172.

¹⁷ Friedman, 169.

sour? If Fromm and Marcuse's contrasting political and philosophical temperaments might account the feud's polarized form, this explanation is not ultimately sufficient to explain the exchange between Fromm and Marcuse.

This essay attempts to answer some of the preceding questions, building on research by previous scholars. For their helpfulness I single out Martin Jay, John Rickert, and Neil McLaughlin.

Martin Jay's history of the Frankfurt School is an enormously rich resource for the detailed personal histories involved in the sometimes fractious development of its core theoretical principles. In Jay's account, Marcuse, though to a lesser extent with Fromm before him, had taken Freud into a utopian direction, very much against the grain of Adorno and Horkheimer's cultural pessimism.¹⁸ Jay's account thus stresses that Fromm's feud with Marcuse should be taken not as representative of Fromm's break with the Frankfurt School, but as a unique encounter between Fromm and Marcuse. Jay argued that both Fromm and Marcuse agreed that aggression was the major problem that Freud had identified as the impediment to social progress. "Despite both men's insistence that their positions were miles apart, they seemed to converge on at least the one question of the strength and durability of an instinct to die".¹⁹ Both agreed, too, that this instinct which resulted in so much social destruction was the result of thwarted life-instincts. Fromm and Marcuse's differences emerged *at* this shared point, in terms of *how much* repression could be tolerated before the threshold of destructive impulses was reached.

¹⁸ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 110-111.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

Jay also locates the strength of Fromm's rebuttal of Marcuse in the feud in Fromm's identification of the basically destructive quality of the sexual perversions, but avoided a thorough discussion of Fromm's reasoning on that account. My paper proceeds from this breaking off point.

Secondly, this essay hopes to move beyond the kind recuperative projects found in the writings of the sociologists John Rickert and Neil McLaughlin. In the 1990s, Rickert began a critical re-evaluation of Erich Fromm's writings on sexuality. Unable to complete his project, Rickert did publish one article that "re-visited" the Fromm-Marcuse feud in order to defend Fromm from the "pervasive amnesia" into which, according to Rickert, his former Frankfurt School colleagues Marcuse and Adorno had consigned him.²⁰ Rickert's study, a plea for the legacy of Erich Fromm, interprets the feud as primarily a clash over the correct Marxist meaning of Freud. Rickert argued for Fromm's centrality in pioneering Marxist social psychology, and he demonstrated the Marxist origins of Fromm's turn to "scientific existentialism" - a turn that distanced Fromm from many members of the Frankfurt School.²¹ Rickert gives short shrift, however, to Marcuse's critique of Fromm. Rickert notes that "instinct theory is of value to Marcuse because... it allows him to ground his social critique in a theory of human nature... By de-emphasizing the role of the instincts, especially sexuality, Fromm allegedly weakens"

²⁰ John Rickert, "The Fromm-Marcuse Debate Revisited," *Theory and Society* 15 no. 3 (May 1986): 372.

²¹ With the exception, fascinatingly, of Marcuse, who, despite the feud, remained theoretically closer to Fromm than other members of the Frankfurt School. According to Rickert, "Despite [Marcuse's] critique of Fromm, the similarities between the two apparently was not entirely lost on Marcuse. According to Fromm, when *One-Dimensional Man* appeared, Marcuse asked him to review the book because Fromm was 'almost the only [person] who would understand him.'" Ibid., 387.

Freud's innovation. Rickert adds that "in judging psychoanalysis as philosophy, Marcuse neglects its claim to the status of science."²²²³ This essay examines Marcuse's critique beyond the criterion of scientific claims and under the rubric of intellectual history.

Lastly, Rickert writes that "Fromm speaks of Marcuse's vision of the release of Eros as irrational, infantile, and regressive. Surely, one might conclude, such remarks express a hostile attitude towards sexuality. Such an inference, however, would be in error."²⁴ Why then can we speak of Fromm's alleged "hostile attitude towards sexuality"? The research presented in this paper integrates material from Fromm's corpus that was not yet publicly available during the phase of Rickert's research, material directly related to the Fromm-Marcuse debate, in particular, to Fromm's views on sexuality.

Third, Neil McLaughlin has attempted to understand the historical reasons for the "origin myth" of the Frankfurt School that he believes falsely purged Erich Fromm from its history. From the institutional perspective espoused by McLaughlin, Fromm's absence from this "origin myth" is explained by the coincidence of Fromm's conflict with Adorno,

²² Ibid., 366.

²³ To defend Fromm from Marcuse's claim that Fromm has lost his critical power by jettisoning libido theory, Rickert likens Fromm's turn to universal ethics to Marcuse's own claim for a critical ideal outside of culture: "although Fromm has relinquished libido theory, his revised conception of human nature - like Marcuse's use of Freud - provides a 'conceptual basis outside the established system' (EC, p. 6) that grounds his social critique" (Ibid., 367). Again, and without focusing on love specifically but on Fromm's "idealistic" ethics, Rickert argues that Fromm's proto-post-structuralist account of human nature "serves the same critical function as Marcuse's use of the instinct theory: it attributes to human nature an inherent drive that resists and under certain circumstances explodes repressive social structures" (368). While the analogy between Fromm and Marcuse's alternate critical grounds is correct, it ignores Marcuse's reasons for rejecting Fromm's idealistic ethics. "The question, however, is whether Fromm's new theory of drives, though different in content, serves the same critical function" (Ibid., 367). According to Rickert, "Marcuse fails to raise" the question of Fromm's new approach's critical potential. I argue that was precisely the purpose of the dialogue between the two thinkers.

²⁴ Ibid., 370-4.

and Horkheimer's financial control over the institution and his public relations concerns. Thus, he sets the debate between Fromm and Marcuse against this larger backdrop of the Frankfurt School's tensions, and reduces the feud to an echo of Fromm and Theodor Adorno's previous animosities. But Fromm's conflict with Adorno has a different valence than his conflict with Marcuse. Whereas Adorno attacked Fromm for his flight from Freudian orthodoxy, and demanded Fromm read Lenin, Marcuse had a very different idea of "Freudian orthodoxy", and a very different political orientation. But McLaughlin argues that

Marcuse's critique was simply another version of this boundary work [excluding Fromm à la Adorno] since for Marcuse, Fromm was not a Marxist because he was for scientific management and conformist industrial sociology, moralism, and did not challenge the capitalist ownership of the means of production.²⁵

The form of the "boundary work" that did take place between Marcuse and Fromm was of a different nature. I hope to offer an understanding of their debate as unique, focusing on their contrasting views on the ethics of sexuality.

My approach to this debate differs from the above scholarship in four distinct but interrelated ways. First, with the exception of Jay's history, what is odd about these representations is that they tend not to reflect the specific content of the debate, namely, the

²⁵ Neil McLaughlin, "Origin Myths in the Social Sciences: Fromm, the Frankfurt School and the Emergence of Critical Theory" *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1999): 109-39. More problematically, McLaughlin's explanation of Fromm's feud with Marcuse operates within a sociology of institutions thesis that doesn't apply to the 1950s. McLaughlin argues that it was the conflict between Horkheimer's "financial realities", and Fromm's independent income from his work as a psychoanalyst that meant that "Fromm was in a position to stand-up to Horkheimer, guaranteeing an eventual break." The "fight about psychoanalysis within the Frankfurt School was intimately tied up with Horkheimer's efforts to legitimize critical theory." These descriptions may carry some weight for understanding Fromm's departure, but by 1955, Marcuse had long been off Horkheimer's payroll, too.

tension between love and perversion. That ignores both the theme (love, perversion) and the form in which those themes appear (ethics). Second, this essay, written after Foucault and queer theory, privileges ethics and affects over what has been an excessive focus in research on the debate as an epistemological conflict over Freud; when it considers epistemology or hermeneutics (how Freud defined x as y, for example), it is as a means of ethical possibility. I define ethics simply as decisions about how to act, which are also decisions about how to think, even if these decisions are already implicated in previous patterns of knowing and acting. As Marcuse's first line of *Eros and Civilization* makes clear, "This essay employs psychological categories because they have become political categories."²⁶ If this interpretive decision risks privileging Marcuse in advance, that may be a welcome balance: my focus on ethical choices opens up the debate to other elements rather than maintaining it under the Frommian rubric of Freud's "real legacy."²⁷ Third, I approach the debate as a "literary debate."²⁸ Fromm's first retort in the debate was not his best answer to Marcuse. It lacked an overarching philosophical opposition to Marcuse's specific critique. Thus, I look to his later writings on Marcuse, sexuality, and the perversions to hear his voice. Lastly, I try to understand the historical problematizations that might account somewhat for the asynchronies in their dialogue. Brought into the same space through language, tradition, and publication, two *authors* (this paper believes in authors with bodies who feel and speak) meet. Meaning displaces meaning in disjunctive

²⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), xi.

²⁷ As an example, see Friedman, 196-8.

