
Desire and Doubt

The Potentials and the Potential Problems of Pursuing Play



CHRISTINE PAYNE

The author takes up Karl Marx's and Herbert Marcuse's investigations into the possibilities for expanding freedom and play. She begins with an analysis of the essential questions about labor that need attention before considering theoretical and practical attempts to render necessary work superfluous in the interests of free play. She considers the limits of Marx's original formulation of such a possibility as well as the problems with Marcuse's attempts to fuse the spheres of work and play together. Inverting Marcuse's reading of Sigmund Freud through Marx, she speculates on the irrational character of desire and its relationship to work and play. **Key words:** capitalism; Critical Theory; desire; play; work

The Desire for Play Encounters Doubt

THIS ARTICLE HAS as its impetus a dialogue I have had over the years with students encountering the works of Karl Marx for the first time. Although reactions vary, I always know that discussing Marx's (1973, 1991) analysis of capitalism, technology, and the potential for a radically different form of life—his declaration that a freer, more leisurely, more creative and playful world lies within our grasp—will arouse responses in my students of surprise and delight as well as of incredulity. They periodically react with such statements as “this sounds good in theory, but it could never work in practice” or such questions as “what about human nature?” I respond equally predictably with a first, practical answer such as “automation can dissolve the labor question,” then follow with a philosophical rebuttal like “given different social conditions, human nature will change for the better.” As I work through these practical and philosophical responses, I essentially rehearse Herbert Marcuse's (1955) thesis in *Eros and Civilization*, which provides a particularly provocative attempt to think through

the possibilities and limitations of Marx's analysis of the potential for increasing the realm of freedom and play. But my attempts to address my students' skeptical concerns have lately led me to question the too-seamless character of the responses that I so have confidently been teaching.

After briefly charting Marx's understanding of the relationship between necessity and freedom, I address two potential limitations to his analysis of coerced work and creative play. The first limitation concerns the labor question. In any form of society, questions about who does what, who gets what, and who decides such questions require deliberation, application, and justification. I reflect upon three problems related to these questions about labor. First, I consider automation as a way of addressing labor worries. Next, I look at reducing production and consumption as a way to address them. Finally, I consider, given the convincing illustrations in Marcuse, whether the activities of work and play can under different social conditions begin to fuse together and (partially or fully) dissolve the sharp distinction Marx draws between them. I conclude that the dissolution of the work-play distinction, while welcome for its attention to the question of desire, must by definition ultimately address the concept of expanding self-directed creative play in the Marxist sense. I contend that those seeking to emancipate play are better served by the distinction Marx draws between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom despite the perhaps unresolvable tensions that persist in this formulation of the labor issue.

The second limitation I address concerns the question of desire. Beginning from Marcuse's project of thinking of Marx and Sigmund Freud together, I go on to think through Freud's characterization of human desire as both irrational and rational. Marcuse reads Freud through Marx, which is to say Marcuse follows Marx in suggesting that a radical change in material conditions and social relations can cultivate new human "natures." I consider what it might mean to hold on to an understanding of desire that is creative *and* destructive, rational *and* irrational. In taking seriously the Freudian contention that human desires are at times highly aggressive, destructive, and irrational, it is tempting to conclude that the emancipatory promises held out by both Marx's and Marcuse's analyses are ultimately untenable. I resist such a temptation and conclude that those committed to the radical emancipation of play must necessarily remain attentive to how and why particular instances of irrationality, aggression, and destruction emerge, stabilize, and remain alluring. In seriously considering theories of desire in relation to Marx's understanding of the realm of freedom, those who study or advocate for an expansion of play are better equipped to identify (and so

potentially disrupt or redirect) the irrational desires that limit the possibilities of freedom and creative play.

The Potential

In *Capital* Volume III, Marx (1991) draws a fundamental distinction between two realms of human experience—the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom. The realm of necessity encompasses that portion of human existence that is preoccupied with the essential maintenance and reproduction of oneself and the potential reproduction and maintenance of other individuals. Humans must sustain themselves physically: they must eat and have fresh water, shelter, and clothing. Such basic needs must be met on a regular basis. Such human needs are met through direct and technologically mediated human labor. Within a capitalist system of production, the vast majority of individuals expend their labor power for owners of capital to earn the wages necessary to meet them. So long as individuals have needs that must be met, they must spend some amount of time directly or indirectly meeting those needs. The experience of expending time and energy in the service of personal and social maintenance and reproduction constitute what Marx (1991) refers to as the realm of necessity.

