



Riesman_D_1959

Review Erich Fromm: Sigmund Freud's Mission

David Riesman

Source: Review E. Fromm: *Sigmund Freud's Mission* (1959a, English) - Typoscript of a draft – publication so far not verified, 12 pp.

I have hesitated whether I should review a book written by a former psychoanalytic teacher and a close friend. But with certain kinds of books, it is hard to find reviewers who are at once reasonably detached and competent, and the nature of the psychoanalytic is such (for reasons Fromm clarifies in this book) that relatively disinterested critics are uncommon. I write, then, as one who is on Fromm's side in the controversial matters he discusses.

Sigmund Freud's Mission consists of two parts: a psychoanalytic interpretation of Freud's personality and a discussion of how his personal qualities gave form and content both to psychoanalytic theory and to its political arm, the psychoanalytic movement, and a much briefer discussion of the contemporary audience for this movement, namely what it is about the present state of middle class culture in America that makes psychoanalysis popular here as it is in no other land. Both matters have been dealt with before — the former in the neglected biography of Freud by Helen Burner — but never with such originality and forcefulness. Fromm's understanding of Freud as a human being has been facilitated by the great amount of new material on Freud's life made available in an Ernest Jones' three-volume book and in Freud's recently published letters to Wilhelm Fliess, speculative-minded Berlin physician who befriended him in his most isolated period.

Fromm draws the picture of a spoiled *wunderkind* who was able to get his mother to make his sister stop practicing the piano because it bothered him in his studies, but a child who was deeply dependent on the mother from whom such blessings flowed. Indeed, Fromm shows how dependence on people whom one needs can, as in Freud's case, be hidden by great shows of independence, and he suggests how again and again in relations to others, to Fliess, to Jung, to Breuer and to later disciples, the constellation of his relations to his mother repeated itself, save that these men, not so doting as Freud's mother, eventuated in the violent breaks and schisms so characteristic of Freud's relations with colleagues. Fromm argues that Freud reacting against his needs to be dependent established an image of himself as dominant and unconquerable, and thus made it impossible for him, despite his self-knowledge in other respect, to understand these recurrent crises in his relationships with the men to whom he had transferred in a quite typical Freudian way his symbiotic tendencies, not only with his mentors such as Breuer, but with his disciples.



Incidentally, in the course of this discussion, Fromm restores a fairer picture of Freud's relationship to Fliess who comes off badly in Jones' largely uncritical and entirely worshipful account. Freud's attitude towards his father was quite different: it was the attitude of the "superior" son whose father, a man of ordinary quality as a businessman, not courageous or inspiring, is at once somewhat critical of the son and unheroic. Fromm observes that the concept of the Oedipus complex with "over-determined" by the fact that Freud did not have a father to whom he could willingly submit, but rather one who was merely an officious rival for the mother — a mother to whom Freud remained attached until she dies in her nineties. Fromm continues:

"Freud's rebellious attitude toward his father touches on one of the most important aspects of Freud's personality as far as his work is concerned. Freud is generally considered to have been a rebel. He defied public opinion and medical authorities, and without the capacity for such defiance, he could never have held and proclaimed his views on the unconscious, infantile sexuality, etc. Yet Freud was a *rebel* and not a *revolutionary*. By rebel, I refer to a person who fights existing authorities, but who, himself wants to be an authority (to whom others submit), and who does not dissolve his dependency on and respect for authority *per se*. His rebelliousness is directed mainly towards those authorities who do not acknowledge him, and he is friendly to those authorities who are of his own choosing, especially when he becomes one of them. The type of the 'rebel', in this psychological sense, can be found among many radical politicians who are rebels before they have power, and turn conservative once they have acquired power for themselves. A 'revolutionary' in the psychological sense is someone who overcomes his ambivalence toward authority because he frees himself from attachment to authority and from the wish to dominate others. (...) While he defied authorities and enjoyed this defiance, he was at the same time deeply impressed by the existing social order and its authorities. To receive the title of a professor, and to find recognition from the existing authorities, were of utmost concern to him, although in a strange unawareness of his own desires, he denied it; so the First World War, he was a fiery patriot, proud first of Austria and then of German aggressiveness, and for almost four years it never dawned on him to question critically the War ideology and goals of the central powers." (pages 60-61)

Freud's need to dominate appeared not only in his relations with colleagues, and his inability to accept any serious criticism from them, but even more in his wish to make of psychoanalysis something more than a medical therapy and a scientific theory. But actually a political movement organized as a conspiratorial cell which could enlighten and reform the world.

