

Political Freud

A HISTORY

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Introduction—Political Freud

In 1968, at a convention of Students for a Democratic Society, I spied a pamphlet by Herbert Marcuse on the book table: *The Obsolescence of the Freudian Conception of Man*. That ideas such as the unconscious and repression could become obsolete shocked me. I remember this today because it encapsulates the two meanings of *Political Freud*. First, for a New Leftist like myself, Marcuse epitomized the ideas that it was impossible to understand politics without insight into the irrational forces that shaped history and that Freudian thought was incomparably the deepest path we had to such insight. Second, the pamphlet's title suggested that Freud's thought was itself historical, depending on the social and cultural conditions that gave rise to it and that could also render it obsolete. In the next few years I watched as Freudian thought *did* become "obsolete," at least in part, and for reasons having nothing to do with its intellectual merits. Its plausibility was undermined through the

dynamics of consumer capitalism, the commercial ambition of pharmaceuticals and insurance companies, the openness of the public sphere to any sensational claim, no matter how ill-founded, the politics of gender and sexuality, and the changing meanings of private life.

Years later, having become a historian of psychoanalysis, I concluded that both senses of Political Freud—as a way of understanding history and as a product of history—were valid. On the one hand, Freudian thought was integral to many if not all of the great progressive currents of the twentieth century, including the cultural rebellions of the 1920s, African American radicalism, surrealism, Popular Front antifascism, the New Left, radical feminism, and queer theory. Its focus on the psychic bases of societal domination generated some of the landmark political-critical books of the last century, such as Wilhelm Reich's study of the psychofamilial roots of Nazism (*Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 1933), Frantz Fanon's excavation of racialized colonial violence (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952), and Juliet Mitchell's rereading of psychoanalysis as a theory of patriarchy or male domination (*Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, 1974). As these examples suggest, political Freud had an affinity with the left and, at times, with heterodox Marxism. On the other hand, every aspect of psychoanalysis, from the recruitment and training of the profession to the most private recesses of the analytic hour, had been shaped, and often warped, by such powerful political forces as anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic self-interest. Even within the privileged space of the consulting room, there was always a tension between free associations, whose center of gravity was depth, and the surface traffic of everyday life.

I was repeatedly struck, too, by the costs of the obsolescence of political Freud. The shallowness and manipulativeness of the late-twentieth-century political sphere; the power of collective emotions like hope, fear, and denial; the weakness of social bonds when based on identification alone; the ease with which group paranoia was mobilized; the role of projection in justifying aggression; the futile longing for leadership; the powerfully unfolding and deeply positive racial,

sexual, and familial revolutions, and so much more, seemed to me to cry out for psychoanalytic insight. Absent that insight, and the radical temperament that accompanied it in the past, I watched at least one great nation lose its way. At the same time, I was struck by the ignorance that surrounded the figure of Freud, the ease with which words like *sexism* or *homophobia* were applied to some of the deepest and most complex concepts he originated, the shockingly false claims of refutation advanced by ahistorical and unphilosophical gatekeepers like Frederick Crews, and the effortless with which the news media was manipulated, especially when the subject was what counted as science.¹ What surprised me, above all, was the lack of resolution on the part of American psychoanalysts, their almost pathetic inability to defend either themselves or their project.

What made the situation particularly distressing was my understanding, as a historian, that psychoanalysis had had a critical or political side from the first. In Europe, where it was born around 1900, amidst a crumbling feudal past, incipient dictators, and omnipresent threat of violence, that meant it trained its critical side on the “father complex.” In the 1920s and 1930s, many drew upon Freud’s insights into the wish to submit, to idealize “father-figures,” as well as into the ubiquity of aggression and sadism, to illuminate the fascist preoccupation with a leader or *Fuehrer*. Later, after Freudianism spread to the United States, others drew on Freud’s insights into the loss of the ego in groups, the credulity of an unreflective “individualism,” and the power of narcissism, to illuminate the “mass” or consumer society that triumphed after World War II. In both Europe and America, psychoanalysis clarified the weakness or loss of individual autonomy that ran through the new mass societies. Whereas under fascism the threat to autonomy came in the form of submission to masters and father figures, in consumer society it came in the form of the merging of one’s identity with a “crowd,” “mass,” or market, or through a one-sided retreat into private life and a fashionable contempt for politics. A shared subterranean current of critical thought seemed therefore to unite the European and American strands of Freudianism.

