



"INSTINCTS" AND THE "FORCES OF PRODUCTION":  
The Freud-Marx Debates in Eastern and Central Europe\*

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In his essay "Psychology and Art Today", the British-American poet Wystan Hugh Auden writes:

Both Freud and Marx start from the failures of civilization, one from the poor, one from the ill. Both see human behavior determined, not consciously, but by instinctive needs, hunger and love. Both desire a world where rational choice and self-determination are possible. The difference between them is the inevitable difference between the man who studies crowds in the street, and the man who sees the patient...in the consulting room. Marx sees the direction of the relations between the outer and inner world from without inwards. Freud vice-versa.... The socialist accuses the psychologist of caving in to the status quo, trying to adapt the neurotic to the system, thus depriving him of a potential revolutionary; the psychologist retorts that the socialist is trying to lift himself by his own boot tags, that he fails to understand himself or the fact that lust for money is only one form of the lust for power; and so that after he has won his power by revolution he will recreate the same conditions. Both are right. As long as civilization remains as it is, the number of patients the psychologist can cure are very few, and as soon as socialism attains power, it must learn to direct its own interior energy and will need the psychologist. (1983, p.130)

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Another poet, a Hungarian, Attila József, once described future socialist society as a society of a harmonious order, one in which "the mind comes to acknowledge finite infinity, the forces of production without, and the instincts within".<sup>1</sup> If we examine the history of the Freud-Marx debates, Auden's skepticism seems more justifiable than Attila József's optimistic image of a society <sup>which</sup> envisions no contradiction between man's inner and outer nature, between the "instincts" and the "forces of production".

In the relationship between psychoanalysis and Marxism, mutual suspicion has been the rule, and mutual understanding has been reached only exceptionally. But why Marx and Freud at all? Why is it that, from time to time, attempts have been made to formulate and re-formulate Marxist and Freudian positions in relation to each other? There is a variety of historical, ideological, and political reasons that determine the context of these attempts. Freud-Marx debates are, however, essentially products of East- and Central-European social history, i.e., they have come into being predominantly in a region of Europe where the existence and status of the individual have been broken by several historical cataclysms: revolutions, counter-revolutions, and wars, as well as Fascist and Stalinist dictatorships. Therefore, without denying the importance of Freud-Marx debates in the West-- in England, France and the United States,<sup>2</sup> I would like to focus in this paper on the Eastern- and Central-European origins of these debates. In this brief overview of the debates, I will



undertake to show certain relevant contexts, within which the problem of the relationship between psychoanalysis and Marxism has emerged.<sup>3</sup>

### Liberal socialism versus messianic communism

...it is intelligible that the attempt to establish a new, communist civilization in Russia should find its psychological support in the persecution of the bourgeois. Only one wonders, with concern, what the Soviets will do after they have wiped out their bourgeois. (Sigmund Freud, 1930)

Because psychoanalysis, unless it is watered down, undermines bourgeois ideology, and because, furthermore, only a socialist economy can provide a basis for the free development of intellect and sexuality alike, psychoanalysis has a future only under socialism. (Wilhelm Reich, 1929b.)

Freud-Marx debates have a history of nearly eighty years, dating back to a 1909 meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, at which the topic of Marxism and psychoanalysis was first discussed.<sup>4</sup> The main presentation, "The Psychology of Marxism", was led by Alfred Adler. The participants of the discussion represented three main positions. According to Adler and Paul Federn, aggressive instincts, repressed in the neurotic, can be transformed into class consciousness in the proletariat; it was Marx who indicated how this transformation might be achieved. The diametrically-opposed position was represented by such analysts as Joachim, Hirschmann, and Steiner. The latter group argued that socialism is nothing more than a substitute religion, if



not itself a special form of neurosis, i.e., that Marxism could be understood only in terms of Marx's own personal psychology. Freud himself represented the middle of the road; according to him, the development of humanity rested upon the extension of conscious processes, with a simultaneous presence of increasing repression. The introduction of psychology to history would require an understanding of this duality.

