

TECHNIQUE AS POLITICS: THE CONTRIBUTION OF SÁNDOR FERENCZI
TO ANALYTICAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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The subject of my paper is slightly different from the title and the summary I submitted a few month before. Originally, I was planning to present a whole history of facts and events related to the various aspects of the social and political commitments of Hungarian psychoanalysis. Now I wish to emphasize only one important aspect: namely, a relationship between Sándor Ferenczi's life work and the analytical social psychology, as represented, first of all, by Erich Fromm. I want to show that Ferenczi's relevance for an analytical social psychology reveals itself on two levels: first, on the level of his explicitly sociological writings; and second, on the level of his ideas on the technique of psychoanalysis. I think that discovering this relationship might be important for understanding politics within and outside the psychoanalytic movement.



1. Ferenczi and "radical antipolitics"

In the period before the first world war, psychoanalytic movement in Hungary was part and parcel of the progressivist movements. For example, Sándor Ferenczi himself was an active member of the Galileo Circle, a student and intellectual movement which envisioned a radical renewal of the whole social and political structure, and fought for the creation of a democratic and civil society in place of the old, semi-feudal, conservative and more or less autocratic regime of Hungary and the whole Monarchy. Ferenczi, as a psychanalyst and a social critic, drew far-reaching conclusions from his psychoanalytic insights. Perhaps the most important concept introduced in that time by Ferenczi was the notion of "unnecessary constraint" (unnötige Zwang) or "surplus repression" (zusätzliche repression). It means that repression in our society requires not simply a minimum of instinctual renouncement necessary for social cooperation but also the subjugation of the members of the society, their deprivation from human dignity and autonomy. "Surplus repression" sets free, according to Ferenczi, those instinctual forces which lead to religious superstitions, to the cult of authority and to a rigid adherence to obsolete social forms. In other words, the consequence of surplus repression is the insaneness of the society, the collective neurosis. In his early paper on "Psychoanalysis and pedagogy" (Ferenczi, 1908) he argues that "the liberation from the unnecessary inner



constraint would be the first revolution which brings genuine relief to humanity, while political revolutions result only in transition of the external powers or the means of constraint from one hand to the other... Only people liberated in this way will be able to bring about radical changes in pedagogy and thus to prevent the reappearance of such conditions". It is instructive to compare Ferenczi's argument with Herbert Marcuse's much later notion of a "psychological Thermidor" which means that without an inner, radical transformation of the human soul all revolutions will be, by necessity, "betrayed revolutions".

It should be emphasized, that Ferenczi was not a revolutionary, at least not in the traditional political sense. He was a radical reformer of human relations, a utopian rationalist in the spirit of Aufklärung. In an other paper before the first world war, in "Psychoanalysis and its relevance for legal and social sciences" (Ferenczi, 1913) he speaks about a "sound individual-socialistic direction" which is somewhere between anarchism and communism, and which serves not only the interests of the society but the happiness of the individuals as well.

It is the irony of fate and history that the first Communist regime in Hungary, the 1919 Republic of Councils appointed Ferenczi to the world's first professorship of psychoanalysis. As I showed elsewhere (Erös and Giampieri, 1987a), this appointment came as a recognition of his role in the progressivist movements and, at the same time, a compensation



for the earlier neglect of psychoanalysis by scientific and university authorities. It had nothing to do with his identification with the aims of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic. His feelings toward the Béla Kun regime were at least ambivalent (this did not prevent, however, the immediate abolishment of the psychoanalytic department and Ferenczi's exclusion from the Budapest Medical Association after the victory of Admiral Horthy's counterrevolution).

In an article published in 1922 in the Hungarian literary magazine Nyugat Ferenczi stresses again the apolitical or, more precisely, antipolitical stand of psychoanalysis. "Psychoanalysis" - he writes - "never pertained to any philosophical dogma, it interpreted both philosophical ideas and political doctrines as the manifestation of man's psychological nature... Psychoanalysis never recognized any of the individual or collectivist parties as true representatives of human nature. It has expected from the future an 'individual-socialistic' direction that would respect natural differences between individuals, their strivings for happiness and independence, at least to the same extent as the inexorable but hardly endurable organization of collective existence" (Ferenczi, 1922).