²⁸ Rainer Funk, foreword to *The Revision of Psychoanalysis* by Erich Fromm (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), xii.

and overlapping ways. Love speaks from different tongues, seen with different eyes on the past, through different philosophical traditions. Semantic asynchronies, disappointments in meaning, result in large measure from a rather infinite set of inputs. Nevertheless, several key problems - “important parts of the story” - can be identified.

First, this debate should be placed in its proper socio-historical context. In *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Anthony Giddens notes that a feature of modern sexuality, in addition to its major feature, increasing gender equality, was “the decline of perversion”: “What used to be called perversions are merely ways in which sexuality can legitimately be expressed and self-identity defined.”²⁹ As Giddens formulates it, this “decline” of perversion was a consequence of the legitimation of perverse desires. A second major theme of Giddens’s account of the “transformation of intimacy” he analyzed was “the transmutation of love,” which Giddens argues - against Foucault - is “as much a phenomenon of modernity as is the emergence of sexuality.”³⁰ The Fromm-Marcuse debate is a prime case study of intellectuals caught between the dual transitions Giddens identifies.

Chapter One of this paper examines the details of Marcuse’s critique of Fromm’s version of love in the debate. (Since Fromm could not have read *Eros and Civilization*, I save his fuller self-defense for the second part of this essay, while occasionally referring to his 1955 responses in both Chapters.) What distinguished Marcuse’s use of Eros? Chapter One also considers Marcuse’s analysis of pleasure under National Socialism as an important (negative) context in the formulation of his philosophy of perverse play as

²⁹ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 32, 179.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

Marcuse's modernization of love. Marcuse's politics of eros was not simply an alternative ethics to Fromm's version of love, which Marcuse understood as repressive sublimation, or to the problem of repressive desublimation, epitomized in Nazism's sexual "Gleichschaltung".³¹ What Marcuse's new philosophy resembled was a doctrine of the flesh, not the renunciation of the flesh but the renunciation of guilt through the sexual perversions. Although he did not name it so, Marcuse had tried to imagine a love divested of the guilt that had made it suspect in Fromm's work.

Chapter Two examines Fromm's defense of love and his "spiritual" critique of the perversions. It explores how the debate offered Fromm an occasion for thinking through the challenge of loving in modern society, which Marcuse had been identifying as an alienated and alienating fantasy. Yet, his response to Marcuse in *Dissent* failed to adequately take full account of the nuance of either Marcuse's criticisms of Fromm, or Marcuse's defense of the perversions - against which Fromm had railed in his rebuttal. Since Marcuse could not yet have read *The Art of Loving*, his critique of Fromm, likewise, did not take full measure of Fromm's idiosyncratic conception of love, which, when expressed in 1956, defied much of the critical portrayal Marcuse had made of Fromm's vision of love. Fromm, not beholden to pessimism, dug in his heels, defending a critical practice of love. This section attempts to read Fromm's historical subject position into an explanation of the feud, with a close reading of his later essay, "Sexuality and the Sexual Perversions". This reading suggests we accept his troublesome, anxious response to

³¹ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth Century Germany* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), 28-9.

Marcuse's politics as bound up with a) Marcuse's polemical rejection of his work; b) Fromm's response to the spiritual question of intimacy under the secular and c) his understanding of German National Socialism.

Chapter One: The Trouble With Love, or, Love as Trouble

Hoping to generate publicity for his forthcoming study of Freud, *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse printed what was to be that book's epilogue in *Dissent's* 1955 summer issue. His article, "The Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism," launched a direct assault on the Neo-Freudian school, which included Karen Horney, Henry Stack Sullivan, and Fromm. In particular, Marcuse attacked Fromm for advocating a socially conservative love and for practicing a therapy that Marcuse accused of adjusting revolutionary affects to a repressive culture. Against Fromm's ethics of love and productivity, Marcuse celebrated polymorphously perverse sexuality, and, following Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Eros, the Greek god of love.

Marcuse's article was an impressive defense of psychoanalysis as a "radically critical theory."³² In order to make a larger revolutionary claim for psychoanalysis, Marcuse called for a return to Freud's singular insight into universal ego formation, the sexual nature of which the revisionists had obscured. Fromm and his collaborators had swept under the rug the irreducibly radical critique of society that Freud, according to Marcuse, seemed to quietly develop over the course of his career. From his writing on the universality of the creation of an ego out of the friction between culture and the undisciplined body, through his skeptical musings in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud had begun to locate the sources for his study of man's psychic burdens in culture itself. Marcuse would show in *Eros and Civilization*, that if less repressive forms of sublimation and de-sublimation could be engineered, then the debilitating power of guilt, shame and al-

³² Marcuse, "Social Implications," 221.

ienation might be offset. In attacking Fromm for his failure to go beyond his project of changing hearts and minds, Marcuse initiated a clash of loves that would unsettle Fromm's own work.

Since his youth, love had been the single most important theme in Fromm's political philosophy, and the cornerstone of his ethics. As he defined it in his 1941 best-selling *Escape from Freedom*, "Love is... a passionate affirmation of an 'object'; it is not an 'affect' but an active striving and inner relatedness, the aim of which is the happiness, growth and freedom of its object."³³ This definition, simple in Fromm's characteristic way, but demanding, remained the active measure for most of his career. Love's near absence in contemporary society, he argued, was the key to a social criticism that valued human freedom. Fromm, usually most noted for arguing against the bedrock of Freudian thought - namely, the dogma of psychosexuality or libido theory, which explained psychic phenomena and mental characteristics as ramifications of the sexual instincts - preferred a "cultural" approach to psychoanalysis, and his definition of love reflected this departure from theories of the mind based in Freudian orthodoxy. It was not entirely clear, then, how it came to be that subjects could love at all, or what love had to do with sexuality. However, Fromm defended Freud's ethics throughout his life, believing that despite the erroneous, historically backward psychosexual substance of Freud's theory of love, Freud's gift to mankind had been at least to endorse love or Eros - a messily intertwined pair in both Freud and Fromm's work.³⁴

³³ Fromm, *Escape*, 114.

³⁴ Fromm, *Revision*, 30-2.

In Marcuse's first critique of Fromm, these ambiguities were nipped in the bud by an aggressive polemic. Marcuse argued that love, which he distinguished from Eros, had a repressive social function in modern society. Like Fromm, he did not define love simply as an emotion, but unlike Fromm, Marcuse understood love as an affective ritual complicit in "one-dimensional" social reproduction. Worse, if love *were* free, then, he claimed, it couldn't exist in modern society. "Love, taken seriously, is outlawed," he wrote.³⁵ Raising either an unphilosophical pseudo-love to the level of a critical virtue after Freud had revealed the emptiness of such categories, or its impossible theoretical ideal, meant perpetuating the same kinds of social repression that, in Marcuse's view, led Freud to the discovery of "libido".

In his critique of Fromm, Marcuse focused on love as an instrument of social control, but also as a force for social frustration. Far from confronting subjects with the reality of brute competition for material resources, love presented subjects with the illusion of their own salvation within a categorically unjust society. In Marcuse's pointed view, Fromm's "love" named a bourgeois ideal that unconsciously perpetuated a mass psychology of inadequacy and competition, which would undermine effective communication, just coordination of resources, and the development of real human freedom in the world system. If the affective ritual of love was not projected in more reasonable ways (i.e., toward the fair distribution of resources, toward the diminishment of suffering, toward the expansion of human potential), but instead continued to remain directed toward object-loves that falsely promised to deliver subjects from their implication in social in-

³⁵ Marcuse, "Social Implications," 234.

justice, then Fromm's politics of love could not be said to be progressive. This was at least slightly exaggerating Fromm's ideas, but it was important for Marcuse's own project of redefining intimacy that Fromm's meaning be challenged resolutely. He had something in its place to offer his readers, a hope for a world of men less afraid of their frailty, and less doomed to eradicate it.

Marcuse began his account of the radical meaning of psychoanalysis by crediting Wilhelm Reich for the discovery of the secret tie between sexual repression and "the interests of domination and exploitation, and the extent to which these interests were in turn re-inforced by sexual repression."³⁶ Where Marcuse parted from Reich, however, was Reich's belief that sexual gratification itself, "undifferentiated" from the aggressive forces that social formation binds to it in Reich's commitment to genital sexuality, contained a key to progress over domination. For Marcuse, the risk that "sexual liberation per se becomes... a panacea for individual and social ills" was too high in Reich's political philosophy, which neglected the ways sexual liberalization might operate as repression. Mocking Reich's revolutionary model - "progress in freedom appears as a mere release of sexuality" - Marcuse would draw an important distinction between repressive and non-repressive (de)sublimation, and single out alternative sexual expressions to celebrate.

Curiously, what Reich lacked, Erich Fromm supplied. For Marcuse, Fromm was the single most important pioneer in linking "the [psychoanalytic] theory of repression with that of its abolition", that is, in moving psychoanalysis out of its stuffy Viennese roots and towards a utopian theory. It was Fromm who revealed the world historical sig-

³⁶ Ibid., 222.

nificance of psychoanalysis, and Marcuse began his critique of Fromm by defending that legacy:

Erich Fromm's early articles are devoted to the effort to free Freud's theory from its identification with present-day society, to sharpen the psychoanalytic notions which reveal the connection between instinctual and economic structures and at the same time indicate the possibility of progress beyond patricentric-acquisitive culture.

