

Summary

The American social theorist Philip Rieff acquired great academic prestige in the sixties as a cultural philosopher and an interpreter of the work of Sigmund Freud. His theory of ‘the emergence of Psychological Man’ was a provocative contribution to cultural theories of modernity and secularization. Today, because of a change in style towards esotericism and a dramatic decline in published work since the seventies, Rieff’s position in the academic canon is marginal. If any knowledge of Rieff’s work remains in the social sciences, humanities and theology, it is incomplete and stereotypical. In this thesis I present an integrated reading of Rieff’s published work in its entirety centering around two central themes: modernity and transcendence. This introductory aspect of my study has a theological focus. I examine Rieff’s conceptualization of religion, in order to situate Rieff’s theory in the existing debate on secularization in Holland where the definition of religion has become a central issue.

My study is divided into three parts. The first includes a general introduction and two introductory chapters. In the *Introduction* I describe the themes in Rieff’s work and situate them in the theoretical context of the current debate on secularization. Chapter 1 is a short sketch of Rieff’s life and academic career, organized around short descriptions of his major publications. In chapter 2 I present Rieff’s most important theoretical scheme. According to him modernity developed a totally new kind of theory (*‘theoria’*), which he calls ‘transformative theory’. This is the opposite of the kind of theory that was typical for premodern Western culture: ‘conformative theory’. This theoretical opposition underlies his interpretation of the works of Freud and his interpretation of modern culture.

In the second part of my study (chapters 3-7) I explore Rieff’s major publications. Through this second part run two main lines, an ‘archeological’ and a ‘thematic’ one. Along the archeological line I examine in detail how Rieff develops the conceptual structure of his cultural theory. In the thematic line I present three central themes in Rieff’s work: *authority*, *sublimation* and *sacred order*.

According to Rieff, authority forms a central, though ambivalent, theme in Freud’s works. Rieff says that a central paradox in Freud’s writings is that on the one hand authority, that is to say, the curbing of human desire, is his basic theme, but he develops this theme as a theory and technique that focus on the expression of desire. There are fundamental tensions here, that are never resolved in Freud’s thinking. Rieff responds to these tensions by taking an ambivalent stance towards Freud’s thinking. On the one hand, he considers Freud as an important, innovating and critical theorist whose work is of crucial importance for a cultural theory of modernity. On the other hand, Rieff considers Freud as the most typical anti-metaphysical modern thinker, whose therapeutic theory and technique promoted

the individualization of Western culture to such an extent that it became culturally destructive.

According to Rieff, Freud is the pre-eminent modern social theorist. He calls psychoanalysis 'a theory of the modern individual in an intrapsychic and social crisis'. In Rieff's interpretation, the central idea of Freud's concept of neurosis is the faltering identification of the individual with cultural ideals. The traditional cultural mechanisms of authority that regulated these processes ('sublimation') have gradually become dysfunctional. Human desire seeks alternative, neurotic, forms of expression. To really achieve these new forms the modern individual believes it has to liberate itself from the traditional mechanisms of authority. Psychoanalysis became a key instrument to reach this goal and therefore it became a very influential cultural factor itself. The key enemy to fight against was (Christian) religion. The autonomous individual, which Rieff typologically calls 'Psychological Man', aims at living without any reference to a transcendent or sacred order of reality.

Rieff's criticism of psychoanalysis is aimed towards its therapeutic, liberating stance which he pits against Freud's theoretical notions of authority. Freud suffered a 'theoretical myopia' because of his radical anti-metaphysical stance and he was blind to real cultural dynamism. Rieff agrees with Freud that neurosis is a *cultural* problem, but rejects Freud's solution as an illusion. Authority cannot be reduced to its psychological and social functions. The working of authority can never be fully analyzed, or brought under rational control, as were the ultimate aims of psychoanalysis. That is why, paradoxically, psychoanalysis contributed to obscuring the problem of authority. In this line of thinking Rieff develops the thesis that sublimation is a cultural problem and should not be conceptualized as a problem of the 'vicissitudes of libido', but as a problem of authority. Connected to this is Rieff's problematization of the modern notion of 'the self'.

Rieff's criticism of sublimation theory leads him to the ancient philosophical debate on the sublime: how can one repress the aggressive and destructive aspects of human desire that are intimately and inseparably connected to its erotic aspects? To achieve this repression a culture needs its 'controls'. According to Rieff the heart of culture is the interdict. The most characteristic feature of modern culture is the attempt to repress this idea, which Rieff calls 'the repression of repression'. According to Rieff this cultural ideal, which in fact is an *anti-cultural* ideal, is constitutive of the central realms of acculturation in modernity: education, science and art. In his later works, Rieff subsumes many modern cultural artifacts (scientific theories, paintings, novels, teaching methods) from these realms under the cultural-theoretical notion of 'therapy'. The final goal of therapy is to emancipate the individual from its subjection to authority and sacred order.

In his later works, Rieff offers a more explicit description of modern culture as 'anti-culture'. According to Rieff no culture can survive without reference to a sacred order, because the origin of the interdict is the sacred. Social order

originates in sacred order. From this starting point, he develops a theory of culture in which he refines his cultural analyses of modernity. In these later works there is an important change in Rieff's interpretation of late modernity. In his early work the notion of the emergence of Psychological Man was stated in the form of a psychohistorical model of Western cultural history. Three character-ideals, each typical for a certain cultural historical period, preceded that of Psychological Man: Political Man (antiquity), Religious Man (Middle Ages) and Economic Man (early modernity). Rieff's cultural historical thinking in this period is strongly diachronic and he interprets modernity as a discontinuity in cultural history. In his later works Rieff adds a synchronic aspect to his theory on modernity. According to him modernity gradually loses its grip on the human imagination and gives way to a new situation. Typical for late modernity is not the attempt to break with traditional culture, but the idea of a clash of *Weltanschauungen* in the 'second *Kulturkampf*'. The theoretical model he develops is an interesting contribution to the debate on multiculturalism.

In the third part of my study, chapter 8, I describe Rieff's conceptualization of religion in the context of the debate on secularization. In this debate the definition of religion is a central issue. First I discuss the problem of interdisciplinary theory which underlies this issue as a meta-theoretical problem. Rieff's theory is an attempt to unify theories found in social theory, the humanities, and theology. This attempt is meant to restore the critical scientific ideals of the Enlightenment that, according to Rieff, were lost in late modernity. I then summarize Rieff's main conceptual categories and describe how he conceptualizes religion from three perspectives: religion as *transcendence* (theological orientation), religion as *order* (sociological/anthropological orientation) and religion as *spontaneity* (psychological orientation). Rieff's central motif is to indicate how modern social theories and other cultural artifacts tend to a functionalist approach of transcendence, in which it becomes a function of immanent phenomena. According to Rieff, this approach is inadequate: transcendence cannot be conceived in this way. Rieff's social theory is theological in the sense that it tries to develop an approach to transcendence as a phenomenon *sui generis*.

A second important feature of Rieff's thinking on religion is that religion as sacred order cannot be studied separately from its institutional (i.e. social) forms, as social order. In this line of thinking 'de-pillarization' (*ontzuiling*) is an important issue in the debate on secularization in Holland. I discuss how 'de-pillarization' can be interpreted as a modern phenomenon from a Rieffian perspective.