So far, it would seem that Fromm's book is only aimed at the debunking of Freud — and certainly he does aim to debunk Jones' picture of Freud. However, Fromm emphasizes the extent to which the mother's unconditional love for Sigmund gave him a confidence which helped him face the frightening abysses of his new vision of man and the courage to trust his own intelligence in the face of common sense and in the face of savage and relentless criticism. Indeed, one may even wonder whether, without a certain authoritarian and domineering streak, without a spark of the Nietzschean superman, one could have broken through the Victorian complacency and have made the discoveries Freud did, which have changed our world beyond recognition. What Fromm does show is how Freud's personality (as happens with every social



thinker) influenced his theories so that, for example, Freud's inability to love reappears as a seemingly scientific verdict on the economics of the libido, while Freud's rationalism, trust in which made it possible for him to proceed at all, re-emerges in his theory in terms of regarding the Ego as the course of all that is rational and the emotion as the source of mere irrational turbulence. Thus, Fromm's book should help in reassessing what remains vital in Freud's ideas — the concept of the unconscious, the theory of the formations of character, the place of dreams and free association and much else — and what is merely the arbitrary toll paid by the theory for being born in Freud's mind.

Or at least it might have this effect if it were not faced with Freud's other great creation: the psychoanalytic movement. Freud created the movement with its now-famous secret circle of seven trusted disciples, allegedly in order to prevent heretical malpractice along allegedly psychoanalytic lines. Much of his correspondence in the Jones biography is given over to the detailed moves and countermoves of the movement, of its national branches within the various countries and of the international congresses which were stage-managed from the center. Fromm points out that there is no "Darwinian" movement which licenses the elect and trains them: Darwin's ideas have become part of the general corpus of science. Rather the comparison with Marxism is striking which in its founder's hands with both a "hard" scientific theory and the movement designed to change the world. (This reviewer would like very much to see a study of Marx by Fromm along the lines of *Sigmund Freud's Mission*.) All one has to do is to read the psychoanalytic journals where often the most banal or most interesting ideas are prefaced by the incantation, "as Freud said," much as a dutiful Communist might make an obeisance in the direction of Marxism-Leninism; correspondingly, there are many American analysts of the current generation who are regarded as orthodox who practice their day-by-day trade with little knowledge of or regard for the niceties of Freudian theory — but are nevertheless protected by the movement to heaving to re-examine what they do.

What was it that Freud wanted to change in the world that led him to giving political form to his scientific rebellion? Fromm shows that he had early envisaged himself as a political-military leader and that increasingly as his life went on, he modeled himself on Moses, a great but neglected man who led his people¹ out of bondage. Freud saw mankind as enbondaged to the instincts on the one side and endangered by barbarism, and oscillating on the other side towards over-refinement and enslavement by the repressions of civilization.

Of the mass of mankind, he was contemptuous, but he thought that an elite — the psychoanalytic avant-garde — could conceivably stabilize society on a basis which would be at once removed from barbarism while not being quite so heavy-handed in repression. Freud was struck in his early work at the price his patients paid for their refinement and became something of a sex-reformer, though never the Bohemian his enemies in later his admirers made him out to be. But particularly after the First World War, Freud was more concerned with the danger the instincts could do to the precarious structure of civilization and his mission was the use of rea-

¹ Strikingly enough, in Freud's view not "his" people, for Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* pictures Moses as an Egyptian nobleman who "adopted" the Jews — much as Freud himself in his fantasies did not care to be his father's son.



son to liberate man both from bondage to his instincts and from bondage to the cruel cultural norms that had been developed to hold the instincts in check. Freud was skeptical, nay, cynical, about most things — a quality that would have made it difficult for him to enter politics directly and made him feel more at home in a scientific career; but his skepticism never extended to science itself, nor to the pursuit of truth, and in his war for the truth as he saw it, he was wholly prepared to employ all the political strategies of a Moses or Hannibal. The picture of Freud which emerged is on the sad side: a grimly courageous and almost wholly isolated visionary, fanatically devoted to his cause and expecting like devotion from others, sustained by him cause and impressive in its service. Like many reformers, he is a greatly self-controlled man who brings to others pleasures and release he denies himself.' For this reviewer, Freud emerges more human from this book than from any other, a disappointed man in terms of his hopes for an unbroken movement, and yet, because he is intrepid and outspoken, a tragic hero in the classical sense.