Historically, most individuals have spent a significant portion of their existence occupied in the realm of necessity. Marx contrasts this realm of necessity with the realm of freedom. In the realm of freedom, individuals do not exist to work. In the second realm, individuals are able to create, play, and relax as they desire. The realm of freedom is the portion of human existence that allows the possibility of individual and social connection in a nonnecessary, noncoercive fashion (see also Weeks 2011). Marx's (1991) definition of freedom rests upon its distinction from necessary labor: "The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. . . . The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it [the realm of necessity]" (958–59). The realm of freedom can be understood as the social context that allows free play and creativity. It is within this series of social relations that individuals find the time and space to direct their energies into activities beyond mere survival or day-to-day functioning and reproduction. In the realm of freedom, individuals engage in activities because they are pleasurable, satisfying, and affirmative in and of themselves. What Marx desig-

nates as the realm of freedom speaks to earlier concerns expressed in his essay on estranged labor (1992). Here, Marx analyzes the various forms of alienation humans experience with an eye to developing a means of transcending these forms of existence. Marx seeks a way finally to achieve that which we have yet to fully experience and enjoy—our “species being,” or nonalienated imagination and action performed beyond the realm of survival and reproduction. In other words, Marx aims to articulate and develop the conditions of possibility for a world based on self-directed play and leisured creativity.

One of Marx’s (1973) central political-economic insights lies in his demonstration that the practical consequence of producing according to the logic of capitalism is a tremendous increase in technological capability and material output such that the realm of freedom becomes a practical—if not yet political—possibility. Within the context of capitalist political economies, social relations are structured such that huge sums of labor time and energy, in conjunction with physical, technological, and financial resources, are invested in, and directed towards, the creation of an incredible array of goods and services. Given this staggering productive power unleashed by the capitalist imperative of infinite reinvestment, we now have the conditions perhaps for a radically different kind of society, a society where human beings may be able to spend a significantly larger portion of their lives experiencing leisure, creativity, and play. In the present historical moment, no individual has to experience the majority of his or her existence within the realm of necessity. We contemporary individuals have the capability to enjoy material plenty, leisure, and creative free play, and yet we have so far failed to guide our productive forces in the direction of individual and social liberation from deprivation, monotonous toil, and involuntary work. It is this potential for freedom and play that fosters the surprise and delight of my students. At the same time, our collective failure to enact radical change becomes the source of much of their incredulity and pessimism. To such pessimistic incredulity, I now turn.

Consideration I—The Labor Question

There are two essential premises required for Marx’s hopeful analysis to work. The first essential premise is the very large-scale political mobilization and action of workers. The second essential premise is the increase in productive technologies capable of automating work. The labor questions—who does what, who gets

what, and who decides these issues—are both technical and political questions concerning the application of automation. Marx recognized the then-current and future potential of automation as a key factor necessary for a transition away from work and toward free play. The potential of automating work goes a decent way toward resolving the labor question. If work is automated, there is no need to determine who does what. The rub, of course, remains the empirical fact that a great many tasks are not yet automated. One is left to consider not only *how* particular sectors or positions might be automated, but also *if* some kinds of labor ought to be automated. Practically, there is the issue of the work of automation itself—that is, there is work involved in transforming tasks and industries into partially or fully automated zones of nonwork. In addition to questions of practicality, there are questions of desirability. Not without good reason, folks may find themselves opposed to theories of automation beyond the question of its technical or practical applications. Discussed within the classroom setting in particular, questions concerning whether automation of the educational sector is desirable ignite fierce debate. More broadly, the goal of automating intellectual labor does not seem an obviously positive one.

In light of both the technical limitations to automation and the question of whether particular activities ought to remain outside the realm of automation, one potential resolution of the questions about labor that students and I discuss involves individuals sharing jobs and moving between multiple roles. This sharing would allow individuals an opportunity for increased leisure and play while obligating them to share, on a rotating basis, the necessary unautomated labor still required. Small- or large-scale rotation of shared work is an unquestionably more justifiable and less onerous division of labor than its current division under capitalism. Nevertheless, the labor question here is reconfigured, not resolved.

A second potential resolution of the labor question we discuss involves individuals working fewer hours coupled with their consuming less and producing locally. In addition to remaining attentive to crucial ecological concerns, the logic animating this resolution to the labor question suggests that reducing consumption and localizing production will result in undertaking less onerous work in the first place. Rather than continue to increase our needs and wants, we can scale down our consumption and thereby scale down the need for work. However, once again, scaled-down consumption and production does not resolve the labor issue. Although the labor issue is scaled down, the questions about it—who does what, on what basis, and who decides these issues—nevertheless remain without apparent answers.

