

\$5.00

ISSN 0033-2836
LC 76-21889
PSREAJ 71(4) 517-676 (1984)

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC REVIEW

VOLUME 71, NUMBER 4, Winter 1984-85

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This journal combines The Psychoanalytic Review (founded 1913) and Psychoanalysis (founded 1952). Former editors of Psychoanalysis: John C. Gustin, Clement Staff. Former editors of The Psychoanalytic Review: William Alanson White, Smith Ely Jelliffe, and Nolan D. C. Lewis, Marie Coleman Nelson.
A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION FOR
PSYCHOANALYSIS, INC.

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THE PSYCHOANALYTIC REVIEW (ISSN 0033-2836) is published four times a year in July, Sept., Nov., and Dec. at an annual U.S. subscription rate of \$69 for institutions and \$30 for individuals (Canada and foreign orders add \$10) by Guilford Publications, Inc., 200 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10003. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes (Form 3579) to *The Psychoanalytic Review*, c/o Guilford Publications, Inc., 200 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10003.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION: For all orders outside the U.S. add \$10.00. Payment must be made in U.S. dollars or at the current rate of exchange. For payment not made in U.S. currency and through a U.S. bank, add \$6 service charge. **ADVERTISING** inquiries should be made to The Guilford Press, Attn: Advertising Manager.

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INDEXED in the Science Citation Index, the Social Science Citation Index, Current Contents/Social and Behavioral Sciences, the Chicago Psychoanalytic Literature Index, and Selected List of Tables of Contents of Psychiatric Periodicals, Language and Language Behavior Abstracts, Abstracts on Criminology and Penology (Netherlands), Excerpta Medica, Index Medicus, Social Work Research and Abstracts, Psychological Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Bernard DeBoer, Inc., Distributor to bookstores, 113 East Centre St., Nutley, N.J. 07110

THE ELUSIVE FREUD

Sheldon D. Pollack

The attempt to situate Freud within the traditional categories of political and social theory has been unsuccessful from the outset. While psychoanalysis touches many disciplines there has been no uniform comprehension of the nature of psychoanalysis as a body of observations about man and culture. The major schools of thought have seen Freud in different ways; paradoxically, conservative and radical theorists of various persuasions have seen Freud alternately as kin and adversary. It is obvious that Freud's thought is neither conservative nor radical in any clearcut way, hence, efforts to reveal the "true" Freud and link him to a particular school of thought inevitably fail. The "true" Freud is fundamentally ambiguous; psychoanalysis is a mixed bag in its implications for social and political theory. The ambiguity in Freud's thought has contributed to the constantly shifting assessment of Freud as conservative or radical.

FREUD AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Despite Freud's claim that his theoretical insights were either ignored or received by unsympathetic and even hostile colleagues, psychoanalysis was indeed widely noticed by the rest of the intellectual world. Freud's own assessment of the negative reaction that his theories drew from among his immediate colleagues in the medical and psychiatric professions must be accepted warily; the whole "myth" of Freud's isolation has recently been challenged (Sulloway, 1979). Furthermore, the reaction within intellectual circles which was slow in developing and mixed in its review became significant nonetheless. Hardly any discipline of thought has remained unaffected by the Freudian revolution, but the impact has also been uncertain. Freud arrogantly predicted that psychoanalysis would eventually subsume the traditional social

science disciplines: "For sociology, too, dealing as it does with the behavior of people in society, cannot be anything but applied psychology. Strictly speaking there are only two sciences: psychology pure and applied and natural science" (Freud, 1933). But the social sciences persist, and Freud has been left behind as psychoanalysis remains undigested by the traditional schools of thought.

Freud was appreciated by contemporary intellectuals, but their assessment of the nature of his theories was never very clear. In the 1920s and 1930s anthropologists such as Mead and Malinowski were strongly motivated by a desire to "disprove" Freudian theories of culture and society. Of course, Freud himself never would have predicted that they would find a replica of the bourgeois family structure on the Trobriand Islands or Samoa. Similar misperceptions appeared in early attempts to synthesize psychoanalysis with liberal political science. The young Walter Lippmann was moved by Freud, and *A Preface to Politics* (1914) contains a Freudian concern with human nature in politics and political science. Yet, Lippmann never developed his perspective and soon abandoned it altogether. Similarly, Harold Lasswell's initial interest in Freudian theory culminated in *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930); yet, he also soon moved away from psychoanalysis and limited psychology to being a tool of behavioral methodology in political science. A genuine and lasting influence by Freud upon the discipline of political science never materialized.

