

Psychoanalysis' Utopian Edge

Adrienne Harris, Ph.D.

Paper for XI th Annual Conference of the IFPS hosted
by the William Alanson White Institute on the topic :
Changing Values in Psychoanalysis.



In this paper I am interested in the complex and often unpredictable interplay between psychoanalytic theory and practice, on the one hand and political work (both theoretical and practical) involved in movements for social change and social justice, on the other hand. Revisiting the issues raised by Fromm and his colleagues in the context of the rise of fascism and the more overtly politicized culture of Europe between the wars, I was caught up in a wave of nostalgia. It was both a relief and a surprise to be asked to think about the impact of capitalism and the nature of the state.

There has been a strong impulse among contemporary North American analysts to distrust theory, almost to fetishize practice, and to keep these realms separate and similarly to sever practice from politics. Politics to the degree it survives as a conceptual category in psychoanalysis appears in certain contemporary discussions of the analytic Third. But the Third is too often identified with the analyst's personal preferences and allegiances, with institutional politics, or even with character, etc. The historical or broader cultural/social aspects of the Third recede in prominence.

I think political theory in its dystopian and utopian forms has always soaked into psychoanalytic theory and also



that the interdisciplinary encounter of political and psychoanalytic theory has the power to deepen both enterprises. I will try to illustrate this in considering the mutual enhancement of psychoanalysis and contemporary movements around gender, sexuality and identities. Women' Liberation in the 1970's had essentially a behaviorist account of gender, as learned role. The work of Dinnerstein, Chodorow and Juliet Mitchell altered and deepened that understanding and correspondingly when feminism entered psychoanalysis (Mitchell and Chodorow created a bi-directional effect) the landscape has been altered in the psychoanalytic understanding of gender. Similar process in relation to queer theory.

From the beginnings of psychoanalysis there have been theorists who lived and thought both in the world of politics and the world of theory and practice. Ferenczi, Reich, Fromm, members of the Frankfurt school, Marcuse, the group of analysts around Fenichel, somewhat later Marie Langer in Latin America. Many of the contributions of these theorists are seamlessly and deeply part of our traditions. What these theorists shared was a conviction that any notion of the subject or of relations of subject and object was meaningless if it was generic. Although there were many disagreements among them about how to account for



historical forces and for human beings relations to the natural world they were all interested in the interplay between forms of thought, social formation, psychic function and forms of labor. I am interested in this strand in our psychoanalytic history because it has privileged the idea both of a historical subject and because there is some consciousness of the ambiguities of a healing practice embedded in culture and in political process.

A politicized use of psychoanalysis has been most usefully deployed in examining the consequences of various forms of alienation both on psyche and on social process. There is also a deep attention to individuals' investments in forms of submission and domination. Currently, my interest in the various entanglements of social critique and psychological diagnosis stems from my involvement with relational theory and with feminism, both theoretical frames in which a historically and socially contingent subject is paramount. Our tendencies towards both domination and submission are acutely the preoccupation of psychoanalytic feminism. Feminists, along with many other political/social critics pay attention to our collective and individual difficulties in tolerating otherness of others. It is hard to find the subject in the object (to



use Benjamin's terms) without giving way to appropriation of the other (via identification or abjection) or destruction of the other (via a refusal of identification, an evacuation of what we cannot bear about ourselves into the now 'foreign' other). All these interpersonal/intrapsychic processes are kinds of colonization of the 'other'.

Revisiting Fromm's arguments about the relationship between character and economic/social formation, they seem both fresh and thinly inadequate. Fromm's project was to see how social relations and relations to work, labor and political culture shaped psyche. From our modern vantage point Fromm too simply connects distinct levels of analysis. Oppression and repression are not identical. Both the social world and the psychoanalytic world have become immeasurably more complex and variegated. We have not given up talk about capital and the state simply in a state of exhausted despair about political life. Entities like the state and capital matter and don't matter in anything like the way they have conventionally done.

Martin Jay, reflecting on his analysis of the Frankfurt school from the perspective of the 1990's acknowledged how profoundly the world economic situation had been restructured, how impossible it is to construct



any meta-narrative of either a collectivity or an agentic political actor. Within psychoanalysis, it often seems that the whole notion of the collectivity survives in a quite privatized form as 'intersubjectivity',, interpersonal but not quite social/historical. But perhaps there can be something excavated and used from old fashioned critical theory, at the very least a method of analysis in which the social and intrapsychic are interpenetrating.