A third potential resolution to the labor issue involves easing the strict distinction between necessity and freedom on which Marx insists. Perhaps the resolution of the questions about labor lies not in finding answers but in reforming the original premises such that the questions dissolve. If, contra Marx, work and play need not remain conceptually or practically distinct realms of human experience, then the questions about labor and the incredulity fostered by attempts to resolve them can dissipate. This is precisely the move made by Marcuse (1955) in *Eros and Civilization*. I attempt, therefore, a critical rereading of Marcuse's own critical reimagining of Marx's understanding of work and play.

As part of his effort to rescue modernity from the dehumanizing effects of coerced labor and the repression of human desires, Marcuse illustrates the possibility of partially fusing work and play. "It is the purpose and not the content which marks an activity as play or work. A transformation in the instinctual structure would entail a change in the instinctual value of the human activity regardless of its content. . . . The altered societal conditions would therefore create an instinctual basis for the transformation of work into play" (215). For Marcuse, the sharp distinction Marx draws between work and play can be overcome if radically different social conditions and relations emerge. The key to dissolving this dichotomy lies in transcending all previous organizations of production. In other words, the key to the labor issue is the emergence of a world that has the productive capacity necessary to overcome material scarcity and the need to toil that such scarcity demands. In a postscarcity society, the potential exists for work and play to lose their distinct characters and transform into a single realm. Humans, no longer under duress of immediate scarcity, reduce their libidinal repression by collapsing necessary work into a form of creative eros or libidinal energy and desire. No longer coerced into working long hours for wages under treacherous or monotonous conditions, humans are free to devote their creative energies and desires to positive moments of "playful" or "erotic" work. Individuals have the ability to objectify themselves positively through creative labor, thereby expressing energy and satisfying desires while usefully contributing to the well-being of the collective whole. Such a restructuring possibly eliminates a significant amount of repression and unhappiness without eliminating instrumental productivity per se.

In addition to conceptualizing the relationship between work and play in the light of a postcapitalist, postscarcity society, Marcuse brings to his theory key insights from Freud. In reminding his readers that Marx does not adequately address psychological drives and desires, Marcuse turns to Freud to better cap-

ture the dynamics and characteristics of work and play in the human experience. In combining a historical and a materialist analysis of social relations with an understanding of conscious and unconscious human drives and desires, Marcuse again demonstrates the possibility of work and play transcending their seemingly antagonistic relationship.

The crucial move that Marcuse makes in relation to Marx's analyses of capitalism, technology, and freedom is his addition of Freud's analysis of the uneasy relationship of individuals to their societies. Freud (1961) echoes in social psychological language a central argument of Marx. The historical reality of perpetually necessary labor, the burden of existing "like a termite," has—in conjunction with patriarchal, monogamous, and familial organizations—produced and maintained the individual and collective misery of human beings. Individuals require one another in their societies to meet needs and desires and yet, as Freud reminds his readers, successful societies often cultivate unhappy and repressed individuals. In response to this paradox, Freud sees in sublimation a potential avenue for channeling socially repressed desires into socially productive activities.

Individuals repeatedly engage in defensive coping maneuvers in their attempts to endure unfree social environments, and Freud maintains that sublimation occupies a central role in struggles of modern individuals navigating their societies. Sublimation is the process by which individuals accomplish an indirect release of their primary—often socially unacceptable—desires and energies in socially acceptable projects and actions. Freud identifies scientists and artists as key examples of those successfully exercising this coping mechanism. Such individuals are able to sublimate their energies and drives into socially acceptable outlets, simultaneously finding the means partially to express and satisfy their individual desires while benefiting the larger society technically and culturally.

Marcuse (1955) takes up Freud's concerns with repression and sublimation, connecting them to Marx's critique of capitalism. This connection leads Marcuse to develop the notion of surplus repression. Modern individuals have been psychically and physically repressed beyond what is socially necessary, including the necessities imposed by capitalist social relations. Individuals no longer repress their desires for freedom, pleasure, and play simply as a result of the coercive demands of work and family. Modern individuals have internalized the controls and restraints placed on them in various spheres of modern life and have developed tremendous powers of self-denial. "While any form of

[society] demands a considerable degree and scope of repressive control over the instincts, the specific historical institutions . . . and the specific interests of domination introduce additional controls over and above those dispensable for civilized human association. These additional controls arising from the specific institutions of domination are what we denote as surplus repression (37). Marcuse goes on to demonstrate that these excessive internalized controls and restraints emerge out of particular social relations in particular historical epochs. In the process of seeking ever-expanding profits, capitalism revolutionizes the forces of production and creates the possibility of transcending material scarcity and the need to spend most of one's existence performing unwanted labor. If conditions of scarcity are overcome, surplus repression can and ought to be overcome as well.