Ten years following the above discussion, revolutions haunted Europe from Russia to Germany. The events in Russia, Hungary, Austria and Germany brought to life and relevance the issues of the somewhat esoteric 1909 discussion. What can psychoanalysis say about the sudden collapse of the old bourgeois or semi-feudal order, and about revolutionary attempts to create a new society-- a society of the "New Man"?

The different answers given to the question "What is Bolshevism?" signify the first great division line in the Freud-Marx debates. The messianic answer claimed that Bolshevism was a "a way out from the prehistory of mankind", a realization of the old, repressed strivings for a new order. In his book Zur Psychologie der Revolution: Die vaterlose Gesellschaft (On the Psychology of the Revolution: Society without the Father, 1919), Paul Federn explains that in Bolshevism the old principle of paternal authority had been replaced by the principle of matriarchal brotherhood; the original soviets, or revolutionary councils, represented the pre-patriarchal forms of collective life, brotherly co-operation. There is, however, the constant danger of a "psychological Thermidor",<sup>5</sup> of the restoration of the "father principle".



Federn warns that the father-less brothers may strive for a strong "father-substitute" (Vater-Ersatz) and, as a consequence, the dictatorship of the proletariat may be perverted into a tyrannical regime.

Federn's messianic position--its elements were based on Freud's analysis of primitive society in his book Totem and Taboo--was vigorously refuted by his opponents. In the same year, Peter Lorenz published a pamphlet entitled Zur Psychologie der Politik (On the psychology of politics, 1919), in which he accuses Bolshevism of being a regression to the primitive horde, of a kind of "retribalization". The same position was formulated by the Hungarian social philosopher Aurél Kolnai, whose book Psychoanalyse und Soziologie (1919) was published also in English in 1924. Kolnai writes:

Even though we see that in extant society the father principle operates to some extent as a force hostile to progress; nevertheless, no syllogism exists to convince us that progress is to be secured by the destruction of the father principle, by the gratification of the fatherhood wish of the brethren of the horde, perhaps in the form of a new paternal dominion (dictatorship) even stricter than the old. What we need is the further sublimation of the father principle, a further remove from the primitive horde. What we need, consequently, is not communism, but the generalization of property (liberal socialism). (1924, pp. 143-144)

Sándor Ferenczi, the Hungarian psychoanalyst who headed the Institute of Psychoanalysis at the University of Budapest during the Hungarian Councils' Republic, declared, in a similar vein to that above, that psychoanalysis expects from the future



an "individual socialist direction that would respect natural differences between individuals and their strivings for happiness and independence, at least to the same extent as the inexorable, but hardly enduring, organizations of collective existence". (Ferenczi, 1922).

It should be noted that Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921) was also inspired by these debates. In this book, he charges Bolshevism with the same kind of intolerance towards outsiders as was characteristic for the Wars of Religion. His evaluation of the "great cultural experiment" taking place in the Soviet Union was not, however, without ambivalence. In his illusions and skepticism, he shared the mixed feelings of many liberals and socialists of the age.<sup>6</sup> But the main point is that Freud and the mainstream of the psychoanalytic movement were much closer to the liberal or reformist trends of the labour movement.<sup>7</sup> Reformist socialists (e.g., the German Social Democratic theoreticians Karl Kautsky and Otto Janssen, or the influential Belgian Socialist leader Henrik de Man) referred to Freudian (or Adlerian) theory as a corrective of dogmatic socialism, providing explanations for mass psychological phenomena.<sup>8</sup>

#### Family laws and sexual politics

I worked with the communist faction because of the new laws in Russia--the sexual laws. Freud was all for it. Today, everybody is for it except the Russians, who dropped it long ago. (Wilhelm Reich, 1975)



Reformist socialists used Freudian theory as an argument against the Communist plans of radically changing society and human nature. The messianic position, however, received strong support from the Soviet Union in the first years of the revolution. This was also the period of the "sexual revolution" in Russia. The abolition of the old, almost feudal, family laws on marriage, divorce, abortion, etc., created an atmosphere of sexual freedom, at least in the circles of the Bolshevik avant-garde intelligentsia.<sup>9</sup> Many observers maintained that the roots of sexual repression had been eliminated forever, and that there were thus no more social obstacles to the creation of a new type of man in a happy and harmonious society. They argued that the original truth of Freudian insight lay in demonstrating the effects of sexual repression on bourgeois society, whereas in a classless society, however, psychoanalysis was envisioned as liberated from its bourgeois class limitations and thus able to freely move toward mass therapy, prophylaxis of neurosis, and sexual enlightenment.<sup>10</sup>