Now I want to argue that the antipolitical and antiauthoritarian utopianism of Ferenczi's early writings anticipated some of the fundamental concepts and theories of the analytical social psychology as elaborated by Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm and other thinkers of Freudo-Marxism and the Frankfurt School. This concepts (surplus repression,



authoritarianism, religion and totalitarian political movements as manifestations of a kind of a collective neurosis) were outlined first by Ferenczi, further worked out by Freud himself in his cultural criticism and in his theory of culture after the first world war (in such works as Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, The Future of an Illusion, The Civilization and its Discontents etc.), and reinterpreted in a leftist, revolutionary-messianic spirit by the Freudo-Marxists, especially in their analysis of Fascism. (1)

2. Technique as politics

After the first world war, Ferenczi seemingly left the area of social critique. It is probably true that his resignation was a reaction to the trauma of the two revolutions and their failure, the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the partition of historical Hungary, and, first of all, to the violent antisemitic outbursts which marked the beginning of the conservative-authoritarian regime installed after the Councils' Republic. As he wrote to Freud already in the turbulent autumn of 1918: "The imminent collapse of our old political world, among others, of the Globus Hungaricus hurts very sensitively our narcissism. It is good that one has, beside his Hungarian ego, a Jewish and a psychoanalytic ego, which remains untouched by these events" (quoted by Erös and Giampieri, 1987b).

It is then not by accident that in the twenties the "psychoanalytic ego" came to the forefront: Ferenczi became more



and more involved in the problems of the psychoanalytic technique as well as a theorist he submerged into the biological or Naturphilosophie side of psychoanalysis (Ferenczi, 1924). Lack of time does not permit me to deal here with the significance of Ferenczi's technical innovations and the nature of his controversies with Freud and with the "mainstream" of the psychanalytic movement.

What is interesting from our point of view is that Ferenczi's contribution to an analytical social psychology is not limited to his early, explicitly socio-psychological works. On the contrary, it was the alternative psychoanalytic technique which had a decisive influence to Erich Fromm's early ideas and his evaluation of psychoanalysis. In his essay "Die gesellschaftliche Bedingtheit der psychoanalytischen Therapie" Fromm contrasts Ferenczi's therapeutic attitude to Freud's "bourgeois-liberal tolerance". "Der frühe Tod Ferenczis" - Fromm writes - "ist ein tragischer Abschluss seines Lebens. Zerissen von der Angst vor seinem Bruch mit Freud und der Einsicht in die Notwendigkeit einer von der freudschen abweichenden Technik, hatte er nicht die innere Kraft, den Weg zu ende zu gehen. Sein Gegensatz zu Freud ist prinzipiell: der Gegensatz zwischen einer humanen, menschenfreundlichen, das Glück des Analysanden in unbedingter Weise bejahenden Haltung und einer patrizentrisch-autoritären, in den Tiefe menschenfeindlichen 'Toleranz'" (Fromm, 1935).

It can be documented that Ferenczi's ideas on the "active technique" had a major role in the development of Fromm's ideas



on a critically oriented analytical social psychology. Not only his concept of social character and the significance of "matricentrism" owes a lot to Ferenczi's alternative technique; in Fromm's life-long critique of Freud and the psychoanalytic movement Ferenczi is the positive hero who challenges radically "the doctor's hidden sadism". Thus, in a peculiar way, technique becomes politics. (3)

3. The Stalinist re-writing of history

In Autumn 1988 I had the chance to continue research in the Erich Fromm Archives, Tübingen. I was looking for possible connections between Fromm and Hungarian analysts. I had in mind the multitude of references made by Fromm to Ferenczi throughout his life work. Dr. Rainer Funk, the head of the Archives called my attention to a file containing a bunch of correspondence from the period of 1957-1958. All these letters are part of the preparation of an important article by Fromm originally published in the American journal The Saturday Review under the title "Psychoanalysis - Science or Party Line?". (Fromm, 1958; in the German Gesamtausgabe this title was translated as "Psychoanalyse - Wissenschaft oder Linientreue".) Fromm's article is a critical review on Jones' book The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, the third volume of which was published in 1957. Fromm's article is basically an attempt to refute the allegations made by the British psychoanalyst against Ferenczi and Otto Rank. They both were stigmatized by Jones as becoming



at one point mentally insane. Fromm argues that, in contrast to Jones' statements, both Rank and Ferenczi were sane, innovative and autonomous persons and, exactly for this reason, they became victims of the antidemocratic inner structure, the power politics, the rivalry, and the suppression of opposing views dominating within the psychoanalytic movement. He characterizes Jones' work as an instructive example of "the Stalinist type re-writing of history" according to which all deviations from the "only truth" are themselves proofs of some "mental disturbance".