Fromm had argued that although certain instinctual processes were biological, "the economic conditions are the primary modifying factors."³⁷ Thus, personality itself, and "social character", could now be tied, through a study of social-libidinal limits, directly to the means of material exchange and the power relationships that undergird those forms of production. The radical connection between individual subjectivity and world history had been rediscovered in Freud's work by, according to Marcuse, none other than Fromm. And, from this link, Marcuse could envision a way forward.

What Marcuse appreciated most in Fromm's social interpretation of Freudian theory was his emphasis on Freud's "explosive" insight - a shared hope in psychoanalysis uniting both Marcuse and Fromm. Fromm's language of "explosion" would characterize Marcuse's own position and would thematize much of his writing on perversion in *Eros and Civilization*. Fromm's earlier identification of the significant value of free sexuality in the present historical moment was of central significance to Marcuse's own ideas on perversion. According to Fromm,

Sexuality offers one of the most elemental and strongest possibilities of gratification and happiness. If these possibilities would be allowed within the limits set by the need for the productive development of the personality rather than

³⁷ Ibid., 223-5.

by the need for the domination of the masses, the fulfillment of this one fundamental happiness would of necessity lead to an increase in the claim for gratification and happiness in other spheres of the human existence. The fulfillment of this claim requires the availability of the material means for its satisfaction and must therefore entail the explosion of the prevailing social order.³⁸

What Marcuse found appealing in Fromm's progressive employment privileging individual sexual "happiness" was its emphasis on creating a different social order altogether. It was Fromm's emphasis, influenced by the Swiss anthropologist Johan Jakob Bachofen, on "the idea of a matricentric culture" suggested an alternative kind of social organization could be practiced that was less repressive, if the forces of matricentric consciousness could become politicized.³⁹ According to Marcuse, it was the "critical sociological function of psychoanalysis" in Fromm's work that offered a path, through sexuality, toward this other rule of pleasure.⁴⁰

How was it that by turning to an ethics of love Fromm had supposedly departed from that path? Marcuse was able to identify love as an indirect social bind, invoking one of Fromm's important ideas against him. "In what Fromm calls the patricentric-acquisitive society the libidinal impulses and their satisfaction (and deflection) are co-ordinated with the interests of domination and thereby become a stabilizing force which binds the majority to the ruling minority." Love, as it was idealized in bourgeois society, thus represented one of these forms of domination, and Fromm had demonstrated nothing to suggest his love was exempt. (This question, of course, was key to their whole dispute.) More spe-

³⁸ Fromm, as cited in Marcuse, "Social Implications," 224.

³⁹ Marcuse, "Social Implications," 223.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

cifically, love lacked the “explosive” power that would bring subjects practicing love into conflict with social repression.

According to Fromm, as modernity creates new social characters and makes old psychic character structures obsolescent, these obsolescent functions remain active in the psyche, even if they are not used in labor. “Now [these released libidinal forces] no longer contribute to the preservation of society but strive for the building of new social formations; they cease, as it were, to be cement and instead become dynamite.”⁴¹ In his essay in *Dissent*, Marcuse would argue that the revisionists had reworked Freudian theoretical categories “in such a way that their explosive connotations were all but eliminated,” that Fromm had forgotten his radical opening.⁴² Still, it was not entirely clear what these returning, obsolescent functions were, or how they could be reactivated for political progressive ends.

According to Marcuse, Fromm’s new American vocabulary did not merely jettison the critical animus in libido theory, but that in turning to concepts like productivity and love, Fromm was giving too much credit to a vision of social progress defined by a dominant culture that did not distinguish itself from the earlier continental systems of repression. Few of Fromm’s “new” ideas, argued Marcuse, radicalized the subject in an oppositional political field, but kept him loyal and “bound” to a socially conforming moral habitus through naively broad but traditionally moral categories like love and productivity. According to Marcuse, Fromm risks reviving “all the time-honored values of idealis-

⁴¹ Fromm, as cited in Marcuse, “Social Implications,” 223.

⁴² Marcuse, “Social Implications,” 226.

tic ethics as if nobody had ever demonstrated their conformistic and repressive features.”⁴³ It was true that the revisionists including Fromm placed emphasis on spiritual transcendence and “consciousness psychology”, or what Marcuse also awkwardly refers to as “objective values divorced from the repressive ground which denies their realization.”⁴⁴ In putting “values” first, Marcuse argues that the revisionists “yield” to “the very Reality Principle which they so eloquently criticize.”⁴⁵ The point, for Marcuse, was to change this reality principle altogether. At once idealistically critical *and* naive, Fromm’s emphasis on love over-specified ethical libidinal action, and underestimated the extent to which love was incommensurable with a contemporary cultural context’s human structures of desire which carried the explosive potential for a new reality principle.

Love’s loyalty to the present meant for Marcuse that Fromm had deployed a philosophical principle that asked subjects to delay their human liberation for a later moment. This claim took on almost spiritual significance: “The striving for a better future is ‘paralyzed’... by [the] Neo-Freudian ‘spiritualization’ [of values], which covers up the gap that separates the present from the future.”⁴⁶ Marcuse’s assertion was that Fromm loses his critical traction so long as his critical categories are also ideal categories, tied to

⁴³ Ibid., 231.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 238-9.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 238. “The realization of a ‘better future’ involves far more than the elimination of the bad features of the ‘market,’ of the ‘ruthlessness’ of competition, etc. - it involves a fundamental change in the instinctual as well as cultural structure. The striving for a better future is ‘paralyzed’ not by Freud’s awareness of these implications but by their Neo-Freudian ‘spiritualization,’ which covers up the gap that separates the present from the future. Freud did indeed not believe in prospective social changes that would alter human nature sufficiently to free man from external and internal oppression. However, we tried to show that his ‘fatalism’ was not without qualifications.”

a future that redeems and turns a blind eye to misery, alienation, and the forms of material oppression that Freud had identified in psychic stress. When love appears in Fromm's dialect as the highest form of free relationality between men, his words tease through an image of "the free realization of man". For the impatient Marcuse, this tease amounted also to bad timing, "vesting the Reality Principle with the grandeur of promises that can be redeemed only beyond this Reality Principle."⁴⁷ Fromm's therapeutic model is thus able to "appear as critical where it is conformistic." Hence, "the character of the revisionist philosophy shows forth in the assimilation of the positive and negative, the promise and its betrayal."⁴⁸ Something was missing in their theory, a gap which Marcuse's own, more critical, ideas aimed to fill.

This gap was the space of historical consciousness. According to Marcuse, in his "Reply to Erich Fromm", "When I talked of the radical critical implications of Freudian theory, I referred to those of its aspects which elucidate the depth of the repressive controls over the 'nature' of man - controls which contemporary society shares with the preceding historical forms of repressive civilization."⁴⁹ The conditions that led to fascism, in Marcuse's view, were still present in modern capitalist society. Love, as Fromm was presenting it, did little to break these continuous tendencies, and was even implicated in them. Marcuse alluded to the gulf in historical consciousness between the two philosophers when he approvingly cited Freud's claim that "There is no longer any place in

⁴⁷ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁹ Marcuse, "A Reply to Erich Fromm," 80.

present-day civilized life for a simple natural love between two human beings”.⁵⁰ In this period, Marcuse sees love as an exceptional privilege in the face of social demands for work and consumption, an ideal that oppresses in its over-designations and unreachability. For Marcuse, Fromm’s insight was to demonstrate how “Anxiety, love, confidence, - even the will to freedom and solidarity with the group to which one belongs come to serve the economically structured relationships of domination and subordination.”⁵¹ As Fromm indicated in his early work, love, as a libidinal experience, as a discipline of the body, had a synecdochical relationship to the sources of power. But “in an anti-liberal society,” observes Marcuse, “individual happiness and productive development are in contradiction to society; if they are defined as values to be realized within this society, they become themselves repressive.”⁵² Context was key. In their “rosy” analysis, the revisionists paint a “false picture of civilization and particularly of present-day society”; in aiming for the development of love in the analytic situation, the cultural school had ignored the extent of social deprivation.⁵³ This historical naivete is epitomized in Marcuse’s view by Fromm’s style, dominated by a “positive thinking which leaves the negative where it is - predominant over the human existence.”⁵⁴

Against Reich and Fromm, crucial to Marcuse’s sexual project of remembrance was his theory that what contemporary society had deemed the sexual perversions were

⁵⁰ Freud, as cited in Marcuse, “Social Implications,” 234.