The Marxist tradition of political analysis also noticed Freud, yet its rejection was strong. Grasping the unsettling implications of psychoanalysis for the whole structure of Marx's theory of man and society, Freud was dogmatically condemned as a "bourgeois" theorist and biological determinist. Wilhelm Reich (1972) found himself rejected by Marxists for his interest in psychoanalysis and by the psychoanalytic movement for his Marxist tendencies. Freud's own shallow assessment of the contradictory relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis—"communism and psychoanalysis go ill together" (Wortis, 1954)—contributed to the hostility between the two world views. Lenin's official condemnation of psychoanalysis finalized the antagonism between the two theoretical traditions that persisted for decades.

It was impossible for Marxists, liberal political scientists, anthropologists, and most intellectuals to ignore Freud. At the same time, his contemporaries had difficulty accepting the Freudian understanding of man and culture because it conflicted with their own ideological

perspectives. Freud was too important to ignore, yet impossible to digest. Radicals saw him as a "bourgeois" or "conservative", and liberals perceived him as a theorist of the irrational. Freud was recognized widely as a conservative social theorist; however, he did not fit well into any particular tradition.

THE FREUDIAN LEFT

A generation of intellectuals in the 1950s remembered Freud much as did Lionel Trilling: shockingly modern in his assessment of man and sexuality, but essentially conservative regarding culture and politics. Lasswell's *Psychopathology and Politics* had presented the conservative conception of a "politics of prevention", and this understanding of psychoanalysis as a theory of the irrational dominated in the 1950s. Freud was known most widely among intellectuals as a conservative theorist of repression, the irrational unconscious, and *massen* psychology. Indeed, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) did much to cultivate this image.

This dominant image of Freud as a conservative social theorist was dispelled by the publication of Herbert Marcuse's influential *Eros and Civilization* (1955). The theorists of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research had long attempted to integrate Freudian theory with their own neo-Marxist methodology. While the Frankfurt School was still in its European period, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer sought to utilize psychoanalytic insights into their own studies of the family, authority, and mass culture (Jay, 1973). In the 1930s Erich Fromm, having been trained at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, was the theorist associated with the Institute most prominent in his study of Freud. During this period, Fromm and Wilhelm Reich were particularly zealous in applying psychoanalysis to the neo-Marxist analysis of politics and culture. However, it was not until the publication in English of Marcuse's "philosophical" study of psychoanalysis that the image of Freud as a conservative was eroded among intellectual circles in the West.

With the rising popularity of Marcuse and the whole Frankfurt School among the New Left of the 1960s, that image of Freud as a conservative social theorist was drastically altered. By the end of the decade, the "Freudian Left" that had formerly been only a minor wing of the psychoanalytic movement was now a major theoretical perspective. Freud was even regarded by some as a fullfledged "revolutionary":

I cannot be convinced that Freud was anything less than a revolutionary, the man who rendered for the twentieth century services comparable to those Marx rendered for the nineteenth. (Robinson, 1969, p. 7)

Such an assessment is still widely held by many theorists of the New Left who see in Freud a proponent of human liberation from repression and neurosis, the modern cultural equivalent of Marx's "alienation." Psychoanalysis is viewed as a form of social therapy. In the words of Russell Jacoby (1975), "psychoanalysis is a theory of an unfree society that necessitates psychoanalysis as a therapy" (p. 122).

Despite the fact that Freud never saw himself as a "revolutionary" and discounted the possibility or desirability of creating a psychoanalytic movement as a therapeutic politics for repressed society, the "Freudian Left" has managed to claim Freud as an intellectual forefather. (For instance, consider such examples as: Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*, Reimut Reiche, *Sexuality and Class Struggle*, Bruce Brown, *Marx, Freud, and the Critique of Everyday Life*, and a wide variety of authors whose works appear in such journals as *Telos* and the *New Left Review*.) There is indeed a sense in which Freud the "radical" sought the social origins of repression and neurosis, thus implying that therapy could do more than just alleviate human "misery" and turn it into "everyday unhappiness." However, the perspective of Freud for almost a half-century was that repression is necessary and inevitable, and that therapy has a limited goal of reintegrating the individual into the family and economy. The dogmatic Marxists of the 1930s were closer to the truth in portraying this side of Freud than the Freudian Left has managed to forget. Although there is nothing intellectually dishonest in developing a psychological methodology for a radical political perspective, it is bad intellectual history to link Freud himself to such an endeavor.