Yet at some point in the 1970s the critical tradition of political Freudianism was largely obliterated, especially outside the university, and a shrunken and distorted image of Freud installed in its place. Conceiving this book as a response, I set myself two interrelated tasks: first, to reaffirm the critical element in Freudianism and, second, to explain the reasons why political Freud had become “obsolete.” My guiding intuition was that the two tasks were interconnected. On the one hand, political Freudianism had arisen to meet a felt need to understand the irrational or unconscious dimension of historical experience. Thus it arose among African Americans because the psychic costs of slavery went so far beyond political and economic deprivation or social exclusion. It arose among Jews because the Nazi project so far exceeded any instrumental Great Power ambition. It arose among women because misogyny was inexplicable simply as a means of gaining control over women’s labor or even over women’s bodies. In each case something “extra” needed to be explained. The chapters that follow identify this “extra”—unconscious mental life—and chart the efforts of political Freudians to probe its depths.

At the same time, I knew that there was something deeply irrational in the rejection of psychoanalysis. To be sure, I knew there was much truth in the criticisms. As the product of an immigrant Jewish background, I had never encountered a truly sexist professional milieu until I observed upwardly mobile, *nouveau riche* American psychoanalysts, especially in their homes. While I knew that Freud had been quite progressive for his time on the question of homosexuality, I also knew that many later analysts held views that were repulsive to me. I understood very well why women did not feel comfortable with a concept like “penis envy.” I knew that the psychoanalytic profession was overwhelmingly white and middle class. And although I was aware that American culture was inhospitable to any form of thought that did not yield immediate short-term benefits, I was not convinced that this was always a bad thing. But none of this changed my fundamental sense that the one-sided rejection of Freudianism was part of a huge step backward politically and culturally, that the baby was being thrown out with the

bathwater, and that it was necessary to look at both the critical side of Freudianism as well as the affirmative, even oppressive side, and to work through their entanglement. This book is the result.

The first chapter, “Psychoanalysis and the Spirit of Capitalism,” can be read as an attempt to create a context for political Freudianism, especially its American wing. It situates the sweep of psychoanalytic history, from its charismatic origins to its “obsolescence,” amid the shift from nineteenth-century competitive capitalism, with its strong work ethic and its demand for saving, to twentieth-century corporate capitalism, with its encouragement of a hedonistic and expansive consumerism. This shift precipitated a new understanding of personal life. In the older, tradition-bound competitive capitalist era, family, community and work largely determined individual identity. The new horizons of corporate capitalism enabled a new sense of interiority, not reducible to societal relations but powerfully shaped by early familial experiences. Psychoanalysis gave voice to this sense of a unique, idiosyncratic intrapsychic life. What propelled it to its leading place was its conviction that existing controls over sexuality and the instincts were irrational and unjust, a conviction that had an affinity with the new possibilities of large-scale capitalism.

The chapter explains this affinity by arguing that analysis helped provide “a new spirit of capitalism”—in Max Weber’s sense of the term—for the era of mass consumption. As analyzed by Weber, capitalism’s original spirit—the Protestant ethic—was ascetic, compulsive, and “pharisaic” or hypocritical, justifying profit and even exploitation so long as it brought in money. In contrast, the newer spirit was tolerant of sexuality, attuned to the emotional currents of personal life, frank, direct, and straightforward. The original spirit had been part of a traditional culture that relied on obedience, hard work, and frugality and in which the family was generally the unit of production. The newer one reflected a world in which the family was a unit of consumption and there was an ongoing drive to expand spending. The transition to a consumer-centered ethic included a long-term revolution in sexual and familial norms to which Freudianism was central, one that reached its high point in the 1960s

and 1970s. In the end, however, this revolution diverged from Freudianism in elevating instinctual release or gratification over and against Freud's goal of instinctual renunciation or sublimation.