Marcuse points towards the overcoming of two critical issues haunting modernity—the experience of alienation from coerced necessary labor and the experience of surplus repression. I worry that Marcuse repackages Freud's concept of sublimation and Marx's concept of necessary labor into a newly minted notion, namely, socially useful work-as-play. Individuals may no longer work under the duress of scarcity, and so they may lessen the psychically distorting pressures of the excessive repression of desire, but they still remain individuals who are essentially laboring in a realm of (lessened) necessity and who still express their libidinal energy via sublimation. In Marcuse's reconceptualization of the realm of freedom, individuals are undeniably better off in comparison to their historical counterparts. Nevertheless, I remain reluctant to accept Marcuse's resignification of freedom for reasons that I spell out in more detail.

Postscarcity Work-as-Play

I turn to Marcuse's reconceptualization of the relationship between work and play. Let us take as an example that those wishing to be involved in food production will choose to involve themselves and their creative labor in food production. Those wishing to be involved in education will choose to involve themselves and their creative labor in some form of education. Others might seek to perform labor in the service of art, music, textiles, writing, or other endeavors. Critical theory scholar Ben Agger (1979) provides a compelling illustration of Marcuse's logic.

A Marcusean example of emancipated work-play, which does not lose its “work” component, is of a group of workers engaged in building a house . . . the house builders engage in socially necessary activity which can also fulfill certain creative and artistic needs. Workers who are not compelled to construct prefabricated homes which resemble other such homes to be located in a monolithic suburban space, but who can inject their personality into their house can approach that unity of work and creativity which is the essence of praxis. In the second case, the workers work together without having to institutionalize bureaucratic or imperatively coordinated forms of decision making. . . . Workers can develop a division of labor without becoming identical with any one role which is then immutably imprinted on the individual’s sensibility. . . . The house builders are Marcusean workers because they do not view their work as a chore, performed only in return for a wage.

Agger immediately concedes that even under radically different social conditions, all work tasks are not likely to become “intrinsically creative.”

There can be a rotation of functions, thus ensuring that the more odious and physically demanding chores can be shouldered by all. . . . It would seem that house-building is not intrinsically “creative” work; in fact, it is work which many of us would not find existentially and aesthetically fulfilling, either because we simply do not see carpentry as artwork or because we are so unskilled in the intricacies of carpentry that we would view the work as mere toil (not possessing the skills, for lack of experience, necessary for enjoying the work). *The work is self-expressive (social freedom) not so much because it is intrinsically artistic but rather because it is democratically self-managed and nondominating. The possibility of nonauthoritarian authority is more crucial than the intrinsic character of the work itself* (emphasis added) (204–5).

In other words, the most significant characteristic of work is whether it is taken on freely or it is coerced. The question centers on choice rather than on arguing whether any one particular activity falls under the category of work or play. This structural framing of the labor issue is helpful insofar as it focuses attention on the desire to perform an action instead of the necessity to perform an action. Indeed, the emphasis on self-directed activity echoes Marx’s understanding of expressing species being in the realm of freedom. However, reframing the issue around choice undermines Marcuse’s emphasis upon intrinsic creativity. The reframing undermines his belief that work can be fused into play, a belief based on the assumption that noncoercive, socially useful work can act as an avenue through which libidinal energies and desires may be channeled. The socially useful work is meant to be the product of intrinsic drives that serve as

the initial motivation for the actions. If this is not the case, then the significance Marcuse affords intrinsic libidinal desires and their expressions and repressions gets lost and, with it, the significance of articulating Marx and Freud together. I return to this dynamic of Marxist free play and Freudian desire shortly.