⁵¹ Marcuse, “Social Implications,” 223.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁴ Marcuse, “A Reply to Erich Fromm,” 81.

precisely those activities that had the potential to reactive the individual's consciousness of a different, repressed reality principle. Whereas Reich celebrated free love, he also saw in the sexual perversions symptoms of an overbearing capitalist upbringing.⁵⁵ But Marcuse differed.

For Marcuse, guilt has, like shame, for each individual, an ultimately sexual source in the shocking childhood experience of the father's domination - the authority from elsewhere internalized in the superego. Because the perversions call the subject to confront guilt with the associated recall of pre-Oedipal memory, individuals, so Marcuse believes, could come to negate the means of their own ensconcement within social repression. Since mother and father vocalize the apparent needs of society, and set the limits of the child's behavior, including his/her physical and biological functions, the perversions mark temporal thresholds of power on the body that correspond to historical social needs.

Marcuse celebrated these perversions as forms of play, as opportunities to reinvent a maternal reality principle. If the psychoanalytic concept of transference, in its most abstract sense, referred to the phenomenon whereby emotional patterns and communicative behaviors learned in childhood "returned" to interfere with and problematize intersubjective, usually linguistic, communication (in Freudian terms, this was understood as the patient transferring his relationship with his parent onto the analyst, whose authority seemed to offer the key to the patient's cure), then Marcuse thought perversion - deviant sexual behavior - implied, similarly, a physical, bodily recall of pre-Oedipal childhood

⁵⁵ Giddens, 160-7.

experiences of pleasure that had been punished or repressed.⁵⁶ But unlike transference, which for Freud would reveal a patient's repetition compulsions and be the key, through talk therapy, to changing those behaviors, the repetition and celebration of the perversions would, Marcuse theorized, constitute itself, through sensation, the practice of a new reality principle. These practices were already to a great extent condoned in consumer culture's creation of and reliance on "leisure time." Individuals were free, Marcuse hoped, to re-imagine labor into play through the practice of realizing the illusion of timelessness - the temporality of Id. It was this increasingly palpable sense of eternity felt by the ego, practiced by an ethics of non-repressive eroticism, that Marcuse found so tempting in Eros, and lacking in Fromm's concept of love.⁵⁷

The missing link between Fromm's potential for radicalism, and his new ideas, was his failure to account for and challenge the binds which maintain subjects' loyalty to a repressive society. For Marcuse, it was society's excessive reliance on internalized guilt that constituted itself the source of so much social repression and historical catastrophes. Given the hopeful direction in his thinking, Marcuse ended *Eros and Civilization* on a pessimistic note. Arguing that death would have to become a choice and a rational, pain-

⁵⁶ Since the language approaches Marcuse's suggestions, I cite George Makari's description of transference as a problem of temporality: "If transference was truly central to analysis, then practitioners would have to deal with longstanding unconscious attempts to reenact the past. From this perspective, human beings appeared to be fundamentally nostalgic; they suffered from an unconscious 'compulsion to repeat.' The rekindling of old loves and hates in the transference was an attempt to live in a timeless, hallucinatory past, and a refusal to remember the past *as* past... Psychoanalytic treatment had become the untangling of unconscious repetitions." George Makari, *Revolution in Mind: The Creation of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 335.

⁵⁷ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 220-40.

less affair if non-repressive society were to be psychosocially sustainable in the long run,

Marcuse wrote,

Men can die without anxiety if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion. After a fulfilled life, they may take it upon themselves to die - at a moment of their own choosing. But even the ultimate advent of freedom cannot redeem those who died in pain. It is the remembrance of them, and the accumulated guilt of mankind against its victims, that darken the prospect of a civilization without repression.⁵⁸

Marcuse understood guilt, contextually and contingently, as an impediment to human progress, identifying it as the source for counterrevolutionary mass psychological impulses. Significantly, love, he believed, had an inner tie to guilt, especially when love functioned as a social obligation. Marcuse refused to end *Eros and Civilization* with any naive optimism, preferring to remind his readers of the practical urgency of his utopianism: guilt was near.

If Marcuse's politics of perversion aimed to honor Freud's legacy by creating immunities against society's excessive reliance on guilt, he made this urgent turn towards Eros in the face of German history. In one telling passage, while arguing that different libidinal impulses and perversions had different social effects in different contexts, and therefore different ethical status, Marcuse referred explicitly in making his case to the Third Reich: "the function of sadism" he wrote, "is not the same in a free libidinal relation and in the activities of SS troops."⁵⁹ The implication was that sexuality *could* be its own sandbox, radically divorced from judgement under the right circumstances.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 236-7.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 203.

What is remarkable about his reference to the “SS troops” as the most obvious trope to demarcate the very possibility of a “free libidinal relation” that was also ethically perverse, is that while for Marcuse, his invocation of perversion was meant to challenge the kinds of domination he saw in their most extreme forms in Nazism and Nazi pleasure, for Fromm, the reverse was true. For him, the specter of the SS trooper would proof that perversion’s autonomy from ethical constraint was fallacious. Fromm’s rejection of perverse sexuality in his debate with Marcuse relied precisely on his definition of love as a necessary repression of infantile desires, which he linked with Nazism’s excesses.

Dagmar Herzog has observed that

For historians of sexuality it has become increasingly standard to turn away from the work of Sigmund Freud to that of Michel Foucault, even as it is likely that we need both of them in order to understand and convey the distinctive qualities of life and death in a viciously savage but wildly popular dictatorship obsessed with issues of both reproduction and enjoyment. Yet the peculiar interpretive difficulties raised by the topic of sexuality under Nazism make it even more valuable to revisit the work of such an intermittently neglected theorist of sex and power as Herbert Marcuse. Few terms capture as well as Marcuse’s famous ‘repressive desublimation’ the regulatory components also of emancipatory injunctions. In addition, Marcuse was one of the first to specify how Nazism’s hubristic racism was inseparable from its attempts to reorganize sexual life, how central the politicization of the previously more private realm of sexuality was to the Nazis’ political agenda, and how it was that sexual excitation could become a mechanism for social manipulation.⁶⁰

What is ironic about Herzog’s interest in Marcuse is that it suggests much of his thought about Nazi sexuality had gone into his defense of the perversions, clashing with Fromm’s claims (further elaborated below), that Marcuse had advocated in his politics of perversion the same kind of “unlimited sexual satisfaction” Fromm saw in Nazism.⁶¹ But

⁶⁰ Herzog, 18.

⁶¹ Fromm, “Human Implications,” 345-6.

Marcuse's earlier critical analyses of Nazi sexuality in his intelligence work for the American OSS in the 1940s in fact show a man well attuned to the political manipulation of Third Reich's tolerance of sexual licentiousness, which converted pleasure into nationalist duty: "The abolition of sexual taboos tends to make this realm of satisfaction an official political domain... The individual recognizes his private satisfaction as a patriotic service to the regime, and he receives his reward for performing it."⁶² I stress this passage in order to highlight the contentious question of what exactly distinguishes a *taboo* and a *perversion* in Marcuse's own work. According to Herzog, what made Nazi sexuality unique was its combination of "greater conservatism" with the wide scale promotion of "playful, pleasurable heterosexuality among those ideologically and 'racially' approved by the regime."⁶³ In other words, as old taboos were crossed, new determinants of heterosexual, racially pure, patriotic pleasure replaced them. It is in similar terms that Marcuse might have analyzed the encouragement of teenage sex in the Bund Deutscher Mädel, for example. But Marcuse also perceived in the ideology of Nazi sexuality a revolt against the father, "the destruction of the family, the attack on patriarchal and monogamic standards." Further, "all the similar widely heralded undertakings play about the latent 'discontent' in civilization, the protest against its restraint and frustration. They appeal to the right of 'nature,' to the healthy and defamed drives of man... They claim to

⁶² Marcuse, as cited in Herzog, 29.

⁶³ Herzog, 27.

reestablish the 'natural.'"⁶⁴ Marcuse's experience of Nazism no doubt formed his critical thinking on Reich's work, but it also shaped his response to Fromm.

What is interesting about this description of fascist sexuality is how deceptively close it approaches Marcuse's own philosophy of the senses. While Marcuse had long flirted with Schiller and theories of sensuous reason, his experience of fascism was formative in the particular approach Marcuse developed to the ethics of sexuality. Marcuse's practical defense of alternative sexualities - the perversions, playful sexuality - and the myths that give voice to them - Narcissus, Orpheus - in *Eros and Civilization* developed in the course of a longer history of a critique of the irrationality of affirmationist culture.