Throughout this chapter, both meanings of political Freud are in play. On the one hand, I use psychoanalysis to extend Weber's account by showing that capitalist society affected not only the preconscious structure of economic motivation and behavior but also released primary processes and unconscious fantasies at the level of mass culture, while undermining paternal authority by revealing its unconscious sources. On the other hand, I historicize psychoanalysis. By situating it vis-à-vis the transition from societies oriented to restraint, control, and guilt to those oriented to release, spontaneity, and empowerment, the chapter helps explain how Freudianism itself spawned conditions that gave rise to its own obsolescence. Yet understanding those conditions raises the possibility that psychoanalysis can remain relevant in analyzing the new repressive or desublimizing aspects of "release."

Chapter 1 discloses the interplay between Freudianism and the "American century," meaning the spread of an American-style mass consumerist ethic throughout the world. It thereby suggests that the ideal of individual freedom, based on access to technology and consumer goods, is only the outer face of American capitalism. At a deeper level, the United States is still grounded in an unmastered—unconscious—past. Slaveholding, the plantation system, and Jim Crow are basic to this past, along with violence, dispossession, and war. Understanding America more deeply therefore raises the issue of *memory*, a popular and collective process that can be distinguished from history and is the subject of chapter 2. In "Beyond the Blues" I examine the radical African American and Afro-Caribbean intellectuals who drew on the Freudian critique of the father complex, in the form of the master-slave relationship, in order to build a collective memory in the Black community. Here, too, the problem of obsolescence looms, since from reading most contemporary history or cultural studies one might conclude that Black America had been immune to the pervasive Freudianism of the twentieth century.

In fact, psychoanalytic thought was central to three great episodes of African American and Afro-Caribbean radicalism that preceded the civil rights movement: the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the Popular Front of the 1930s, and the existentialist-inflected anticolonial and postcolonial paradigm that emerged after World War II. In each case, political Freudianism aimed less at a theory of racism (though attempts at this were made) than at uncovering the memory of the slave experience and its aftermath. W. E. B. Du Bois deciding he had “not been Freudian enough” when he observed the body parts of a lynched Negro displayed in a local store. Richard Wright helping found a psychoanalytic clinic in Harlem that could speak to the experience of Southern migrants. Frantz Fanon fearing that he could never shake off the memory of a child’s street cry, “‘Dirty nigger!’ or ‘Look a Negro.’”² In each case an African American or Afro-Caribbean intellectual was drawing on Freud not just to probe the damage to the inner world left behind by slavery and colonialism but to turn that reconstructed memory toward politics. To be sure, political Freudianism was a supplement to other vehicles of collective Black self-examination and self-expression, including, most importantly, music. The blues especially demonstrated the African American capacity and will both to remember and transcend the legacy of slavery. Yet political Freudianism added something to the blues. In the hands of figures like DuBois, Wright, and Fanon, it turned self-deprecating humor, wisdom literature, and odes to ambivalence into direct statements of anger and pain, encouraging political action in place of endurance.

Effectively then, chapters 1 and 2 disclose the way in which political Freudianism can appear as a critical intervention into the historical process and then disappear, become “obsolete.” The third chapter, on Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1938), focuses directly on that process by interrogating an idea crucial to the Freudian approach to history, the idea of *regression*. Freud’s first substantial use of this idea was in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) where he wrote, “If we call the direction which the psychic process follows from the unconscious into the waking state progressive, we may then speak of the dream as

having a regressive character.”³ The concept had broad implications by suggesting that the history of the human species, like that of the individual human mind, does not exist on a single “progressive” surface, but rather has active layers or strata, formed in the past, to which we can *return* or regress. This broad sense is in play when we say that fascism involved regression. But it was also in play when Theodor Adorno claimed that consumer society fostered “narcissistic regression” in the form of Warhol-style infinite celebrity. Used this way, the concept of regression offered a new way to think about history. Against the standard approach, which contrasts progress with decline or decadence, political Freudians posited that history unfolds at different levels and at different timescales, that there are points in the past to which we regress, predispositions, stages, or conflicts to which we “return.” In this Freudians refused to accord exclusive authority to the straightforwardly empirical approach to historical study and instead linked historical thinking with philosophical and political critique as well as with a theory of memory.