To consider the limits of Fromm's analysis quite locally in regard to psychoanalytic theory, one sees a kind of innocence in regard to the function of theory. Fromm seems to have seen psychoanalysis as a kind of transparent instrument useful to illuminate the defenses and unconscious forces that spoiled the human possibility of freedom, predicting, all too well, the human tendency to submission. Fromm gave up certain aspects of Marxism and of Freudian theory, the darker edges one might say, to focus on human relatedness at the expense of human destructiveness. Fromm moved his focus from oedipal to pre-oedipal concerns, to the forms and forces of matriarch. This perhaps was part of his interest in Ferenczi and perhaps as a consequence a utopian humanism came to prevail.



I am also interested in a question Fromm could not have articulated: Is psychoanalytic theory and practice an instrument of liberation or surveillance?

And yet. Some of Fromm's interests and ideas continue to be viable and compelling. Certain hallmarks of his approach have a vital modern ring: the human difficulty in sustaining separateness and interconnection, the danger of idealizing and fetishizing autonomy and individuation at the expense of connectedness, the human longings for submission. The illusions that devolve if one insists on an isolated ego, the fragmentation and necessary forms of not seeing and not knowing, reflect particular social/economic conditions, Fromm thought. Teresa Brennan captures this in her analysis of what she terms a 'social psychosis. " If the social order blocks off truth through its intense imaginary affiliation with the ego's wish not to know, if the symbolic is under assault by a social psychosis, then the 'attacks on linking' will increase and the sense of historical moving time will be foreclosed" She connects this with a contemporary experience of losing time, living in a kind of endless present being robbed of time in various ways.

These ideas are deeply familiar to contemporary work on gender. Indeed these conceptions, simultaneously



carrying social values and descriptive conceptual potency, have been at the heart of feminist entanglements with psychoanalysis. One insight from the feminist turn in psychoanalysis is that complex relations that involve power and intimacy, spontaneity and conformity cannot be approached if disciplines or discourses exist in sadomasochistic relations to each other or to their objects of analysis.

One development since Fromm is to think consciously about psychoanalysis as a site of domination as well as of liberation. Fromm wrote as if one could stand outside theory and history and simply analyze its forms. A more postmodern preoccupation with politics and psychoanalysis takes up the presence of power and subject formation as a practice within psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is not a transparency but as a site of power/knowledge. Here is what I would take from Foucault. Power, functioning in the capillaries of systems is deployed to produce subjects as much as to repress them. Rules, norms and regimentation are among the very fine tuned sites of this transmission. The examination, which appears in legal, medical, educational or psychiatric/therapeutic forms, functions like some magical visual machinery that actively shapes and molds the subject.



Granted that the discussion Foucault initiates around power can seem mystifying. Power is everywhere and nowhere, settled in forms of knowledge as much as in the state apparatus. Yet to think of power flowing in the capillaries of a system means you pay attention not only to the transactions and hierarchies within formal institutions but also to the scenes and dialogues inside the consulting room.

The move from public to private from social\collective to secret and unwitnessed acts may actually quieten and deepen the engagement between the local site of power and the individual. There is something potent about the production of persons (whether criminal or psychiatric or therapeutic) which depends on and flowers in conditions of intimacy and on a process that is more dyadic and insular. These are of course the particular conditions of psychoanalysis where the potential for submission and compliance is heightened in the hot-house conditions of transference and where norms of thought and action can be conveyed in unconscious, subtle or more obvious ways.

The question of politics and theory is nowhere so deeply engaged as in the contemporary debates and developments in the analysis of gender and sexuality. Feminism and more recently queer theory begin their



encounter with psychoanalysis as marginalized outsiders but on both sides of this encounter there has been a transformative connection. I am going to draw on three feminist thinkers who have enriched psychoanalytic understanding and are utterly indebted to it: Dorothy Dinnerstein, Jessica Benjamin and Teresa Brennan. I have chosen them because they are so poised between political analysis and psychoanalysis.