THE CONSERVATIVE FREUD

If the New Left was fairly successful in staking a claim on Freud, other theorists have continued to object to the portrait of Freud as a radical social theorist. One of the best secondary works on Freud, Philip Rieff's *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (1961), argues the case for the conservative side. Rieff recognizes the "full-range of Freud's hermeneutic techniques." However, rather than taking Freud's hermeneutics toward

a radical theory of human liberation, in the manner of such theorists as Jurgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur, Rieff points out the limitations on politics implied by Freudian theory.

Psychoanalysis exposes the triviality of much contemporary agonizing over the conditions of social organization that encourages conformity. It undercuts the whole problem of the freedom of the individual in any society, emphasizing instead the theme of the anti-political individual seeking his self-protection in a context as far from the community as possible. All politics are corrupt. . . . (1961, p. 280)

Other political theorists have challenged the portrait of a "radical" Freud. In a recent study of the political philosophy of the Frankfurt School, written by George Friedman (1981), a sympathetic outsider to the School, Freud's own position is contrasted with the "revised" conception of Freud that emerges from the Frankfurt theorists.

To Freud the scarcity of nature constitutes a permanent and transhistorical reality. One simply could never abolish the reality that perpetually denies man those things that man craves most. Marcuse, reading Marx, raised the possibility and the reality of conquering nature. This world-historical, and to Freud inconceivable, reality is the starting point for Marcuse. (p. 90)

Without denigrating the thought of the Frankfurt School, the separation between their position and that of Freud must be raised and clarified. Marcuse's claim of remaining faithful to the spirit of Freud's theory must surely be questioned, although his reading of psychoanalysis is important and illuminating just the same.

Of recent challenges to the image of a radical Freud, perhaps the most important reinterpretation is Frank Sulloway's *Freud: Biologist of the Mind* (1979). Although Sulloway's work is overly ambitious, it is quite successful in altering the traditional understandings of Freud and the psychoanalytic movement. Most important to present concerns, Sulloway traces the origins of Freud's thought to a nineteenth century Darwinism. The crypto-biologist that emerges from Sulloway's portrait of Freud is not really very new; Marxist contemporaries of Freud saw him as a theorist of biological determinism and hence as a conservative opposed to radical politics. However, the overall picture does much to correct the image of Freud as a radical theorist of human liberation. Sulloway's Freud is the dynamic leader of a movement firmly under his control. His original emphasis upon biological theory and Darwinism persisted and permeated his work even after subsequent revi-

sions. The shift to the social, political, and economic concerns that takes place in the hands of the Freudian Left is undercut by Sulloway's insistence that Freudian theory at heart focuses upon immutable biological drives. Although Sulloway carries his point too far and fails to recognize Freud's own statements that psychoanalysis relies upon a conception of psychology independent of physiology (Freud, 1905), his argument does much to counter the radical's thesis that man can ever feel comfortable in society. The "biological" theories of Freud point toward an irreconcilable conflict between man and society that defies radical theories of politics.

Despite the strong arguments in favor of the conservative interpretation of Freud, the question inevitably arises: How has Freud's thought lent itself to such different interpretations over the years? How could theorists of both the right and left claim Freud as an intellectual heir?

THE AMBIGUOUS FREUD

The reason that Freud could be seen as kin to both conservative and radical social theorists is found in the breadth and ambiguity in Freud's thought. Psychoanalysis touches upon a diversity of topics and in a sense contains a little bit for everyone. At the same time Freud is ambiguous at key points in his theory—or at least, the theory implies several possible directions in which it legitimately could be taken.