Written on the eve of World War II, and in the shadow of the Nazi terror, *Moses and Monotheism* used the idea that there are unconscious processes in history to analyze the founding of monotheism in ancient Egypt, the accompanying creation of the Jewish people, and the subsequent rise of anti-Semitism. The history of the Jewish people, Freud argued, had been marked by *repetitions*, events that *returned*, in such forms as internally felt commands, categorical imperatives, or religious injunctions, but only after being worked over by unconscious processes. Such processes, Freud argued, could not be explained through behavioral accounts that focus on education or training; rather, they “escaped the constraints of logical thought.” Unlike many recent interpretations of the book, such as those of Yosef Yerushalmi and Jacques Derrida, which confine themselves to the question of Jewish identity, then, my reading reveals a *Moses and Monotheism* centered on the problem of how genuine spiritual advances, such as monotheism, philosophy, and—Freud’s special concern—psychoanalysis, can be preserved in the face of an ever present pull toward regression.⁴ It was

the question of progress or, more starkly, *survival* that animated Freud's interest in Jewish identity.

In my reading, *Moses and Monotheism* is at bottom a reflection on the history of psychoanalysis, a *summa*, centered on Freud's pre-conscious identification of psychoanalysis with Judaism. Just as Freud believed that regression from monotheism to sensual experience was the main threat faced by the Hebrews in biblical times, so he held that knowledge of the repressed unconscious was in danger of being destroyed by the regressive forces of his time. Importantly, the threat to psychoanalysis came from *two* sources—on the one side, the Nazis, and, on the other, the integration of psychoanalysis into a debased, American-dominated mass culture. The rise of the Nazis—a horrific regression in what many considered the most advanced country in Europe—precipitated the writing of the book. But, by broadening the theme of regression to include the fate of psychoanalysis in the United States, Freud's interrogation of progress had implications that went beyond the looming war. In addition to the light it sheds on Judaism and anti-Semitism, the book raises the question of whether the obsolescence of psychoanalysis also included an element of regression.

The Jewish people survived World War II, but could the same be said for psychoanalysis? To be sure, the psychoanalytic profession survived, above all in the United States and England, from whence it was reexported after the war as part of the remaking of the postwar world. Nevertheless, something important had been lost. Not only were the most important societies and centers in Vienna, Budapest, Berlin, and Frankfurt destroyed, not only were many analysts and followers killed, but the internal spirit of the analytic world was compromised by the attempts of central figures, including Freud, to keep an analytic presence going in Germany even after the Nazis had expelled the Jews from the profession. Once again the political side of psychoanalysis became irrepressible, this time in an immediate and practical sense. In 1933 Freud exclaimed, "Free me from [Wilhelm] Reich," because Reich wanted to organize sex clinics against the Nazis and Freud feared this endangered the psychoanalytic institutes. I regard Reich as

exemplary of the political Freudian tradition for seeing the need to organize against the Nazis and I see a tragic flaw in Freud for his deluded hope that psychoanalysis could survive in Nazi Germany even after the expulsion of the Jewish analysts.

After World War II, the question of the survival of the critical element in Freudianism became increasingly pressing. This problem is probed in chapter 4, “The Ego at War: From the Death Instinct to *Precarious Life*,” which examines political Freudian thinking concerning war during World War I, World War II, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which followed 9/11. In 1932, prodded by the League of Nations, Freud wrote to Albert Einstein, asking, “How long shall we have to wait before the rest of mankind become pacifists too?” Freud’s view that human beings are instinctually aggressive was well known, so what could he have meant by calling himself a pacifist? The answer lies amid the outbreak of shellshock (today termed post-traumatic stress disorder) during World War I. The cause of the syndrome, according to Freud, was not aggression but rather passive waiting, which became pathological because of the soldier’s defensive denial of vulnerability, or what Freud called his “preference for the active role.” In contrast to other antiwar strands of his time, such as those associated with Marxism and some strands of maternalism, Freud believed that aggression was a normal and healthy part of civilization, but only insofar as its roots in vulnerability, dependence, and in the continued presence of infantile states in the adult mind were recognized. Freud’s formulation became central to a political Freudian tradition that grappled with war, and through tracing that tradition we can discern a significant shift in the conception of the human being during the twentieth century.