Douglas Kellner observes that Marcuse's critique of affirmationist culture directly emerged as a historical critique of fascism's origins. And recall that it was love's affirmationism that Marcuse objected to in Fromm's thought. Affirmationism did not refer specifically to positivity, but to "spiritualization" - precisely the term Marcuse uses to critique Fromm's love. In Douglas Kellner's description, "Affirmative culture projected its spiritual realm as a higher, more sublime and valuable realm than the everyday world and claimed its values were essential to the individual's well-being." Marcuse singled out love - "refined, exclusive and monogamous" - as a "mystifying" mechanism of the bourgeois soul. It was bourgeois culture's appeal to the soul, in which the idea of love was implicated, that "helped prepare the way for its own abolition in fascist society by teaching submission and deflecting individuals from demanding well-being and social

⁶⁴ Marcuse, as cited in Herzog, 28.

change.”⁶⁵ Thus, in Marcuse’s view, Fromm’s ideas came dangerously close to the same kinds of ideological work he associated with the weaknesses of bourgeois culture, and the appeal of National Socialism. If Marcuse’s critique of love in Fromm’s corpus verged on exaggeration, the context - imagined or not - for his elaboration of “affirmative culture” imbued his critique with the nightmare of the formative years of the Frankfurt School. What made his defense of the perversions immune to Nazi irrationality was his critique of spiritual mystifications like “the soul” and “love”. In this way, his critique of Fromm, and his project in *Eros and Civilization*, have roots in his analysis of fascism, an analysis that gained inertia in his intellectual career even as new contexts emerged.

I end this section by noting that Marcuse was not a critic of love absolutely. Anthony Giddens writes that the “omission of a concern with love is a puzzling feature of Marcuse’s work.” Yet Giddens also writes that Marcuse argues for a “pleasurable cooperation based upon attraction passionée, not passionate love but the flowering of Eros in communicative love and friendship, which would become the dominant medium of sociability.”⁶⁶ This contradiction in Giddens’s account of Marcuse - love is both denied and present - also pervaded the debate, and reflects Marcuse’s complicated take on the value of love.

Marcuse’s critique of Fromm was a very specific critique of a kind of political advocacy of love that, from Marcuse’s point of view, was disappointingly ineffective. This did not mean Marcuse was not interested in love as a political idea in other contexts.

⁶⁵ Kellner, 105.

⁶⁶ Giddens, 167-169.

On the contrary. Marcuse's disdain is not with love per se, nor with love as an ideal, but with the ideal's impossible context, with the "sanctioned conditions" attached to sexual drives, "sanctioned conditions" which themselves prohibit love. It is "not the values themselves [that] are spurious," but the inevitable alienation or "impossibility" to which present social conditions condemn those values.⁶⁷ Thus, what Fromm and Marcuse seemed to fundamentally disagree on was the degree of repression in contemporary society. "Fromm maintains," Marcuse wrote in his second critique in the spring of 1956,

that his concept of 'productive love' rejects adjustment to an 'alienated society.' This is precisely what I question; I think that his concepts partake of alienation... Fromm reminds me that 'the alienated society develops in itself the elements which contradict it.' It does, but I disagree with Fromm on where and what these elements are.⁶⁸

Marcuse saw in Fromm's defense of love and rejection of the perversions the same kind of social instrumentalization he saw in Nazism.

Marcuse ends his critique of Fromm's ethics of love with the claim that "Beyond its legitimate manifestations, love is destructive and by no means conducive to productivity and constructive work... Love, taken seriously, is outlawed."⁶⁹ "Toward a practice of outlawed love" thus might be an alternate subtitle to *Eros and Civilization*, but the word belonged to Fromm and to a wrong time.

As Marcuse wrote in *Eros and Civilization*, celebrating Nietzsche, "Nietzsche envisages the eternal return of the finite exactly as it is - in its full concreteness and finite-

⁶⁷ Marcuse, "Social Implications," 233.

⁶⁸ Marcuse, "A Reply to Erich Fromm," 81.

⁶⁹ Marcuse, "Social Implications," 234.

ness. This is the total affirmation of the life instincts, repelling all escape and negation. The eternal return is the will and vision of an erotic attitude toward being for which necessity and fulfillment coincide.”⁷⁰ Marcuse disagreed with Fromm about how love could be practiced, and shied away from the term “love” for the historical and moral content it seemed to imply in Fromm’s writings. Still, love in this world, and what Fromm termed biophilia, clearly had a place in Marcuse’s thought. But Marcuse’s other purposes - the effective means of countering modernity’s sociability of guilt - than the “spiritual transcendentalism” and repressive sublimation he saw in Fromm’s conception of love.⁷¹

To make this point a bit clearer with anecdote, consider Marcuse’s response to one interview question years later:

at least in some of the liberation struggles in the third world and even in some of the methods of development of the third world this new theory of man is putting itself in evidence. I would not have mentioned Fanon and Guevara as much as a small item that I read in a report about North Vietnam and that had a tremendous effect on me, since I am an absolutely incurable and sentimental romantic. It was a very detailed report, which showed, among other things, that in the parks in Hanoi the benches are made only big enough for two and only two people to sit on, so that another person would not even have the technical possibility of disturbing.⁷²

⁷⁰ Marcuse, *Eros*, 122-123.

⁷¹ Marcuse, “Social Implications,” 238.

⁷² Marcuse, “The End of Utopia - Questions and Answers,” *Five Lectures. Psychoanalysis, Politics and Utopia*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 82.

Chapter Two: Fromm's Critical Love and The Critique of the Perversions

This section attempts to provide a sketch of Fromm's critical theory of love as a response to Marcuse's critique, which he had only come to understand after a period of time following the feud. While *The Art of Loving* argued for a renewed religiosity of love based in a secular faith, his later texts, particularly *The Revision of Psychoanalysis*, published posthumously, elaborated his critique of the sexual perversions in more detail. Even the title of *The Art of Loving* reflected Fromm's purpose of countering Marcuse with a critical vision of love, even if his assertion that loving was an art without clear aims or use amounted to a kind of concession: "Can anything be learned about the practice of an art except by practicing it?" he asked.⁷³ In both texts, Fromm committed to a spiritual vision of love based on faith and openness toward mankind and the future. This forward thinking in Fromm's theory of love was reflected in his framing of perversions as backward, tied to the past.⁷⁴ But it was also his "foreward" thinking that shrouded his coming-to-terms with Marcuse with the intellectual inertia of self-defense. Furthermore, Fromm's critical category of the "idolization" of "*that which was*" allows him to articulate what, in his worldview, are shared characteristics connecting the sexual perversions and aspects of Nazism.

As Lawrence Friedman suggests, in the *Dissent* debate, Fromm probably lacked sufficient time to prepare his responses to Marcuse.⁷⁵ He also revealed on several occa-

⁷³ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 107.

⁷⁴ This view was representative of early twentieth century thinking on queerness. See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁷⁵ Friedman, 195.

sions that projections about what Marcuse had been advocating, and nothing Marcuse had said, determined his rebuttal. It was Fromm's historical imagination that filled in the gaps. In his responses to Marcuse in *Dissent*, Fromm's critique of his opponent could not account for the nuance and full range of argument for the perversions that Marcuse would develop in *Eros and Civilization*, since the book had yet to be published. Marcuse himself acknowledged this in the second round of their debate: "Erich Fromm has constructed a thesis which I did not state... his misinterpretation may be to a great extent due to the fact that my book, *Eros and Civilization*, to which the article specifically referred, had not yet been published."⁷⁶ This was true especially regarding Marcuse's all important distinction between repressive and nonrepressive desublimation, which Fromm ignores.

Without a full appreciation for Marcuse's particular theory of a sexual revolution, Fromm took Marcuse's justification of the perversions only myopically as a defense of a version of sexual liberation as "unlimited gratification". It must have appeared to Marcuse and those who understood him, when Fromm replied in *Dissent* to the criticisms Marcuse had made against him, as if Fromm were firing shots into the wind. Thus, the arguments Fromm used to attack Marcuse in the debate had an air of absurdity. Their logic was indicative of a mental world in which Fromm's thoughts on love retreated from and held back a dark nightmare. As he wrote in his 1955 rebuttal to Marcuse,

To believe that a theory which demands greater freedom for the sexual instinct is for this very reason a radical theory is an error which can be understood either as the result of a misunderstood materialism, or as a reaction to the fact that the conservative and reactionary groups were adherents of a strict and repressive sexual morality in the first part of the twentieth

⁷⁶ Marcuse, "A Reply to Erich Fromm," 79.

eth century. Thus it appears that sexual emancipation was a radical step in the emancipation from oppression. However, the attitude of the Nazis toward sexual freedom was sufficiently concrete evidence that this assumption was wrong. The Nazis, far from following the reactionary ideology in this point, favored sexual promiscuity and were extraordinarily permissive in their sexual code. But the example of the Nazis is not even necessary. Unlimited sexual satisfaction is only part of a characteristic trait of twentieth-century capitalism, the need for mass consumption, the principle that every desire must be satisfied immediately, that no wish must be frustrated. The principle, then, that love is identical with sexual desire, and the idea that emancipation of man lies in the complete and unrestricted satisfaction of his sexual desire is, in fact, part of the cement which binds men together in the present phase of capitalism. It was a reformist ideology in the beginning of the century; to think of it as a radical theory *now*, means not to have learned anything from the development of society during the last thirty years.⁷⁷

Fromm's response to Marcuse's critique explicitly referred to the abuse he saw in Nazism, and their sexual excess. As this passage suggests, Fromm positioned himself as a thinker who has *moved on* from sexuality (in his post-Freudianism) at the same time that his evaluation of Nazism's excessive sexual politics suggests the present conditions - capitalism, mass consumption, a culture of sexual gratification - of society have not moved on from Nazism. As I show below, Fromm's reference to the Nazis, and to the historical trends in the previous decades, was not just incidental. Nazism stood for all that was against love and respectability, and all that had to be left behind.