The ambiguity surrounding psychoanalysis is evident at several levels in Freud's thought. First, he often takes an ambiguous stance regarding the "moral" implications of his theories. As Norman O. Brown (1959) has observed:

Freud's writings, taken as a whole, vacillate between two opposite answers to this perpetual question of unhappy humanity. Sometimes the counsel is instinctual renunciation: Grow up and give up your infantile dreams of pleasure, recognize reality for what it is. And sometimes the counsel is instinctual liberation: change this harsh reality so that you may recover your lost sources of pleasure. And sometimes, of course, Freud attempts a compromise between the two attitudes. (p. 57)

Such a wavering position helps to explain the different characterizations of psychoanalysis by other theorists. For instance, the concept of repression which is so central to Freud's theory ("the doctrine of

repression is the foundation-stone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests, the most essential part of it. . . ." [Freud, 1914]) can be legitimately seen as the basis for a theory of liberation from the neurosis of social life. On the other hand, Freud can be described justly as a proponent of repression due to the need to contain man's inherently aggressive and antisocial nature. Both interpretations stem directly from Freud himself.

The second source of confusion in how to label Freud hinges upon the disjunction between Freudian theory and Freud himself. This is reflected in the fact that Freud has been properly described as "bourgeois" and "conservative" in his personal life, while it is Freudian theory which has been appreciated by radical social critics. The man and his theory are at odds. Russell Jacoby (1975) argues:

Freud's subversiveness is derived from his concepts and not from his stated political opinions. This disjunction is absolutely crucial to recognize: the disjunction between the political, social, and truth content of concepts and the political-social outlook of those using the concepts. . . . If Freud was "conservative" in his immediate disregard of society, his concepts are radical in their pursuit of society where it allegedly does not exist: in the privacy of the individual. (pp. 25-26)

It is all too convenient for radical theorists to insist upon this artificial disjunction between Freud and his theory. However, as long as this distinction is made, it is possible to "revise" psychoanalysis and arrive at the Freudian Left position.

A final and more substantial ambiguity in Freud's overall venture stems from the distinction between psychoanalysis as theory and psychoanalysis as therapy. Especially in America the art of therapy took on a momentum all its own, developing into a coherent social structure aligned with the "helping professions." As such an institution within the social structure, professional therapy seeks the reconciliation of the patient with the environment. Professional therapy serves the interests of society by "adjusting" its social misfits; the onus is upon the individual to reconcile his or her needs with those of society. In Freud's own terms, the goal of therapy is to help the individual to work and to love, that is, to live within the world of the economy and family. Therapy rests upon the notion that people ought to adjust to the world as a given; social reform is beyond the means of the analyst. The function of therapy is inherently conservative.

Psychoanalysis as therapy has a radical side. Rather than imagin-

ing therapy as a remedy for the individual and his adjustment to society, therapy can be conceived as part of a program of radical social reorganization. While Freud discounted the possibility of such a social therapy, nevertheless it is implied in his linking of neurosis to social institutions: "The neuroses themselves have turned out to be attempts to find individual solutions for the problems of compensating for unsatisfied wishes, while the institutions seek to provide *social* solutions for these same problems" (Freud, 1913).

The attitude of radical theory is that therapy aligned with a radical political prescription can lead toward a restructuring of the human condition. In this respect, a radical politics supported by psychological changes could penetrate deeper than a simple restructuring of institutions. Economic and political revolutions are more limited than social therapy aimed at the transformation of the psyche. This is social engineering of the highest order. Such an optimistic conception of revolution through mass social therapy appears in different guises in the writings and politics of Wilhelm Reich, Lenin, B. F. Skinner, Theodore Roszak, and Charles Reich. Such a diverse collection of theorists share the assumption that politics alone is not enough, and that humankind itself must undergo a form of mass therapy in order that political and social revolution succeed. Freud would agree that politics has its limitations, but he would probably doubt the possibility of any transformation of the human race.

Thus, it is little wonder that theorists have seen Freud from various perspectives. At times Freud looks profoundly conservative—as in his attitude toward work, repression, and human nature. Yet, psychoanalysis does suggest a theory of liberation from neurosis and repression, and it faults social institutions for at least some human misery. If mass social therapy or an "eroticization" of life is not Freud's intention, radical social theorists have not had to depart very far from Freud's own text to imagine such possibilities. If Freud has been misinterpreted as a radical social theorist, such "misinterpretation" was inevitable given the ambiguous nature of Freud's thought.