The century’s earliest approach to war rested on the older, father complex–inflected warrior ethic associated with such ideals as glory, honor, and self-sacrifice. The shell shock incident of World War I led Freud to formulate his theory of the ego, which, insofar as it retains its connections to infancy and the unconscious, challenged those ideals. In doing so, Freudians seemed to affirm the spirit of jazz age modernism and to make common cause with the antiwar movements

and pacifist feminisms of the time. As psychoanalysis matured, however, its interest shifted from the father complex to the preoedipal mother. During the Second World War, the British analysts around Melanie Klein used the theory of the earliest relation to the mother to explain the country's appeasement of Hitler, which they interpreted as male soldiers and citizens' abandonment of their mothers, sisters, and daughters. They thereby replaced Freud's theory of the ego with a theory of object relations. Decades later, after the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, the philosopher Judith Butler again drew on political Freudian traditions to argue that the wound to American narcissism brought about by the attacks precipitated the self-destructive, defensive reaction of the invasion of Iraq. By Butler's time, however, the theory of the ego, now coded "male" or "Cartesian," had become suspect. Thus she conceived her project as disrupting the bounded and protective sense of self that the jihadist attacks had breached. Hence the political Freudian tradition reflects a shift from the classical Cartesian or Kantian view of the rational, independent, "bounded" ego to the view that the ego is formed through recognition, object relations, and language. While this shift deepened the Freudian interrogation of vulnerability, it also threatened to lose the focus on ego autonomy that gave psychoanalysis its critical force. This loss, integral to the problem of obsolescence, is further explored in chapter 5, "From the Maturity Ethic to the Psychology of Power."

Chapter 5 concerns the Freud of the New Left and of radical feminism, arguably the last incarnation of political Freud. The chapter begins in cold war America, when Freudian thought was being integrated into an anticommunist "maturity ethic," a new Puritanism or Calvinism. This cold war version of Weber's spirit of capitalism echoed its predecessor by condemning narcissism or self-love and so became a target of radical movements in the 1960s. If Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* became the psychoanalytic "Bible" of the New Left, it was largely because the book extolled the primary, antinomian narcissism of the infant-mother relationship, which—so Marcuse wrote—pointed the way "from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy"

to eroticization of the entire body, more or less as an infant's body may be said to be eroticized everywhere, not merely in the genital region. In the seventies, however, the terrain shifted again. The boundlessness, "polymorphous perversity," and oceanic feeling of the antinomian moment gave way to secondary narcissism in the form of "good works," meritocracy, and self-assertion, especially in the feminist movement, which argued that power, not sexuality, was the central, driving force in the private sphere. Thus, 1970s feminists, drawing on the New Left precedent, substituted a sociological and political account of domination for the "individual explanations" characteristic of psychoanalysis. The eventual result was a new ethic of personal life that converged with the neoliberal critique of traditional, familial, and kinship-based authority and unwittingly facilitated the emergence of full-scale consumer capitalism. Bringing us full circle to the story begun in chapter 1, then, the cultural revolutions of the sixties and seventies completed the critique of the Protestant ethic that classical Freudianism had begun. Narcissism replaced asceticism, flexibility (the network society) replaced compulsivity, and the "pharisaic" or hypocritical spirit of the older capitalism gave way to a full-throated valorization of "empowerment." As the restraints and inhibitions that once animated it seemed to crumble, Freudianism became "obsolete."