It is, of course, not by chance that Fromm uses the analogy of Stalinism. As a Freudo-Marxist and originally a member of the Frankfurt School, Fromm had never in his life ceased to fight for a radical renewal of Marxism, for a return to its messianic, humanistic and libertine traditions. It was his non-conformist or humanistic Marxism which, for a long period, has made him a non-desirable or at least a strictly censured author in Eastern Europe. We should not also forget the date when Fromm's review on Jones was published. It was 1958, two years after the 20. congress of the Soviet Communist Party on the one hand, and the oppression of the Hungarian revolution on the other. It is only a temporal coincidence, but not without symbolic meaning: two days after the publication of Fromm's article, on June 16, 1958, the leaders of the Hungarian revolution, Imre Nagy and his associates were executed in Budapest.

The correspondence shows that, in the autumn of 1957, how carefully Fromm prepared his article to be published in The



Saturday Review. He conducted a kind of independent "investigation" in the Ferenczi as well as in the Rank case. The method of this investigation was to search out witnesses who could give account and personal testimony of the fate of Ferenczi (and, of course, Rank's).

Fromm's feelings and intentions are best documented in his letter to Norman Cousins, the well-known editor of The Saturday Review. I am quoting a few paragraphs from this letter.

"I have just finished reading the third volume of Freud by Dr. Jones, and I am appalled by its spirit. In a truly Stalinist method, he declares that the two pupils of Freud, Rank and Ferenczi (...) were insane at the time of their defection. No evidence of this statement is given. Quite a few people are alive who knew Rank and Ferenczi at that time, and who can testify to the fact that no insanity was observed. All that this amounts to is the character assassination of those who showed traces of disobedience and insubordination, in psychiatric language they are called insane, where the Stalinists call such people spies and traitors.

I feel this just shows how psychoanalysis has become a strongly entrenched totalitarian organization, and I find it most lamentable that in the few reviews I have read about Jones' book, nothing of that is noted. I feel strongly compelled to write an article (the tentative title of which might be 'The party line in psychoanalytic history writing', or 'Dr. Jones re-writes history') in which I would discuss this point in connection with the whole spirit of psychoanalytic development



as a crusading and more and more totalitarian-minded organization." (3)

Elsewhere (Erös, 1989) I presented an overview of the correspondence. Now I can only summarize the story. The idea to write a critical review on Jones emerged first in the correspondence with an American psychoanalyst, Izette de Forest, a former patient and student of Ferenczi, the author of a book on him (The Leaven of Love) and also a close friend of Fromm. Fromm asked her to write him "all the data you have on Ferenczi, from his last years, and also the names of people who knew him". He turned with the same request to Clara Thompson, another American psychoanalyst who had also been an analysand of Ferenczi in Budapest. They both sent their detailed testimony proving Ferenczi's mental health and they suggested further names to be approached.

In a four-page letter to Fromm Clara Thompson describes her memories of Ferenczi. He (Ferenczi) began telling her his difficulties with Freud in 1932 when he worked on his paper for the Wiesbaden psychoanalytic congress on "Confusion of tongues between the adult and the child". (Int. J. Psycho-Anal. 30, 1949, 225-230.) "He was having a lot of trouble writing it because he feared Freud would not approve" - Thompson writes. She didn't notice "anything else unusual on him during that spring and summer". "He was very worried about Hitler (...). He talked of wanting to find an island somewhere to escape. I know he had been collecting foreign money in Switzerland - certainly not the activity of a madman." Then came Ferenczi's tragic last visit to Freud.



Izette de Forest sent Fromm a written testimony on "Ferenczi's last visit to Professor Freud", as it was reported to her by Ferenczi himself. "This story was told me in great sadness" - writes Izette de Forest.

"On my last visit, in 1931 [correctly: 1932], to Professor Freud, I recounted her Ferenczi, 'I told him of my latest technical ideas. These are empirically based on my work with my patients. I have tried to discover from my patients' told history, from their association of ideas, from the way they behave (...), from the frustrations which arouse their anger or depression, and especially from the content - both conscious and unconscious - of their desires and longings, the manner in which they suffered rejection at the hand of their mothers or their parents or surrogates. And I have also endeavored through empathy to imagine what kind of loving care, even in specific details of behavior, the patient really needed at the early age, a loving care and nurture which would have allowed his self-confidence, his self-enjoyment, to develop wholesomely. (...)

The Professor listened to me with increasing impatience and finally warned me that I was trading on dangerous ground and was departing fundamentally from the traditional customs and techniques of psychoanalysis. (...)

This warning ended the interview. I held out my hand in affectionate adieu. The Professor turned his back on me and walked out of the room. I shall never see him again."