THE ESSENTIALS OF FREUD

While certain ambiguities in Freud's thought may lend themselves to various interpretations and political perspectives, there is an essential core of psychoanalytic insights which bear unambiguously upon poli-

tical and social theory. The essence and spirit of Freudian theory is much closer to the conservative understanding, and radical theorists who wish to utilize psychoanalysis must recognize the difference in intention between their own work and that of Freud. Several key Freudian concepts defy any Utopian or radical interpretations of psychoanalysis.

First, Freud's conception of repression closes the door to any possibility of either liberation or eroticization. Freud views human nature as inherently aggressive, antisocial, and at odds with society's need for labor and peaceful social interaction. While eros and love bind people into social groups, repression is necessary to live together in community. Hence, repression is a vital component of individual development and also of social development. Those who see in psychoanalysis a theory of liberation from repression simply distort the core of Freud's position. At the close of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud even suggests that increasingly sophisticated technological skills in creating human destruction make *more* repression necessary in the modern world. Marcuse is most successful in sidestepping the conservative implications of Freud's notion of repression. His distinction between "surplus" and "basic" repression is useful in correcting the lack of specificity in psychoanalysis which makes it difficult to distinguish between repression related to individual development and that of social development. Still, Marcuse hints that basic repression is so minimal that life itself will become erotic once surplus repression is overcome. In Freudian terms, even the basic repression makes such an occurrence impossible. Human nature requires repression; social and economic revolution may solve problems of inequality, but they can not solve the problem of the unhappiness that is part of the human condition.

Second, the concept of "scarcity" in Freud's work also defies economic or political solutions. Indeed, there is not even a psychological solution to scarcity as Freud conceives it. According to Freud the existentialist, life itself is limited and bound by the inevitability of death. Material goods do not satisfy, since happiness depends upon fulfilling primal desires, of which wealth is not one. Even sexuality does not offer the possibility of complete satisfaction ("Something in the nature of the sexual instinct is unfavorable to the achievement of absolute gratification" [Freud, 1912]). Human beings strive for libidinal satisfaction, yet the human body does not cooperate. The demands of society for work and restraint frustrate man's ability to

satisfy aggressive drives. The scarcity of nature and unappeasable drives make "scarcity" a feature of the human condition itself. Utopian claims that people can achieve satisfaction in the world of material goods or human relations conflict with the fundamental existential gloom of Freud. Problems of poverty or unequal distribution can be altered; yet, existence itself suffers from a transhistorical scarcity that radical politics can not change.

Finally, Freud's theory suggests that while an individual is a political and social being, that individual is a conservative political being bound by "the authority of the past," as Philip Rieff (1961) describes it. The superego makes humans conservative beings insofar as they are linked via the unconscious to their past. The human is a creature who yearns for authority; the figure of the father is replaced by the political leader of the community. It is a Utopian illusion to envision either a community based upon self-interest or principles of reason. Individuals require institutionalized repression to contain their aggression, and they desire a leader as the object of the group's affection. The individual as a political being is both conservative and irrational. The history of politics is the cyclical history of repression, rebellion, and the reinstitutionalization of repression. There is no end to politics; the most that can be accomplished is for politics to contain human aggression and rebellion, but it can not *solve* these problems.

CONCLUSION

The implications of Freud's thought for social and political theory are rather conservative. The portrait of humankind and society that emerges from Freudian theory is opposed to the intentions of such radical social theorists as Wilhelm Reich, Norman O. Brown, and the theorists of the Frankfurt School. Still, it is possible to employ Freudian thought in a radical social and economic critique without linking Freud himself to the venture. Such an approach can be found in the social criticism of Christopher Lasch (1979) and Philip Rieff (1966) in their analyses of the "therapeutic society." Critics of the left and right will find psychoanalytic theory useful in providing insights into the manipulation of the individual that takes place in mass-bourgeois society (as well as within the totalitarian polity).

In the end, it is impossible to answer successfully whether Freud and his theory are conservative or radical. Freud was not himself a political philosopher nor was he particularly specific or articulate when he did discuss the political and social. Hence, the ambiguities in his own thought have generated conflicting interpretations of Freudian theory. Despite the relative strength of the conservative interpretation, psychoanalysis is a theory of such diverse trends and characteristics that no single interpretation can be claimed as definitive.

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The Psychoanalytic Review
Vol. 71, No. 4, 1984