With regard to understanding the fusion of work and play as an instance of noncoercive or self-directed activity, I argue that rather than attempt a reconciliation between socially useful work and creative play as it emanates from desire, we ought to call socially useful work what it is—work. We need not seek to express ourselves primarily through socially useful labor, nor need we argue that socially useful labor ought always lead to a positive objectification of self. If an individual's socially useful labor is a positive objectification of his- or herself, an instance of intrinsic energies being experienced as creative play and freedom, so much the better. But we cannot assume that this happy resolution will be the case. Work should be understood as work. It is, by the nature of its social necessity, not free in the sense Marx understands freedom. Work is done for reasons of subsistence and social utility. Whether you consider the dynamic between work and play under capitalism or some variant of socialism, radical democracy, or communism, the underlying logic remains. Work for subsistence and social utility can mean work for wages under capitalism just as much as it can mean work for the goods and services of life in a radically democratic, socialist, or communist society. The reason Marx juxtaposes the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom is precisely to demonstrate that social necessity cannot result in, nor fuse with, freedom. The goal is not to merge the two realms of experience, but to shift the amount of time spent working as far as possible toward time spent enjoying creative play in the realm of freedom.

Surplus and Sublimation

Having considered the limitations of dissolving the distinction between work and play, I turn to Marcuse's use of Freud in relation to Marx. As demonstrated above, Marcuse argues that given conditions of postscarcity, we can occupy a position where work can be self-directed, creative, playful, and socially useful in character. Radical changes in social relations provide the conditions in which unnecessary psychological misery, that is, surplus repression, can be overcome.

Marcuse demonstrates the historical nature of the social constraints that Freud views to be necessary and unalterable. Marcuse understands modern

humans as bearers of surplus repression; that is, Marcuse appears to understand repression as a phenomenon of degrees and not of kind. He gestures for the possibility of a decrease in the amount of repression that individuals experience—not an elimination of repression itself. Marcuse foresees a transformation of surplus repression into creative productivity as work-as-play. I contend that Marcuse's transformation of surplus repression into creative work-as-play does not substantially challenge Freud's original understanding of sublimation. Marcuse's desire to draw the insights of Marx and Freud together in the hope of imagining a better future ultimately results in a denial of Marx's radical understanding of freedom and play. Marx's (1991) understanding of the realm of freedom rests fundamentally upon his contention that free and creative play becomes an end in itself; for Marx, free and creative play is, by definition, not performed primarily to satisfy a socially useful end beyond itself.

Marcuse remains with the uneasy resolution of the relationship between individual desires and social constraints that Freud arrives at in his formulation of the same dynamic. Marcuse's understanding of what a less repressed society could look like is far more politically radical than Freud's. Nevertheless, the two arrive at similar resolutions. The realm of freedom as Marx imagines it remains unrealized—and seemingly unrealizable. Intrinsic libidinal desires and self-directed creative play in both Freud and Marcuse are understood through the lens of socially useful outlets; desire and free play are means and not ends in themselves. Simply put, reducing surplus repression through creative work-as-play is exactly that—a reduction in libidinal repression via socially useful sublimation. Freud, assuming capitalism, and Marcuse, assuming socialism, are suggesting approximately the same solution.

Ultimately, Marcuse's provocative demonstration of the potential fusion of work and play remains unpersuasive in the light of Marx's understanding of the realm of freedom. First, it reiterates Freud's original suggestion that socially useful sublimation can—and ought—to serve as the primary positive outlet for libidinal energies. The necessity of sublimation, rather than a rejection or removal of this necessity, remains in Marcuse's otherwise radical resignification of Freud's analysis of the relationship between individuals and their societies. This retention of sublimation may in fact speak to a fundamental truth about human nature and desire. It may in fact be the case that we do harbor irrational drives such that socially useful channels are necessary to curb the destructive and aggressive components of ourselves. Such considerations are outside of Marx's analysis, and it is to his credit that Marcuse takes these Freudian insights

seriously. Still, if we follow Marx's articulation of the meaning of freedom, then Marcuse's refashioning of Freud's theories of sublimation—the channeling of desire into socially useful outlets—falls short. While certainly more desirable than simple repression, the transformation of surplus repression into work-as-play does not achieve the kind of freedom and creative play that Marx imagines. Additionally, if we assume that socially necessary labor must be combined with more creative labor, we admit that some work is necessarily unfree and simply must be dealt with through mutual responsibility and sharing. Lastly, if some individuals fail to complete some of the more onerous projects, we slip into a functionalist theoretical framework that treats individual freedom as a problem requiring resolution.