In his *Dissent* response to Marcuse, Fromm tried to dodge Marcuse's critique that Fromm's advocacy of love meant his critical theory had degraded into an accommodation-

⁷⁷ Fromm, "Human Implications," 345-6.

ist politics of values, which had Marcuse had rejected.⁷⁸ This was a major point of contention in the debate. “I emphasize again and again that happiness, love, as I define them, are not the same virtues as those called love and happiness in an alienated society.” Moreover, he insisted that “the analysis of love is social criticism,” and “to study the conditions of love and integrity means to discover the reasons for their failure in capitalistic society.”⁷⁹ But while these defenses may have been true, Fromm also argued, more directly against Marcuse’s claim, that the “attempt to practice these virtues amounts to the most vital act of rebellion.”⁸⁰ How did he support the idea that his definition of love could be a radical praxis?

The Art of Loving must be read as an solution to Fromm’s sudden and unexpected need to prove decisively that what he had in mind for love exceeded Marcuse’s critical focus on love as “manageable resignation”. Indeed, that book was published with Mar-

⁷⁸ As Marcuse wrote in his *Dissent* critique of Fromm, “productiveness, love, responsibility become ‘values’ only in so far as they contain manageable resignation and are practiced within the framework of socially useful activities - in other words, after repressive sublimation.” “Social Implications,” 231.

⁷⁹ Fromm, “Human Implications,” 348-349.

⁸⁰ Fromm, “Human Implications,” 349.

cuse in mind, after the debate, in 1956.⁸¹ Fromm's direct references in that text to Marcuse's cynicism suggested one of its negative influences. Fromm did, however, begin the manuscript years before the feud, when Fromm fell in love with a woman who became something of a muse to him in that period - and the woman who would remain his wife until his death - Annis Freeman.⁸² In his second *Dissent* rebuttal to Marcuse, in the spring of 1956, Fromm stressed that in "marital love" the "full satisfaction of the sexual instinct" is "not possible" because - as Fromm admits Freud had shown - "full satisfaction" means the satisfaction of the urges of sadism and coprophilia. "Respect" between lovers implied these perversions were out of bounds.⁸³ No doubt, Fromm's own values about marriage as he experienced and practiced it conflicted with an easy coming-to-terms with Marcuse's prophecy for perversion. This rather banal observation however points to the way Fromm's intellectual work no doubt expressed itself with reference to

⁸¹ I emphasize this because it is clear that Lawrence Friedman, in his recent biography of Fromm, is oblivious to this fact. He writes, "Fromm's prescription for treating narcissism lacked nuance. It was insufficient to urge his readers to use humility, objectivity, and reason in order to view and love others as they 'really were.' If most people already mired in marketplace capitalism were intensely locked in their narcissism, how did they acquire the capacity for objectivity and reason? Fromm's answer embraced the self-help tradition, with its attendant simplicities and misplaced optimism... Following the formula of other classic self-help authors, Fromm focused *The Art of Loving* on individual thought and action - on cultivating and enhancing qualities within the self. Only at the end of his book did he fully and forcefully reiterate what he periodically asserted in earlier sections of his text: the severe limitations on love inherent in modern capitalist society and its focus on materialist acquisitiveness... Thus, the social structure had to be dramatically changed from simply producing and consuming more goods and services, if man's capacity to love was to become part of his basic social existence. What was problematic about Fromm's powerful plea for revolutionary change was that it was placed toward the back of his book. Indeed, it ran at cross-purposes with his narrative line: the eminent possibility of mastering the art of loving" (Friedman, 181). Friedman's incredulity at Fromm's odd balancing of writing about love between lovers, on the one hand, and a more revolutionary love for mankind, on the other, can be resolved if we accept that Fromm's manuscript adapted to Marcuse's complaints in *Dissent*. It is much easier to add an alternate ending to one's book than give up and start from scratch.

⁸² Friedman, 170-171.

⁸³ Fromm, "A Counter-Rebuttal," 83.

his own cultural existence. In Fromm's mind, the progressive, civilized quality of love - denied in Nazi society, in the ethos of consumer capitalism, and in Marcuse's work - was a *necessary* form of social repression that guaranteed creativity, freedom and a buffer against the kinds of historical outbreaks of violence he saw in the excesses of Nazism and that he explicitly associated with sexual gratification. Thus, for both thinkers, the question of historical progress had come to be framed within the question of appropriate sexual behavior, and vice versa.

Fromm's version of love as he explained it in *The Art of Loving* attempts to defy the arguments Marcuse had deployed against love in 1955. This was primarily done through spiritual language and appeals to a kind of spiritualism that Fromm understood as culturally critical. Although *The Art of Loving* did not respond to Marcuse's claims for the perversions directly, the spiritual models it laid out became the basis for his later critique in *The Revision of Psychoanalysis*.

Many of the ideas expressed in *The Art of Loving* had been previously publicized. Fromm long believed, as he expressed it in *Escape From Freedom*, for example, that love was man's only hope from the isolated and paranoid forms of interaction that capitalism had engineered in the wake of the Middle Ages. Love, a religious mode of relationality, had become alienated under the secular.⁸⁴ In his later writings, Fromm summarized the problem and linked it to the death of God:

“*God* today is an idol of love and wisdom. People are not loving, and they are not wise, but since it is difficult for man to live completely without love and wisdom, they go to churches and worship God. Since they have

⁸⁴ Fromm, *Escape*, 110-115.

projected love and wisdom on to God, they are once a week in the company of their own love and wisdom, by being in the church, or by using the name of God... It's not an experience, but an indirect being-in-touch-with that which they have already lost, but not given up.”⁸⁵

In Fromm's view, modern religious life had a fundamentally alienated, melancholic character, which might threaten fundamentalist violence even as it upheld capitalism and deadened free interaction. As he observed wittily in *The Art of Loving* while mocking the Reverend N. V. Peale's entrepreneurial religiosity, “God has been transformed into a remote General Director of the Universe, Inc.”⁸⁶ Modern love was implicated in this transformation and intellectual loss. Fromm viewed Marcuse's defense of the perversions through this melancholic pattern too, since the perversions represented repetition compulsions, forms of idolatry, that could not be left behind by maturity.

Fromm saw signs of decay in a variety of rituals, including Western monogamic love, which he understood as a “sado-masochistic attachment.”⁸⁷ One aspect of love that Fromm stressed was equality. Although Fromm did reject the sexual content of transference in his analytic practice, he did not reject transference as a fact of modern culture. “The transference phenomenon,” he wrote, “is to be understood as the expression of the fact that most men unconsciously feel like children and, hence, long for a powerful figure whom they can trust and to whom they can surrender.”⁸⁸ Fromm's love aimed to transcend this power relation.

⁸⁵ Fromm, *Beyond Freud: From Individual to Social Psychoanalysis* (Riverdale: American Mental Health Foundation Books, 1992), 92.

⁸⁶ Fromm, *Art*, 106.

⁸⁷ Fromm, *Escape*, 115.

⁸⁸ Fromm, *Revision*, 51.

But if inequalities in power - an imbalance in characteristics that could be desired or withheld by the will of the other - meant unfree relations, Fromm seemed to be denying most people the possibility of enacting his theory of love. He was not shy to admit this:

If LOVE is a capacity of the mature, productive character, it follows that the capacity to love in an individual living in any given culture depends on the influence this culture has on the character of the average person. If we speak about love in the contemporary Western culture, we mean to ask whether the social structure of Western civilization and the spirit resulting from it are conducive to the development of love. To raise the question is to answer it in the negative. No objective observer of our Western life can doubt that love - brotherly love, motherly love, and erotic love - is a relatively rare phenomenon, and that its place is taken by a number of forms of pseudo-love which are in reality so many forms of the disintegration of love.⁸⁹

This insistence on love's scarcity and difficulty - "There are many people who have never seen a loving person," he wrote - was in all likelihood a strategical response to Marcuse's criticisms.⁹⁰ If love was rare, then that constituted some degree of proof of its negativity.