But now we must ask why is it that his movement has had such an impact on the urban and suburban upper middle class in the United States?

Many scientists would maintain, of course, that Freud's combination of political and scientific goals is illegitimate and that a scientist should stick to his trade (intermittently, Freud himself claimed that he was only a scientist and only reported what he saw) and there are many people who accept Freud as a clinician and distinguish between the Freud of the earlier, more technical writing and the Freud of the later, more metaphysical and speculative ones. These dichotomies do not appeal to me: "science" becomes itself a movement when it protests too much about being hermetically sealed off from that is going on in the world and from those developments to which its own progress contributes. What was misleading about Freud's political bent was not that it existed but that it remained so largely unconscious and unavowed and here, as elsewhere, his own contribution can help us to understand and curb the excesses of the psychoanalytic movement itself. As his dreams and his interpretations of them show, Freud repressed his drive for greatness and for domination, and many of his own followers, to whom he behaved in a kindly and paternalistic way so doing as they obeyed him, failed to see these qualities in him either. It would be unfortunate if the examples of Freud and Marx should lead scientists to stick to their lasts and leave the world to be mismanaged by others.

But a further question remains, to which Fromm devotes only a tantalizingly brief discussion, namely how it is that the psychoanalytic movement has had such an enormous appeal for the urban and suburban American upper-middle class. He argues that while psychoanalysis in its inception was a radical theory, an attack on repressions, it has today become a conservative one which still pretends to radicalism. Sex is no longer forbidden, but a commodity in which advertising encourages us to indulge: "Thus, psychoanalysis owes its popularity as a messenger of sexual freedom to the new consumer passion, rather than being the cause of the new sexual morality." (page 113-114)

Beyond that, it is precisely the Movement itself which appeals to people, Fromm writes:

"Psychoanalysis became a surrogate for religion, for the urban middle and upper-middle classes. (...) Here in the movement, they found everything — a dogma, a ritual, a leader, a hierarchy, the feeling of possessing the truth, of being superior to the uninitiated; yet



without great effort, without deeper comprehension of the problems of human existence, without inside into and criticism of their own society and its crippling effects on man, without having to change one's character and those aspects which matter, namely to get rid of one's greed, anger and folly. (...)The decay of liberalism is expressed in the decay of psychoanalysis." (page 112)

And that decay, Fromm contends, is shown in the deliquescence of psychoanalysis itself as a creative theory. Increasingly, psychoanalysts have become ritualists, lacking in spontaneity as therapists and in Originality as observers. Indeed, psychoanalysis as a career increasingly appeals, in my own limited observation, to physicians who are not themselves basically troubled nor neurotic, but rather to those who are attracted by the sedentary, not unproductive life in which they can come close to people in a nonreciprocating way, without the risks of intimacy — people whose professional tragedy Alan Wheelis describes poignantly in the *Quest for Identity*.

In his crack at liberalism, there is a certain irony in the light of developments in the past few years. When this country was more liberal than it is now, that is in the forties, his own work and that of other neo-Freudians was welcomed, among other things as a way of getting away from Freud's biologicistic pessimism his reactionary view that life could hardly be changed for the better. But in the last few years, there has been a powerful "back to Freud" movement, led by those American intellectuals who are themselves most weary of liberalism. It is they who have welcomed Freud's pessimism as manifesting a truly tragic sense of life and as manifesting a fence for the biologic core of the individual as against all reformist hopes and social pressures. It is they who turn the Jones biography in Freud's centennial year (1956) into an attack on the neo-Freudians for their allegedly shallow optimism, their belief that if the world were a better place man could be happier. (See, for example, the collection of essays, many of them excellent, in Benjamin Nelson, Ed., *Freud and the 20th Century*.)

In my judgment, liberalism has become an all too easy fall-guy for all that has gone wrong in the 20th century — for many of the same reasons that have led Freud's emphasis on the irrational in man to take precedence today over his equally powerful emphasis, indeed over-emphasis, on the rational. If liberalism is decayed, so much the worse for the planet: at its best, it provides the climate for its own correction and development — the climate where the ideas of Freud can become not only the opiates of the consumer, but, as in Fromm's hands, a critique of culture.