Consideration II—The Character of Desire

Having demonstrated key limitations in Marcuse's attempted work-as-play resolution to the questions about labor, I want to consider in more detail the significance of taking seriously a Freudian theory of desire in light of Marx's understanding of the realm of freedom and creative play. Partially inspired by Rachel Shield's (2015) compelling analysis of the nature of play in this journal, I want to consider the character of human desire and the relationship between desire and social conditions. If we emphasize, following Marx (1992) and others (Marcuse 1955; Fromm 1961; Habermas 1971; Lukács 1971; Reich 1972; also see Reich 1970 for an analysis closer to Freud's), the historical nature of human drives, there is reason to anticipate desires emerging that flow in relatively rational, socially beneficial directions. If we emphasize—following Freud (1951, 1961, 2004) and others (de Beauvoir 1976; Deleuze and Guattari 1977; Bataille 1985; Lyotard 1993; Nietzsche 1998)—the irrational character of human drives, there is reason to anticipate desires flowing in rational and irrational, constructive and destructive directions. Marcuse reads the key insights of Freud through a Marxist framework and so explores the former's line of thought. Here, I consider what it might mean to read key insights of Marx through a Freudian framework in order to explore the latter line of thought. I briefly trace Freud's understanding of human libidinal desires to challenge gently the too-seamless Marxist narrative of a socially harmonious postscarcity society.

Freud maintains that drives and desires constitute the basis of our psychic and material lives. He sees in even the most apparently rational actions the more

or less contained potential of the irrational unconscious. Freud (2004) understands his task to be the exploration of “the conditions under which influence is exerted for no adequate logical reason” (41). Although he does recognize that needs and desires, including the objects and relationships available to capture and create desire, are historically particular and fluid in nature, Freud nevertheless maintains that needs and desires are not reducible to—or fully explicable as—historical expressions of social relations. His comments addressing Marxist optimism are worth quoting at length.

The communists believe that they have found the path to deliverance from our evils. According to them, man is wholly good and is well disposed to his neighbor; but the institution of private property has corrupted his nature. The ownership of private wealth gives the individual power, and with it the temptation to ill-treat his neighbor; while the man who is excluded from possession is bound to rebel in hostility against his oppressor. If private property were abolished, all wealth held in common, and everyone allowed to share in the enjoyment of it, ill-will and hostility would disappear among men. Since everyone’s needs would be satisfied, no one would have any reason to regard another as his enemy; all would willingly undertake the work that was necessary. . . . The psychological premises on which the [communist] system is based are an untenable illusion. In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression one of its instruments, certainly a strong one . . . but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature. Aggressiveness was not created by property. . . . We cannot, it is true, easily foresee what new paths the development of civilization could take; but one thing we can expect, and that is that this indestructible feature of human nature will follow it there. (Freud 1961, 70–73)

Simply put, human drives and desires change over time, flowing toward and against historically particular objects in historically particular conditions; however, their ultimate character can, so to speak, go either way. For Freud, human beings are inherently rational and irrational, productive and creative, as well as destructive and dangerous. The eros that Marcuse envisions expanding has, according to Freud, an aggressive component that we have no reason to imagine might be extinguished by overcoming capitalist social relations or scarcity.

Freud’s (2004) analysis of mass psychology, the experience of individual and collective desire for—and loyalty to—a particular person, group, idea, or cause provides a helpful illustration of the irrational character of desire. A mass of individuals is structurally neutral; it is a set of relations between selves and objects and selves and other selves. “Mass psychology deals with the individual

as member of a tribe, people, caste, class institution, or as one element in an assemblage of human beings who at a particular time, and for a specific purpose, have organized themselves into a mass” (18). The relationships that social actors develop may attain lasting significance through a shared object or meaning of investment. The object or meaning so invested becomes a source of self-identification, and this identification of selves to their partially shared object becomes a source of shared identification amongst members of a mass. The partial satisfaction and partial stability generated in a social group is an expression of libidinal attachments to someone(s), something(s), or some meaning(s), and such attachments remain active and meaningful insofar as they provide an avenue for identification (52, see also Reich, 1970). Such a mass might be a religious organization, a political party or project, a philosophical or scientific understanding and approach to particular issues, or an attachment to a particular political-economic form of life. The central point that Freud makes is that long-standing social formations of whatever kind indicate that libidinal investments are being made and satisfactions—rational or irrational—are being had in and through such investments.

