

# THE REPRESSION OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Otto Fenichel and  
the Political Freudians

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crossed paths with the Fenichel group. However, in their eagerness to modernize psychoanalysis, they surrendered its critical spirit, its dimensions of the unconscious and sexuality. Here they parted from the Fenichel people.

Fenichel realized that his own position on the neo-Freudians required a finely tuned theoretical ear and a pragmatic tactical touch. The mixture was rare. Against the flat culturalism of the neo-Freudians, Fenichel stressed the instinctual and sexual depths. As a political Freudian, he also denounced biological reductionism and the social blindness of mainstream psychoanalysis. For this reason he warmly greeted the neo-Freudians as allies—only to criticize sharply their revisions. On this score he sided with the psychoanalytic conservatives with whom he shared little.

While Fenichel's position was theoretically coherent, even stringent, in the midst of psychoanalytic squabbles it pleased very few. As the neo-Freudians gathered support, the lines hardened. The conservatives glued themselves to Freud's texts and denounced a social or political psychoanalysis that built on these texts. The neo-Freudians rejected by the conservatives discarded more and more dimensions of psychoanalysis finally embracing a very lax sociologism. Fenichel who saw the truth in each position was welcomed by neither faction.

Abram Kardiner, for instance, wrote to Fenichel soliciting a sympathetic review of his *Individual and His Society*.<sup>8</sup> With bitterness, Kardiner complained that the New York analytic establishment unanimously derided his attention to an anthropological psychoanalysis, judging that his work subverted canonical psychoanalysis. Since Fenichel was "looked upon as a champion of conservatism," a friendly review might turn the tide (LX/11 August 1939/9).

Fenichel bridled at Kardiner's label: "I don't think that my point of view in psychoanalytic questions can be summarized by the slogan of conservatism." He agreed that the "applica-

tion of psychoanalysis to sociology is the main task" and the "first applications of this kind à la Reik or Róheim have been basically wrong." However, he wrote to Kardiner, "the opposite danger does also exist today . . . one might neglect or underestimate the specific discoveries of Freud and the unconscious" (LX/11 August 1939/9).

As was his habit, Fenichel reviewed the book at length and sent the review with a letter to Kardiner. He sympathized with the book's social orientation but not with its rejection of instinct theory. He told Kardiner, "the libido theory has never denied that the personal structures are formed by the frustrating and limiting influences of the outer world" (LXVIII/July 1940/6). Kardiner expressed "deep chagrin" at Fenichel's criticism and failure "to grasp what I was driving at" (LXX/10 August 1940/7). Kardiner subsequently joined Sandor Rado in breaking away from the New York Institute to establish a separate clinic associated with Columbia University.

The same theoretical and tactical jockeying marked Fenichel's relations with Karen Horney, Margaret Mead, and, above all, Erich Fromm. Fenichel saluted Horney's attack on "extreme biologism," which, he noted, remained a constitutional failing of current psychoanalysis. Yet Fenichel anticipated that Horney's receptivity to the "social moment" would entail a "turning away from Freud and a surrendering of specific analytic knowledge" (?XXXIX/11 September 1937/7).

Horney's *Neurotic Personality of Our Time* fully confirmed Fenichel's fears. While it hinted of socialism, her book completely neglected sexuality; ultimately, Fenichel concluded in a review, it can explain neither the social nor psychic structures (XL/23 October 1937/11). He sent the review to Horney who judged it "very fair," but reiterated that they fundamentally differed on instinct theory: "I see it as something which must be overcome" (XLII/7 January 1938/9).



With Fromm, Fenichel maintained the broadest discussions. In Germany they had moved in the same left-wing analytic circles. For several years Fromm belonged to the Institute of Social Research (or, the Frankfurt School), which included Max Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. In the Frankfurt School's journal, Fromm published an article on the social bases of psychoanalytic therapy which prompted Fenichel to reestablish the contact with Fromm that exile had severed. Fromm's essay attacked Freud's therapeutic posture—noninvolvement—as a liberalism camouflaging a cold authoritarianism; Fromm praised Ferenczi as the more radical analyst who dared to encourage love and warmth in therapy. Freud remained a nineteenth-century aristocratic liberal, according to Fromm, correct in his therapeutic behavior, but fundamentally unable to affirm the happiness of his patients.<sup>9</sup>

Fenichel commented in the *Rundbriefe* that on many points Fromm's critique recalled Reich's, although Fromm did not cite Reich. Fenichel wrote to Fromm, suggesting they resume their "interrupted connection": those devoted to a "social psychoanalysis" should work together. Yet he rejected much of Fromm's essay. Fromm's point that Freud was a child of his time was undoubtedly correct. "How could it be otherwise?" To polemicize against Freud as a repressive bourgeois missed the mark. It reminded Fenichel of Reich "who always reproached Freud for not being a Communist" (XXIII/3 March 1936/12).