The above atmosphere of sexual revolution--the honeymoon of Bolshevik avant-gardism and psychoanalytic messianism--provided the original context for classical Freud~~o~~Marxism, as exemplified most significantly in the works of Wilhelm Reich. His attachment to this early period of Soviet history was so strong that, even in 1929, when the honeymoon had long ended and the general crusade against psychoanalysis was well on its way, he found many excuses for the hostile treatment of psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union.



In his report on his study trip to Moscow, he writes:

...the Russians have nothing against psychoanalysis as a psychological discipline, but are opposed only to so-called "Freudism", by which they mean a "psychoanalytic view of the world". ...People in Russia talk a great deal about perekluchenie, i.e., the conversion of sexual energy into work. Freud's theory of sublimation is fully recognized. (Reich, 1929a)

The same understanding of Soviet Marxist attitude toward psychoanalysis is visible in Reich's famous essay Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis (1929). The program manifesto of the German Sexpol Movement in 1932 also refers many times to the example of the Soviet Union where "bourgeois eroticism" disappeared and sexual freedom had been achieved.<sup>11</sup>

#### Freudianism: the birth of an ideological phantom

In our days, the campaign against Marxism is fought more and more under the flag of Freudianism. Even certain "Marxists" in our ranks try to defend some elements of De Man's world view. (A. Debordin, 1928)

Wilhelm Reich's subsequent attempts to justify the ideological battle against psychoanalysis and to reconcile it with the principles of dialectical materialism did not prevent his Soviet opponents from accusing him of being a Freudian idealist attempting to "smuggle Freudianism in through the back door".<sup>12</sup> What were the major factors that provoked the enormously violent attacks on psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union? The ideological and political reason are quite evident and well known.





First of all, it was the monopolization of power by Stalin after the leadership of Lenin that transformed radicalism and messianism into status quo opportunism and bureaucratism. Utopic messianism was replaced by the ideological claim that messianic goals had already been achieved and that the Soviet Union was the "healthiest country in the world", where all causes of neurosis had been eliminated, psychopathological symptoms, therefore, being possible only on a hereditary or organic basis.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, with the campaigns against Trotsky, Soviet sympathizers of psychoanalysis lost their most influential supporter, who had defended them on a number of occasions.<sup>14</sup> And, thirdly, it was the great schism between communism and social democracy within the international labour movement that provoked anti-Freudian purges. Psychoanalysis had been identified with social democracy (i.e., in the language of the Comintern at that time, with "social fascism"), largely because the aforementioned social democrats and the liberal socialists (Kautsky, Janssen, De Man, Kolnai), employed elements of Freudian mass psychology in their criticism of the Russian revolution and Bolshevism.<sup>15</sup>

It is instructive to observe how Soviet sympathizers of psychoanalysis had come to gradually accept the logic of anti-Freudian arguments. They themselves came to view Freudianism as "bourgeois ideology", as a "reactionary philosophy and sociology", preferring to stress, instead, its importance as a medical discipline and as pure natural science.<sup>16</sup> There were several attempts to reconcile psychoanalysis with Pavlovian neurophysiology, with reflexology and even with Gestalt theory. As



A. Lurija and L. Vygotsky state in their preface to the 1925 Russian edition of Freud's book Beyond the Pleasure Principle:<sup>17</sup>

We are witnessing now in Russia the emergence of a new and original direction of psychoanalysis which attempts to achieve a synthesis between Freudianism and Marxism through the doctrine of conditioned reflexes and to develop the system of "reflexological Freudianism" in the spirit of dialectical materialism. (quoted by Garai, 1969)

The campaign, however, did not spare even those sympathizers who were most critical of Freudianism. This very term, in fact, proved to be an ideological phantom, a curse upon all who manifested the faintest similarity to or interest in psychoanalytic arguments.<sup>18</sup>