In other words, activities individuals repeatedly perform, and the interpretations and understandings of these activities, attain and maintain some degree of permanency in particular contexts because individuals derive—rationally or irrationally—a sense of libidinal satisfaction from their repeated experience. From these partially satisfied, partially conscious investments, new investments are produced and so transform older investments. Following this logic, Freud’s (2004) theory of libidinal investment can be interpreted as fundamentally fluid and open-ended and so one that holds out hope for radical social transformations fostering radical transformations in the character and direction of desire. If the emergence and relatively stable maintenance of a long-term social formation—a “mass”—is characterized by identifications as expressions of libidinal inhibitions, then the transformation of a mass is ultimately dependent upon tensions generated by the relative increase of, or acute failure to satisfy, latent investments. “If a drive-situation may (as is indeed usually the case) turn out in various ways, we shall not be surprised to find that the eventual outcome will be the one associated with the possibility of a certain satisfaction, whereas a different one, even a more obvious one, will not ensue because actual circumstances refuse to let it attain that goal” (74–75). In other words, the potentially radical transformation of desire remains fundamentally uncertain in the sense that desires may remain ultimately irrational; there is no guarantee that a particular

arrangement of social relations will foster particular needs, wants, and actions (see also Arendt 2006; Strong 2012b). In addition, there is no guarantee that different arrangements of social relations will necessarily foster the dissolution of what Marx (1970) identifies as ideologies and what Freud (2004) identifies as illusions—both of which hinder the ability or desire to transform radically social relations in the first place.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (2004) traces the relationship between individuals and their social conditions to examine the parameters of desire in relation to cultural reality. Freud seeks to understand the continuing importance illusions play in the libidinal economy of modern individuals. Why do significant numbers of individuals continue to hold on to improbable beliefs in spite of their incredible nature? Freud concludes that illusion performs a “triple function”; illusory belief is invested in “warding off the terrors of nature, reconciling humans to the cruelty of fate, notably as revealed in death, and compensating them for the sufferings and privations imposed upon them by living together in a culture group” (123). Beliefs that are otherwise incredible or that run in a direction opposite an individual’s or a group’s own interests retain their potency because of the strength of the desires and anxieties that drive the creation and reproduction of the illusions in the first place. The illusions Freud examines serve to decrease anxiety, increase satisfaction, and provide some measure of certainty of self and society. “The secret of [illusions’] strength is the strength of [our] desires” (138). Such illusions are not simply false, nor are they necessarily irrational. They emerge out of a particular social milieu as humans negotiate their desires with and against what are believed to be the boundaries of social possibility. If social actions emerge as expressions of needs and desires, then social ideals are stabilized instances of meaning derived from practice. To the extent that they do persist, social ideals may continue to imbue action with meaning even if the initial conditions responsible for the emergence of a given ideal have been transformed. Again, the crucial point here is that Freud gestures toward the possibility that social investments and identifications have the potential to disengage from their immediate, material-libidinal contexts of emergence, making them potentially radical or reactionary. Such considerations of the risky character of desire can inspire frustration, but they remain crucial to thinking through theoretically and struggling practically on behalf of political projects that aim to enlarge the realm of freedom and play. If we take Freud’s understanding of desire seriously in relationship to Marx’s understanding of the realm of freedom and play, our assessment of the possibility that a change in

social relations will necessarily eliminate instances of irrationality, aggression, or destruction can be hopeful while remaining tempered against either Marx's or Marcuse's more seamlessly confident assumptions.

Conclusion

The master question animating this essay is what a theory of freedom might look like in light of taking seriously Freud's emphasis on the significance of libidinal desire in individual and social life. In attempting to think through the possibilities of this dynamic with regard to the expansion of creative play in particular, I have pivoted between work and desire. With regard to work, the use of automation to solve the labor question appears to be a necessary but not sufficient resolution, while alternative resolutions such as rotating tasks and decreasing consumption shift the form or scale of the questions rather than adequately resolve them. Finding these attempts to transcend the realm of coercive work in favor of the realm of free play, I have turned to the work of Marcuse.

Marcuse's work is crucial in the present context for two reasons: he reorients the angle from which Marxists and others might approach the issue of expanding freedom by dissolving the strict distinction between work and play, and he secures this reorientation of the dichotomy by giving serious attention to the character and role of desire. In line with Marcuse, I too contend that attention to desire is a crucial component for any satisfactory analysis of increasing freedom and play. To limit an analysis of expanding free time and creative play to transformations in political-economic relations presumes both too much and too little. Such an analysis presumes too much in the sense that changes in political and economic relations cannot be assumed to lead directly and self-evidently to changes in consciousness, values, and everyday social and cultural relations and practices that take place partially or entirely beyond the purview of political and economic relations. At the same time, such an analysis presumes too little because strictly political and economic understandings of expanding the realm of freedom and play downplay or ignore entirely the significance of human desires.