In general, then, the book charts the rise and fall of political Freudianism. Each chapter highlights two seemingly antithetical moments: a critical moment when political thinkers and social movements looked to psychoanalysis to clarify the irrational sources of domination and an affirmative moment when Freudianism became submerged in a larger history and appeared to become obsolete. Read together, the chapters disclose a subterranean struggle to guard a critical perspective against forces conspiring to repress, suppress, or abandon it. These struggles are taken up directly in the afterword, "Freud in the Twenty-first Century."

Written on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Freud's birth, the afterword asks whether psychoanalytic thought is relevant in today's world or is merely of historical interest. In its heyday, it argues, Freudianism was a synthesis, combining a theory of the mind, a new paradigm

for interpreting culture, and an ethical commitment to self-reflection. During the 1970s, with the waning of the traditional, family-centered culture of restraint, the three currents came apart. The theory of the mind gave way to neuroscience. The approach to culture found a home in the university, especially in cultural studies, women's studies, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and film studies. But the fate of the ethical commitment to self-reflection, like the fate of political Freudianism as such, remains in doubt. What is at stake in the resolution of this doubt?

To answer this question requires that we, like Freud before us, situate ourselves in the long *durée* of evolution and history. What made Moses a transcendent figure, and drew Freud to him, was the realization that a great idea, such as monotheism, meant nothing if it remained restricted to a small, intellectual elite. It needed rather to be internalized by a whole people. However, there is a crucial difference between movements centered on reforming the spiritual life of a people, such as monotheism or Calvinism, and psychoanalysis. Earlier movements sought to align an individual's internal state to an objective moral or "axial" order by promoting a focus on morality, sin, or conduct. Psychoanalysis, in contrast, posited a new and essentially postaxial conception of the individual. According to that conception, stimuli that come to the individual from the society or culture are not directly registered but are first dissolved and internally reconstituted in such a way as to give them personal, even idiosyncratic, meanings. As a result, there is no direct or necessary connection between an individual's subjectivity and the social order. The goal of analysis, then, is not the internalization of any particular value but that of the analytic attitude itself: the capacity to examine one's thoughts, wishes, and conflicts without judging them, at least at first.

The spread of the analytic attitude represented a great advance in moral thought, because it extended critical self-reflection from acts to thoughts and wishes. This book argues that a similar extension or inward turn had begun to take place in radical politics as well. Whereas mainstream and cold war liberals opposed fascism or "totalitarianism," radicals were critical of capitalism as well. Thus liberals saw progress as blocked

by *external* antiliberal forces, while democratic leftists saw progress as blocked by forces that were *internal* to their own societies, such as class exploitation and ideological mystification. In the same way, Freud saw the resistances to rationality and progress as *internal* to consciousness and the ego and not as external obstacles such as lack of education or ignorance. What distinguished political Freudianism, then, was the effort to identify the obstacles to progress from *within* the movement toward progress itself. African American Freudians showed that slavery and ethnocidal violence were *internal* to liberalism and even to the Black freedom movement itself, not marginal or contingent; feminist Freudians showed that misogyny was *internal* to the family and to women themselves; antiwar Freudians showed that violence was *internal* to mass democracies and the modern nation-state. An important substream of the twentieth-century radical tradition, then, involved collective processes of self-reflection, beyond what either communists or mainstream liberals sought to accomplish. If political Freudianism is incomplete, how can we preserve this achievement in the present and for the future?

Today few people need to be convinced that we need higher levels of cooperation and foresight than earlier liberal societies promoted if we are to address such problems as the increase in social inequality during the decades of neoliberal ascendance or the dangers of climate change. What cries out for explanation are the *internal* obstacles that prevent us from achieving those levels. As in the past, the obstacles are rooted not only in the sometimes narrow self-interest of the elites but also in the superficiality of progressive movements themselves. If a new stage in the radical tradition is to emerge, it has to be able to look at its own history and identity. In so doing, it will see that contemporary radicalism's sense of itself as self-created a mere generation ago is worse than an illusion—it is a repression. The result of this repression has been the failure to appreciate not only the political Freudians of the past but also the general crisis of the twentieth century to which we are heirs. This failure makes it more likely that we will reenact the blind spots of the past while failing to identify the regressive forces of our own time, which, as always, present themselves as the most progressive.