If Fromm was not optimistic about modern love, however, he was hopeful about his own message. His criticisms of the secularization and desiccation of modern love into sado-masochistic partnerships (which, according to Fromm, the bourgeois marriage updated with the appeal of "team spirit" in the interwar transition to consumer capitalism), likely influenced by his reception of Max Weber, supplied Fromm with the critical impetus to fashion himself as "love's prophet" - Lawrence Friedman's characterization of

⁸⁹ Fromm, *Art*, 83.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

Fromm that aptly describes his project as a renewal of that which was worth saving in love.⁹¹

One of the important meta-contradictions between Marcuse and Fromm's emplotments of Eros is that while for Marcuse, social change involving contradictions between the practices of desire and the social order would resolve themselves through history, diachronically, Fromm believed love itself could be a space that contains dialectical change. Arguing that memory cannot be the basis of love - since time deceives and abstracts experience, uniting past and future through fantasy - Fromm imagines a love that opposes escapism from the present and in which subjects embrace the facts of their existence together. Love cannot be, he insists, the "absence of conflict," but must be a space for change, in which conflict is not denied, but embraced. Love "is not a resting place, but a moving, growing, working together."⁹² Thus, the processes he observes in the outside world are questionable forms of progress.

Take, for example, Fromm's views on gender as they pertain to love. One creative response to Marcuse's delegitimization of Fromm's turn to love was that Fromm revisited the early Marx as a theorist of love. Indeed, Fromm understood love as a fundamentally

⁹¹ Fromm's cognizance of the problems of secularism for love did not however leave him hopeless. His work might be considered the attempt to retain for the secular what was of value in love. His characteristic hope, and search for some renewal of love, underscored his evaluation of the hippie movement "as an original religious mass movement, perhaps the only significant one in our time." Fromm had little respect for most other contemporary established religions, especially in the United States, which he considered reactionary, encouraging of conformity to social repression, and merely extant. For him, the hippies, with their "faith in love, in life, in equality, and in peace", represented the possibility of a non-idolatrous, non-consumptive sexual and religious liberation, even if he was disappointed that drugs played such a strong part of their culture, or that they had no plans to evolve into an institutionally stable, long-term cultural force. See *Revision*, 86, and (for "team spirit") *Art*, 88, 92.

⁹² Fromm, *Art*, 103.

Marxist virtue; he could not disentangle his active political life as a socialist from his Talmudic studies, guided by his mentors Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel and Salman Rabinkow. In one essay, “Marx’s Contribution to the Knowledge of Man,” - part of a 1970 collection of essays, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, that included another condemnation of Marcuse - Fromm claimed, commenting on the inadequacy of Freud’s “bourgeois materialism” that “in the center of Marx’s concept of human relations we find not sexuality, but Eros, of which sexuality can be one expression. By Eros is meant here the specifically male-female attraction which is a fundamental attraction in all living substance.”⁹³ His turn to Marx was part of his strategy to defend himself against Marcuse’s claims of his accommodationist politics, but it also supplied Fromm with the authority to suggest the possibility of love that transcended sadomasochistic forms of love and represented the free harmony of opposite gendered substances or beings. This free harmony between genders, Fromm believed, could only be established in love, and not as a result of capitalist atomization, which was his explanation of the decline in gender norms. In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm observes that in “contemporary capitalistic society”, the concept of equality has devolved from its Kantian expression into “sameness” - “the sameness of abstractions, of the men who work in the same jobs, who have the same amusements, who read the same newspapers, who have the same feelings and the same ideas.” Thus, the “soul” of gender has become hollowed out. “The polarity of the sexes is disappearing, and with it erotic love, which is based on this polarity.”⁹⁴ Thus, Fromm opposes his creative, erotic, gen-

⁹³ Erich Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 19, 55.

⁹⁴ Fromm, *Art*, 15.

dered, active, soul power love to the same-old automation infantile love that he sees in Marcuse's deferral to a perverse historicity.

Thus, a major feature of Fromm's concept of love is its potential to provide personal growth from inequality - which he sees as the fundamental feature of transference love. The robust call for equality characterizes Fromm's textual relationship to psychoanalysis through a series of metaphysical claims, for example when he writes that, "If the desire for physical union is not stimulated by love, if erotic love is not also brotherly love, it never leads to union in more than an orgiastic, transitory sense."⁹⁵ In this way, Fromm appeals to a normative metaphysics to outline a higher love that is post-Freudian (e.g. "Tenderness is by no means, as Freud believed, a sublimation of the sexual instinct; it is the direct outcome of brotherly love"⁹⁶), while critically invoking failed examples of love that remain of an orthodox psychosexual character (e.g. Fromm's description of "falling in love" as a transference that "always verges on the abnormal, and is always accompanied by blindness to reality"⁹⁷). This kind of "vacillation" exemplifies what Marcuse had identified in his critique, but viewed in the reverse, it speaks to Fromm's insistence on a transcendent rationality of intimacy, which he defines beyond transitory submission to desire. In this sense, Fromm invokes the epistemology of psychoanalysis as diseased by inequality (and if not inequality, then "sameness") in order to argue for a higher love (defined by equality).

⁹⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁶ Ibid., *Art*, 55.

⁹⁷ Ibid., *Art*, 90.

Fromm's critique of capitalism thoroughly informs his definition of what love is not - and what love is not is primarily all he can say. This refusal to define love, in turn, mirrors his "paradoxical" thinking on God, which, following Meister Eckhart, cannot be thought except paradoxically, and known only negatively, through the experience of history.⁹⁸ Thus, love becomes primarily a modernist project of growth through paradox. In his time, it is capitalism which defines the not of love. Fromm's ethical lover is someone who is present in - one with - the "productive unfolding of his own powers" in relation to others - a very nearly asexual formula if his thematic terrain were not clearly defined, negatively, by practices of intimacy.⁹⁹ Thus, Frommian love is not "idolatrous" or "sentimental" or "irrational" or "satisfaction experience by the consumer of screen pictures, magazine love stories and love songs."¹⁰⁰ Love appears only comprehensible in the new, and finds its negation in idolization, in reification, in repetition of the past. This logic verges into varieties of an athletic humanism raised to the order of infinity: love is the limitless "emergence from a pattern of infantile relatedness" and narcissism, a maturity defined by an active openness to the world, by the humble willingness to listen to others, by faith, by a patient, disciplined, perpetual transference onto the all.¹⁰¹

How then do the sexual perversions - and Marcuse's political theory embracing them - constitute a radical exception to Fromm's now robust, emergent definition of love?

⁹⁸ "Man can only know the negation, never the position of ultimate reality." Fromm, *Art*, 77.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 94. Fromm elsewhere defines narcissism as an "orientation... in which one experiences as real only that which exists within oneself." *Art*, 118.

It is precisely this refusal of change and maturity against which Fromm defines love that he sees in Marcuse's embrace the sexual perversions. Sure enough, Fromm had long distinguished love from its sadomasochistic varieties, but never with such critical totalism as in his response to Marcuse. In *Escape From Freedom*, he emphasized that love

is based on equality and freedom. If it is based on subordination and loss of integrity of one partner, it is masochistic dependence... Sadism also appears frequently under the guise of love. To rule over another person, if one can claim that to rule him is for that person's own sake, frequently appears as an expression of love, but the essential factor is the enjoyment of domination.¹⁰²

However, what is important about this early distinction, in comparison to his later essay, "Sexuality and the Sexual Perversions" (1970), in which he more fully elaborates his critique of Marcuse, is that Fromm is not concerned here with the threatening theoretical possibility of a playful sadomasochistic sexuality - distinct from a moral relationship.

When he turns to this problem in "Sexuality and the Sexual Perversions" - which almost teleologically precedes his essay "The Alleged Radicalism of Herbert Marcuse" - Fromm argues that sexual sadomasochism remains fundamentally a spiritual answer to existence. It is a fascinating example of the way in which disgust is thoroughly displaced by existentialist language recapitulating his developmental approach to love - a strategy not without the rhetorical interference of historical analogy to Nazism.

Indeed, Nazism became one of the curses of Wilhelm Reich's narrative of sexual liberation as Fromm judged it. Fromm was inspired by Reich's concern for the "quality" of genital sex as a life experience not defined by reproductive utility only and as an opportunity to "experience ecstatic joy and freedom." Fromm genuinely admired Reich's

¹⁰² Fromm, *Escape*, 158-9.

call for “the non-repressed, nondefensive personality, of the total life-affirming and life-enjoying, free human being.” But what is strange about Fromm’s final evaluation of Reich is reasoning behind its ambivalence. Reich is someone whose thought “has not lost ant of its importance” but who

made the error of believing naively in the immediate political consequences of the attitude of the sexually liberated youth. He wrongly assumed that because the reactionary adhered to a strict sexual morality, the opposite attitude characterized the revolutionary. Specifically, he failed to foresee that the Nazis would not adhere to the conservative standards of sexual morality.¹⁰³

Thus the pertinent measure for Fromm of a particular theory of sexual liberation is tied to the historico-political result of Nazism’s sexual liberalization, regardless of the theorist’s oppositional relationship to Nazism, or the ethical claims of those ideas alone.