#### Fascism and Popular Front politics

Reactionary psychology is wont to explain the theft and the strike in terms of supposed irrational motives; reactionary rationalizations are invariably the result. Social psychology sees the problem in an entirely different light: what has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry don't steal and why the majority of those who are exploited don't strike. (Wilhelm Reich, 1933)

Wilhelm Reich's earlier efforts to synthesize psychoanalysis and Marxism culminated in his celebrated and controversial book The Mass Psychology of Fascism (1933), published a few months after Hitler's seizure of power. This book rests upon his earlier



theoretical ideas on sexual repression, character, and socio-economic structure, and its original version was written very much in Marxist or dialectical-materialist language.<sup>19</sup> Paradoxically though, this classic of Freudo-Marxism marked the end of classical Freudo-Marxism. With the publication of the book, the break between Reich and the Communist movement became final and irreversible, because the Reichian analysis of fascism had been diametrically opposite to the contemporary official Comintern evaluation of fascism. According to the Comintern interpretation, fascism was only a temporal victory over the proletariat, its objective role being to aggravate the general crisis of capitalism and accelerate the final victory of socialism. In contrast to this conception, Reich argued that fascism enjoyed mass support from the working class, and he attempted to explain this fact in terms of the authoritarian character structure of the sexually and socially repressed individuals under patriarchal rule. All later theories on fascism, authoritarianism and character structure have their origin in Reich. It was Reich who formulated the principle of a "negative psychoanalysis", in which he saw the primary task of Marxist psychoanalysis as being to explain why the proletariat failed to fulfill its historical role, why it acts against its objective interests.<sup>20</sup>

As noted above, Reich's book marked the end of classical Freudo-Marxism, i.e., mutual combination and integration attempts within the framework of the official Communist and psychoanalytic movements; the partisans of Freudo-Marxism had been either exiled



or pushed to the periphery by both of these movements.<sup>21</sup> There were, of course, efforts to reorganize Freud-Marxist attempts and even transform them into a kind of political movement in opposition to both Comintern and the official psychoanalytic movement. These attempts were represented by Reich's own efforts to establish an emigrant SEXPOL, and also by the "dialectical-materialist opposition" formed by Fenichel and his associates within the International Psychoanalytic Association.<sup>22</sup>

Popular Front politics (the new tactics of the Comintern applied from the mid-thirties on, suggesting that the fight against fascism necessitates the joining together of all anti-fascist forces, including the "progressive bourgeoisie" and the social democrats) brought new hope for the re-emergence of the Freud-Marx debates. In this changed atmosphere, Freud-Marxist theories and Reichian ideas were widely discussed in Hungarian leftist intellectual circles. The new element in these discussions was that it was no longer mandatory to recognize "Freudianism" as a reactionary ideology; the humanistic and rationalist message became increasingly emphasized (in the spirit of Thomas Mann). All this failed, however, to lead to an essential rehabilitation of Freud-Marxism. In fact, its most famous Hungarian partisan, the poet and philosopher Attila József, was expelled from the Communist party and ultimately committed suicide.<sup>23</sup>

The outbreak of the Second World War swept away Freud-Marxism from Eastern and Central Europe. The Freud-Marx debates,



however, did continue in the West (the Frankfurt School, Marcuse, Fromm, the French structuralism, and, more recently, the debate between the hermeneutic approach to Freud by Habermas and the popperian philosophy of science promoted by Grubaum<sup>24</sup>).

Walter Benjamin once wrote that "in every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from <sup>25</sup> conformism that is about to overcome it". And although, today, such attempts with respect to the Freud-Marx debates are being undertaken primarily in the West, the growing interest in psychoanalysis in Hungary may pave the way for a fresh re-examination and re-appraisal of some of the more vital elements of these debates, in an effort to assess its relevance within changing historical contexts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is a rough translation of some lines from his poem "On the edge of the city" (1933). See more about A. József's Freudo-Marxism in Erös (1983).

<sup>2</sup> In England, Reuben Osborn (1965) and Christopher Caudwell (1960), in France, Georges Politzer (1968), and in America, J.F. Brown (1936) were the leading participants of these debates.