Fenichel also did not accept Fromm's critique of Freud's therapeutic practice, a recurring objection lodged against Freud by the neo-Freudians. Many neo-Freudians championed Ferenczi; by encouraging affection and love in therapy, he broke with Freud's asceticism. Fenichel defended Freud's orthodoxy as more radical than Ferenczi's reform. The neutrality prescribed by orthodox psychoanalysis, he wrote to Fromm, does not deny the patient's claim to happiness. Nor did he

agree that Ferenczi's teachings on love radically transcended the social taboos that beset Freud. In fact, in his last years a reactionary flavor permeated Ferenczi's ideas. Alluding to Ferenczi's final illness and mental deterioration, which his followers have always contested, Fenichel wrote that he did not know why Fromm celebrated "the great Ferenczi in this period of his decline." To be sure he retained his "genial flashes of insight"; but this did not suffice to elevate him to a "revolutionary analyst who overcame liberalism" (XXIII/3 March 1936/12).

Fromm responded in detail to Fenichel's comments. Ferenczi was no revolutionary, yet his relationship with patients struck a different note from Freud's. Fromm also explained his dearth of references to Reich "on personal as well as factual" grounds. Personally he found intolerable Reich's "pathological self-love and arrogance." Moreover, despite appearances, he and Reich tap antagonistic traditions. "Philosophically Reich in no way represents historical materialism; rather he represents a mechanical materialism. . . . In reality he has never understood Marxism." While unyielding about Ferenczi, Fenichel completely accepted Fromm's evaluation of Reich. Reich's "impossible behavior," he noted, compelled his own move from "secure Oslo to insecure Prague." In general, Fenichel believed, Reich has rendered more difficult the project of a social psychoanalysis (XXV/23 April 1936/10).

Even as Fenichel endeavored to reestablish relations, Fromm was moving in a neo-Freudian direction. After Fromm published several essays clearly influenced by Horney and other neo-Freudians, Fenichel asked, "What became of Fromm's Marxism?" (90/10 July 1942/14) When Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* appeared, a transition work marking his departure from classical psychoanalysis, Fenichel published a long critical review. "For the purpose of avoiding and correcting mistakes which psychoanalysis admittedly has made," he

charged that Fromm, Kardiner, Horney, and others “abandon psychoanalysis altogether instead of applying it in a better way”<sup>10</sup> Fromm embraced a vague social idealism which he falsely imagined was more “real” and “concrete” than Freud’s antiquated concepts.

Privately, however, Fenichel sounded another note: the theoretical issues could not be cleaved from the plight of their circle. To the version of the Fromm review he circulated in the *Rundbriefe* Fenichel added that it was “regrettable” that “we” do not write better books than the neo-Freudians. “Perhaps it could be made possible that such better books be written by the reestablishment of our old and forgotten habit of discussing important issues of Marxist psychoanalysis among ourselves” (86/3 March 1942/1). He increasingly accompanied his criticisms of the neo-Freudians with the same lament. “We,” the more political and radical analysts, have surrendered to the neo-Freudians

In 1937 he sharply criticized Margaret Mead’s *Sex and Temperament* for its “unsurpassable naïveté, bourgeois prejudice, and sociological ignorance” (XXXIII/1 February 1937/9). Eight years later when he evaluated another book by Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, regret mollified his critique. Fenichel, troubled by his group’s minimal productivity and visibility, concluded that Mead’s book was idealistic and inadequate, yet “its task is our task,” the concrete investigation of social and character structures. In one of his final letters, he noted that fifteen years ago this was “our” program; but we have watched as non-psychoanalytic thinkers assumed the lead. “When will we have the opportunity to sit down together?

... We all have ideas which go far beyond what Margaret Mead says.” Today, he commented, the analysts know neither anthropology nor history; and if a few anthropologists command psychoanalysis they are deficient in history and sociology (114/2 January 1945/13).

The isolation of the Fenichel group was defined, perhaps caused, by their distance from both the neo-Freudians and the psychoanalytic conservatives. Even as Fenichel fired away at the neo-Freudians, he reiterated that the opposite extreme, a psychological reductionism which explained everything by the Oedipus complex, still flourished. Ernest Jones’s “Evolution and Revolution”<sup>11</sup> reminded Fenichel of the vigor of this psychologism. “It is enlightening to see how the ‘leaders’ of ‘orthodox’ psychoanalysis have learned nothing in the last years” (87/22 March 1942/9). That the conservatives continued to prosper was brought home to Fenichel by a critical review of Kardiner by Róheim and a review of Fromm by Menninger; these reviews he considered “obviously unjust” (83/27 November 1941/9). Fenichel often reminded the others that “we” must not cease to distinguish ourselves from the reactionary critiques of the neo-Freudians.

This delicate theoretical posture suffered when translated into the protean world of organizational politics. When Horney and her followers broke with the New York Society, the Fenichel circle faced unpleasant choices: they could not support the revisionists, even though they applauded their general orientation; and they also harbored serious differences with the conservatives who maintained the organization. This “paradoxical situation” pained Fenichel. The Horney group challenged the official organization partly because it failed properly to assess social factors; but Fenichel entertained “no doubt” that we must be against the Horney group since they renounced the essence of psychoanalysis (80/3 September 1941/1).

In the middle of World War II the symmetry between the military and psychoanalytic battle seemed obvious to Fenichel. The alliance of the reactionary Western forces and revolutionary Soviet forces mirrored the configuration within psychoanalysis. An ironic coalition of conservatives and revolutionaries composed the Allies. There is

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