Although this was the measure Fromm used to evaluate Marcuse earlier, in 1955, his strategy had changed by 1970, but the articulation of his response to Marcuse still would invoke the memory of Nazism. Fromm includes under the perversions “sadism and masochism, anal and especially coprophilic sexuality, exhibitionism, voyeurism, transvestitism, oral-genital practices (even masturbation was once looked upon as a perversion), and all forms of homosexuality.” But in view of the “disappearance” of the “theological and moral ideology” that sustained the taboo on them, it is “not easy” to come to a judgement on the ethics of perversion. For thinkers arguing that the perversions ought to be rejected, he suggests that disgust is not a reliable ethical source. On the other hand, he argues that the liberal supporters for the removal of taboos on perversions think only according to the “dogma of Bentham” and the ethics of mass consumption, with the “under-

¹⁰³ Fromm, *Revision*, 88-89.

lying assumption... that all needs are of equal rank and that freedom consists in man's right to fulfill his needs and to do as he pleases, so long as he does not harm anybody else." It is against this too broad an assumption that Fromm aims, in his essay, to find a moral ground with which to evaluate the perversions, since he has given up trying to understand the "puzzling" claim for perverse sexuality's "revolutionary" opposition to "bourgeois life".¹⁰⁴

In critiquing Marcuse, Fromm argues that "perversions are related to the person's character and to the 'spiritual' answer he gives to life." For example, he states that "Experience has shown that the person for whom sadistic practices are most exciting sexually is also a 'sadistic character'."¹⁰⁵ Thus, Fromm categorically rejects the idea that a separate sexual sphere exists, outside of which a person may be free of the characterological deficiencies he exemplifies in the bedroom.

The pervert is for Fromm is "inhibited in his capacity to love" - with love defined in much the same way as in *The Art of Loving*, as both in contradiction to the inequality of capitalism, and as a practice of openness to the world and change.¹⁰⁶ For Fromm, the "type of *experience*" that Marcuse argues distinguishes a sexual sadism from everyday or characterological sadism and analism is not distinguishable from the characterological traits of the capitalist partners, who, "unrelatedness in an affective sense," "use each

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 89-92.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 94.

other” and “exchange lust for lust”. Their relationship cannot extend beyond “narcissistic self-involvement.”

When Fromm writes that “characterological sadism can be conscious but is usually unconscious and rationalized, for instance, as justified revenge, performance of duty, or nationalistic or revolutionary hatred in the fight for the just cause,” he makes a link between the “unconscious” of ideological violence - in particular, he singles out nationalist ideology - and the sexual, “overt sadistic perversion”. This link is his bridge between the historical and the personal, but unlike Marcuse, who provides a space for a redemption of sexual symptoms, Fromm only sees “characters” defined by a “total existence” crossing the bridge. Through this bridge, Fromm unites the anal character and the “experience of sadism” in the figure of the “storm trooper”, who is invoked to argue that the “kind of ‘pure’ sadism of which Marcuse speaks is the denatured brain child of psychoanalytic ‘philosophy’ and lacks real existence.”¹⁰⁷ Fromm is not convinced of any qualitative difference between the Third Reich as a political legitimation of sadism and the merely “socially more acceptable” kinds of sadism in the bedroom. For him, they are differences in intensity. But he also argues that “Examples of sadism not directly linked to sexual desire and not combined with genital release include the cruelties of the storm troopers in concentration camps and in occupied territories” - a strange assertion, given the purpose of his argument is to refuse Marcuse’s claim for the autonomy of perverse

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 97.

sexual desire by providing an account of how character and sexual activity cannot be disentangled.¹⁰⁸

In conclusion, Fromm's essay, "Sexuality and the Sexual Perversions," primarily discusses examples of sadism beyond any pornographic or representational spheres. The key example is the sadistic storm trooper. For Fromm, sadism is of an altogether pathological existence far exceeding any psychosexual definition, indeed is "something much more profound; it is a way of being, one of the possibilities of human existence, one of the answers that man can give to the question he is asked by being born human."¹⁰⁹

In the essay following his review of the perversions, "The Alleged Radicalism of Herbert Marcuse," Fromm admitted:

I find it impossible to understand what Marcuse is really talking about... there is no greater manifestation of power than forcing a living being to endure pain. This content is not basically different from that involved in the practice of the sadomasochistic perversion, which is frequently found in our society and many others. If sadism does not have this aim - an aim that gives it its character and is the basis for the intensity of excitement and satisfaction, it is no longer sadism; but Marcuse fails to say *what* it is.¹¹⁰

Fromm's confused response to what he called Marcuse's faux radicalism and his "intellectual acrobatics" can't be dismissed as *mere* confusion. Fromm found it difficult to go where Marcuse went - into the realm of sexual perversion, play and representation - for reasons tied not just to Fromm's interpretation of the Third Reich, but to his definition of love as oriented towards productivity and spiritual maturity, which he entangled in his

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

memory of the Third Reich. On the other hand, however wrong Fromm gets Marcuse in his reply, Fromm's cornered, defensive posturing indicates the extent to which he felt his ideas had been castrated of their politically engaged meaning, while at the same time, his flummoxed retort suggests Marcuse had reached a thorny problem in Fromm's philosophical wholeness - love's practical radical potential.

Conclusion: Political Theology in the Bedroom

As Marcuse had identified the problem in 1956, the apparent rhetorical certainty of their clash gained its gravity from a deeper disjuncture in the two thinkers' social imaginations, in how each understood history to function, and how each perceived the contemporary eroto-historical and psychosocial situation.¹¹¹ The lack of sustained personal self-reflection, the tendency toward polemical overstretch and overreaction no doubt can be partly explained too by Fromm's early misunderstanding of Marcuse's ideas. That misunderstanding gave way to a firmer theory by which he could re(-)fuse his interlocutor, first with a positive theory of love in *The Art of Loving*, and then with an integrated critique of sexual perversion. Nevertheless, the way in which historical memory guided their different emplotments of the sexual revolution and influenced their ideas remains curious for its significance to Fromm's hard existentialist critique of the sexual perversions and his rejection of any notion of playful sexuality.

This essay demonstrates the historical traction that obscured a shared sense of love's contemporary critical status, which in turn generated alternative approaches to love. Above all else, the debate turned on different perceptions of the historical moment - the defeat of fascism, the rise of American consumerism - a difference that was obscured moreover by mutually hostile philosophical temperaments. These disagreements depended on Marcuse's and Fromm's different understandings of what love was in relation to "perversion", of the status of love and sex in the 1950s, and on the two philosophers'

¹¹¹ "Fromm reminds me that 'the alienated society develops in itself the elements which contradict it.' I disagree with Fromm on where and what these elements are." Marcuse, "A Reply to Erich Fromm," 81.

different relationships to the memory of the catastrophes of the preceding decades. While Fromm identifies love's political potentials with a certain faith and openness in the historical process as an other to be embraced (a love for the future), yet understood in the perversions echoes of the same features of society that motivated the sadism of the National Socialists, Marcuse's skepticism of love's real possibility in contemporary society is put in the service of a greater Eros, which led him toward an emphasis on radical sexuality and polymorphous perversity. Marcuse's love involved a perverse labor of play, whereas Fromm emphasized a practice of listening and existential embrace that was skeptical of sexuality as an aspect of Being. Whereas for Fromm love entailed the human's transcendence of historical time, for Marcuse, Being was rooted in the human experience of historicity, which led him to engage sexuality negatively. Both hoped to expand the possibilities for love, but through different temporal practices that depended on their perceptions of the historical moment.

The philosopher Jonathan Lear, in a book arguing that Freudian analysis had discovered love as an indispensable need in human development, observed of his own discomfort with the topic that "all this talk of love and death may seem quaint, even embarrassing. The embarrassment is, I suspect, a symptom that we are treading in intellectually threatening territory"¹¹². Marcuse and Fromm both understood the gravity of their debate, if for different reasons. One of those reasons might have been the recognition that psychoanalysis's legacy - whatever it may be - could not be contained within the therapist's

¹¹² Jonathan Lear, *Love and its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 28.

office. Like the early Protestants who had, to paraphrase the sociologist Max Weber, brought the Reformation Church into the world, Fromm and Marcuse both insist on liberating the psychoanalytic philosophy from its “structured setting of a psychoanalytic therapy.”¹¹³ In 1955, psychoanalysis had not yet slammed the door on its clinic. In their debate about the best way to bring psychoanalysis into the world, love was key. But what kind?

My discussion of the debate, I hope, has shown that what we might choose to see are two different messages, to be sure, each with unique guides to intimacy. Prepared to see differently by their teachers and their own philosophies, their feud reverberated with the crisis in which their ideas reached maturity in the Weimar Republic. One offers forgiveness-in-advance for the trauma of desire, and a space to breathe for the abjected subjects of history; the other, with universalist gravity, calls for faith and hope, for openness to change and a patience for redemption. But to understand their two philosophies as fundamentally conflicting versions of Marxism, of Freudianism, or even of love, is to ignore the fact of history, and misses the ways in which, at the boundary of their ideas, “another truth speaks.”¹¹⁴ Perhaps the answer to their conflict - this other truth - lies in what Lauren Berlant has called love’s “wild syncretism,” in which history, again and again, is always implicated.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 36.

¹¹⁵ Lauren Berlant, “Love: A Queer Feeling,” in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 448.

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