One of the questions that Dorothy Dinnerstein was interested in was certainly Fromms. Why revolutions fail. But she came to a somewhat different conclusion. She saw the fiercest forms of anxiety and the ensuing defenses in relation to maternal power. She saw that contempt for women is always a transform on fear of women. In tracing the difficulties in tolerating early dependency as it was carried into adult gendered character Dinnerstein was describing normal gender as a species of psychopathology and embedded in this project was the utopian hope that principles of equality and freedom might flourish in the intimate and social life of men and women. Jessica Benjamin's interest in gender development has always held both moral and psychological questions. She has been braiding two kinds of discourse, 1) a rights discourse from Hegel, in particular his analysis of the Master slave



dialectic of mutually constructed needs and subjectivities. This is interrelated with the discourse on attachment and its vicissitudes. 2) The problem of submission and destructiveness Fromm was so invested in, she renamed as a problem in gender relations. The distorted form of such relations which she has termed 'complementarity' collapse the tensions between self and other, as both object and subject into relations of domination and submission losing the more exquisite tension in mutual recognition.

Without getting into the vary complex and variegated topic of intersubjectivity, I only want to say that Benjamin has drawn from her work on gender development, a range of questions on the relationship of self to other. Certain inheritors of the Frankfurt school's interest in politics and psychic investments in oppression, particularly (Derrida and Levinas) also ask us explicitly to attend to the moral and political questions in these psychoanalytic analyses of the relation of self to other. The choice of who is kin and who is other, the imperialism of our relation to otherness, the difficulty of sustaining some relation of integrity towards the other, is in their hands a matter both of psychic experience and political consequence.



Teresa Brennan, who approaches psychoanalysis from philosophy and feminism, posed the problem in a different but related way. She has analyzed the trenchant hold on our imaginations of what she terms a foundational fantasy, a fantasy held culturally, consciously and unconsciously about woman. This fantasy, which in so many ways is built into our narratives and material history is one in which women are considered to be dangerous, degraded and in need of domination. She connects this idea to the social and historical construction of the ego as an alienated and omnipotent structure. The fantasy of a degraded feminine dependency overturns any history or importance to early dependency by either sex in what Wrye and Welles call the 'sensory enmeshment' of the mother and her babies. Everything in our ways of seeing and being fights knowing the deep entanglements of people with each other and with shared body space and 'the lively heterogeneity of living nature' (Brennan 4). So what adds to the intellectual challenge of reconfiguring experience as interactional as a 'living heterogeneity' is that this will disrupt the gender arrangements upon which we all depend.

Gender terms have been, to cite Gergen terms 'deeply sedimented by use,' monolithic, reified, forced to operate as transhistorical concepts. The feminist and post-feminist



uprising - transgender, intersex witnessing, queer theory-
 make all the terms accruing around the binary male-female,
 masculine feminine loosen and open up. Now certain neo-
 classical analysts would see this social and linguistic
 rebellion and reconfiguration, where gender and sexual
 practices appear as 'works in progress' and not essences,
 as moving us towards social and personal psychosis. I would
 say, from the Frommian tradition that only when we give up
 the illusions of autonomy and the binary sex division that
 maintains such illusions could we be relieved of a kind of
 social psychosis, a fragmentation with all its relation to
 exploitation and the domination of nature and other people.

In the year of contemplating this paper, I have been
 working on several projects that have come to feel
 embedded in this writing. Writing an afterward for a new
 and posthumous edition of Dorothy Dinnerstein's work.
 Developing a conference to honor Emmanuel Ghent and to
 explore his work on spiritual practice, aesthetics and
 psychoanalysis. Submission as the default to surrender.
 Sadism as a foiled but eager attempt at contact, object
 probing. The melancholic and exciting experience in the
 termination of my own analysis. Throughout much of that
 experience I organized in fantasy my own writing and
 creativity as a secret project of which my analyst



disapproved. It is curious that in this imaginative space with its fantasies of domination and prohibition I wrote more and more and so it is to him that I can dedicate this paper, written with him and for him and not against him. The common themes in the events of this year are Losing and finding of freedom, filial duty and rebellion. Surrender not submission.

Psychoanalysis is implicated in the installation of illusions of ego autonomy and domination and has the potential to heal these splits. Perhaps at the millenium we cannot predict but could hold out that utopian hope that in the tension in psychoanalysis between care and containment, care will be ascendant.

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