With the help of Izette de Forest and Clara Thompson, Fromm was able to collect a few more testimonies on



Ferenczi's last year. In the correspondence on Ferenczi, I found letters from two other American psychoanalysts, Elizabeth Severn and Alice Lowell, both one-time analyzands of Ferenczi in Budapest in the early thirties. They both testify that their master was in full possession of his mental capacities in the last period, too.

Fromm and his most devoted collaborator in this "investigation", Izette de Forest approached some family members of Ferenczi. They too affirmed that during Ferenczi's fatal illness nobody observed any change in his mental capacities.

In the correspondence with the family members the names of two persons emerged who were supposed to have the crucial proofs, or the expert's opinion against Jones' allegation. One was Dr. Lajos Lévy, a founding member of the Hungarian Psychoanalytic Association in 1913, who had been a well-known internist and psychoanalyst in Budapest and who treated medically Ferenczi until the end. The other was Dr. Mihály (Michael) Bálint, another Hungarian analyst who had been a close friend of Ferenczi and the literary executor of his will. They both lived in London in the fifties. Fromm turned to Dr. Bálint and to Dr. Lévy, asking them to make a statement on Ferenczi's last period.

Dr. Bálint did not answer to Fromm (or, at least, his letter is missing). Dr. Lévy, in his letter of November 30, 1957, acknowledged that Jones' statement needed correction. Since, however, Dr. Jones is seriously ill, "he cannot and would not into a discussion with a death candidate (Ich kann und will nicht auf eine Polemik mit einem Todeskandidaten eingehen)".



Ernest Jones died, indeed, very soon (in 1958). Surprisingly enough, the "death candidate" made a (private) statement on the Ferenczi case in a letter of November 28, 1957, to Professor Magoun who criticized him for his accusations against Ferenczi. A copy of this letter had been forwarded to Fromm by Izette de Forest.

"I think it is sheer nonsense", writes Jones, "to talk of my having made an attack on Ferenczi simply because there are people who cannot bear the truth. (...) I have all the letters Ferenczi wrote to Freud from 1907 till the end. They make most painful reading as displaying a thoroughly unstable and suffering personality whom personally I always loved. But the evidence of increasing deterioration is only too plain.(...) Naturally if anyone attacks me in public I shall have to produce some of the evidence I have taken care to suppress in Ferenczi's own interest."

So Jones. Without acquiring crucial proofs, Fromm finished his article and sent it to The Saturday Review in early December, 1957. Besides published sources, he could refer in his review only to the few personal communications he was authorized to quote. But the case was not finished.

We know that, eventually, a compromise had been negotiated between Bálint and Jones. They both sent a letter to the editor of the International Journal of Psychoanalysis (1958, XXXIX, p. 98.). (4) In their respective letters they both expressed their own views on Ferenczi's illness. Let us see how Fromm commented this compromise in his letter to Izette de



Forest on the very day when his article was published in The Saturday Review (June 14, 1958):

"I believe he [Bálint] is an intelligent and warm human being, but definitely lacking in courage. I just read this morning the statement he made in the International Psychoanalytic Journal about Ferenczi, and that is really a very cowardly statement, making concessions to Jones for which there is no justification. Especially his point that the disagreement does not deal with disagreement in facts, but interpretation, is quite untenable, since Jones' statement must refer to facts which permit the interpretation of insanity, when in truth Balint himself believes there were no such facts. (...) The whole story is really like a cheap dime novel, and pretty sordid."

To sum up, Fromm's intervention to this "cheap dime novel" can be regarded as an early attempt to rehabilitate Ferenczi both personally and scientifically. The true rehabilitation started almost two decades later when the growing popularity of Ferenczi's views in the international psychoanalytic community directed scholarly attention to the real nature of his innovations and to the depth of his relationship to Freud. The forthcoming publication of the Ferenczi-Freud correspondence in 1990 will give a full access to the facts, suppressed by Jones "in Ferenczi's own interest". Fromm's investigation in the Ferenczi case and his challenge on the "Stalinist-type rewriting of history" underlines again the link between Ferenczi's life work and analytical social psychology.



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NOTES

- (1) A more detailed analysis of the social psychological relevance of Ferenczi's early writings: Erös, 1990.
- (2) On the "technical debate" in psychoanalysis: see Haynal, 1989, Pfitzner, 1990.
- (3) I quote brief passages from the correspondence by permission of Dr. Rainer Funk, Erich Fromm Archiv, Ursrainer Ring 24, D-7400 Tübingen 1.
- (4) See the text of this letters in Fromm, 1971, 25-27.

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