Nevertheless, I contend that Marcuse's attempt to resolve the dichotomy between labor and desire is ultimately unsatisfactory. In bringing the question of desire to bear on the possibility of expanding free time and creative play, Marcuse follows Freud in suggesting that both rational and irrational desires can be safely channeled into socially useful work. This maneuver is inadequate

for two reasons. First, the assumption holds in Marcuse as much as in Freud that some drives and desires must remain repressed via sublimation. In other words, there is not so much a reduction in libidinal repression in Marcuse as there is a more radical rechanneling of risky desires. More germane to the line of thought I have traced is the question of what is at stake in the dissolution of the work-play distinction.

Considered to be a way of transcending the limitations of the questions about labor that take for granted the dichotomy, as well as a way to address the question of desire in relation to Marxist analyses, Marcuse's work-as-play resolution reduces rather than expands the realm of freedom as Marx understands it. In light of the issue of emancipated play in particular, Marcuse's work-as-play thesis decreases rather than increases the possibilities of expanding the realm of self-directed creativity and play taken as ends in themselves. Work-as-play reduces the character and scope of play; play serves as a channel—a means—for a series of socially useful functions. Simply put, I contend that Marcuse's resolution of the dichotomy between labor and desire by way of his concept of work-as-play points in a direction opposite to those who, like Marx, seek to emancipate free and creative play from the imperatives of social necessities. It is crucial that those seeking such an emancipation of play hold on to the distinction Marx makes between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom and work in whatever fashions found practical and deemed desirable to reduce the amount of time we spend in the first so as to increase the amount of time we may finally experience in the latter.

Given the importance of maintaining Marx's distinction between work and play, questions about the significance of desire remains. The component of aggressive, destructive irrationality that Freud maintains must necessarily remain in any understanding of desire irrespective of the particular historical or social conditions in which such desire manifests, serves to trouble a straightforward Marxist project aiming to decrease necessity and increase freedom and play. Freud sounds a warning against the assumption that changes in social relations necessarily translate into changes in the forms of identifications and investments that libidinal energies make. If the goal is to increase the realm of free and creative play, it is given a better chance at being secured if due attention is paid to the possibility that social structural transformations by themselves may be necessary but insufficient to ensure the goal of emancipated play. In addition to seeking and building practical and political projects aimed at shifting social relations in the direction of increased free time, it is important to identify and explain the instances of real or apparent irrational investments that particular

individuals or groups make. In other words, we must seek to understand the underlying fears, anxieties, and frustrations that variously motivate the formation and stubborn persistence of aggressive or destructive beliefs, values, and actions that derail transformation of those social relations necessary to allow for the emancipation of play.

In spite of the risky and often inscrutable character of irrational desires, it is worth recognizing even in Freud a reason for careful hope. As I have discussed, Freud's own logic leads him to conclude that desire is inherently fluid and so amenable to at least some degree of purposeful guidance. Whether he is right to claim that aggression and fear will remain prominent in a radically restructured society is something that we cannot know in advance. Nevertheless, we do know that libidinal energies move in multiple directions across varying objects of identification and investment. Although this fungible character of desire presents the unwelcome possibility of risk and failure for those seeking to emancipate play from social constraints, it is this same fungible character of desire that presents the possibility that the most welcome radical changes in direction—of political and economic relations, but also of beliefs, values, and the libidinal energies that underlie social relations more broadly—may occur.

In short, the question of desire must be kept in mind by those seeking to create social relations and conditions for the expansion of play and pleasure. Going forward, those working in play studies can both challenge the temptation to fold work into play as a means of suppressing certain desires, while productively working to assess if and how desires themselves may be reorganized both as a way towards social transformation and as a response to changes in political, economic, cultural, and social structures and relations. In our current situation, are there some ideologies or social institutions that might prove particularly amenable to irrational investments and identifications? Are we able to identify the most prominent or potent fears and anxieties underlying a radical restructuring of social relations? Is there even perhaps something about the possibility of radical freedom promised by play and creativity that fosters such anxieties? These and related questions can serve as fruitful starting points for further reflections in projects devoted to the expansion of play.

Students, in spite of reasonable skepticism, consistently express their desires for a radically different society. The possibility of living a life not devoted to necessary work, of living a life where self-directed imaginations and actions prevail, delights and inspires them. The task now is to begin the process of toggling between the equally essential spheres of utopian vision and practice,

always taking into consideration the potentially irrational basis of human desires. The character of desire, like the possibility of enlarging the realm of freedom, remains a question mark that only practical and political engagements can make clear or resolve.

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