<sup>3</sup> A more thorough analysis of Eastern and Central European Freud-Marx debates can be found in the author's recent book (Erös, 1986). See also Dahmer (1982) and Jacoby (1975, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> The protocol of the session was published in Nunberg and Federn (1976-1981).

<sup>5</sup> This is an expression used by Herbert Marcuse in his work Eros and Civilization (1955).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the opinions on the Soviet Union of such writers as H. G. Wells. Concerning the Western image of the Soviet Union in the twenties, see E. H. Carr's History of Soviet Russia (1950-1978). Freud's mixed feelings are best reflected in his following works: The Future of an Illusion (1927), Civilization and its Discontents (1930), and Moses and Monotheism (1939).

<sup>7</sup> On the relationship between psychoanalysis and the Austrian social democracy or "Austro-Marxism", see Dahmer (1983).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Jenssen (1924) and De Man (1927).

<sup>9</sup> The most famous partisan of the Russian sexual revolution was the Bolshevik feminist writer and politician Alexandra Kollontai. Concerning her life, see Stora-Sandor (1973). Vera Schmidt's "psychoanalytic kindergarten" should also be mentioned within this context (Schmidt, 1924).



10 These or similar views were held in the Soviet Union by different philosophers, doctors and psychologists, such as, B. Bihovskij, M. Reissner, A. Varjas, A. Zalkind, and others. They published mainly in the journal Pod znamenem marksizma (Under the flag of Marxism). Many of these texts were reprinted in Sandkühler (1970).

11 The complete text of the Sexpol-manifesto appears in reprint in Gente (1970), pp. 155-181.

12 The publication of Reich's "Dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis" was followed by the rejoinder of a Soviet philosopher I. D. Sapir (1929). He was one of the main figures of the "dialecticians", while the defenders of psychoanalysis were called "mechanicists". The debate between these two directions was a major philosophical trend in the Soviet Union at that time. For additional details, see Erős (1986) and Dahmer (1983).

13 See, for example, another article by the above-mentioned I. D. Sapir (1926).

14 Concerning Trotsky and the psychoanalysts, see Deutscher (1959).

15 Bolshevik charges against psychoanalysis and social democracy are best manifested in Deborin (1928) and Thalheimer (1925-26).

16 This is best exemplified in the works of Alexander Varjas, a Hungarian philosopher who emigrated to the Soviet Union after 1919. Concerning his participation in Freud-Marx debates, see Erős (1986).

17 During the twenties, quite a few texts by Freud and other psychoanalysts were published in the Soviet Union. A. R. Lurija, the well-known neuropsychologist, started his career as a psychoanalyst and wrote a book on psychoanalysis, as seen in the light of the main currents of contemporary psychology (Lurija, 1923). On the history of the psychoanalytic movement in Russia and the Soviet Union, see Lobner and Levitin (1982).



<sup>18</sup> According to the Soviet philosopher V. Jurinetz, the main sins of Freudianism are the following: "subjectivism", "decadence", and "aestheticism". (Jurinetz, 1925)

<sup>19</sup> In the later, enlarged American edition of his work (1970), Reich attempted to eliminate the original, Marxist terminology.

<sup>20</sup> For more information concerning "negative psychoanalysis", see Jacoby (1975). The integration of psychoanalysis into critical theory took place within the context of this problem, i.e., the "lack of socio-psychological conditions" for the proletariat's seizure of power. See also Jay (1975).

<sup>21</sup> As it is fairly widely known, Reich was excluded almost simultaneously from both the Communist Party and from the International Psychoanalytic Association (1933 and 1934, respectively).

<sup>22</sup> See a detailed description of the history of Feniichel's opposition movement in *Jacoby* (1983).

<sup>23</sup> See *Eros* (1983). Concerning the Hungarian Freud-Marx debates in the thirties, see *Eros* (1987).

<sup>24</sup> See the influential American philosopher Adolf Grünbaum's critique of Jürgen Habermas' and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic interpretations of Freud (Grünbaum, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> From Walter Benjamin's "Über den Begriff der Geschichte", quoted by Jacoby (1975), p.4.





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