



When a Cigar is Just a Cigar: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and ‘Reversion Compulsion’¹

Kurt Jacobsen

Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with different means), the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.¹ – Pierre Bourdieu²

Politics is not a purely rational arena, so it always has been a perfectly valid subject for psychoanalytic investigation, if crucial caveats are kept in mind. An anti-Freudian groupthink cultural climate has discouraged political analysts from so much as dabbling in psychoanalysis (though dabbling of course can do as much damage as kneejerk hostility). So when social scientists muster the nerve to venture into inner worlds of their subject matter, they much prefer the safety of cognitive frameworks insofar as they lend themselves to formulaic findings, easy quantification and fashionable but dubious artificial ‘experiments.’³ For their part, psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, with notable exceptions, hardly have been eager to tread *en masse* into the interpretive perils of our 21st century political terrain.⁴ Erich Fromm, Erik Erikson, Bruno Bettelheim, Robert Jay Lifton and other earlier psychoanalytic luminaries have not spawned a new generation of critical public intellectuals of similar stature, at least not any who can gain traction outside of a tiny handful of specialized journals.⁵

Yet few social scientists deny that psychological factors exert influence on political events, and vice versa. The magisterial international relations Realist Hans Morgenthau reckoned that international politics was at root psychological in nature.⁶

¹ The cherished Freud cigar quote seems to be apocryphal. This essay ought to be read as a companion piece to my ‘Why Freud Matters: Psychoanalysis and IR Revisited.’ *International Relations* 27, 4 (December 2013) which explains the advantages of psychoanalysis to those favoring structural power models.

² Bourdieu, *Outlines of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977). p. 64. The quote rephrases Marx and Engels’ comment that the ruling ideas in every epoch are the ideas of the ruling class.

³ See Dawn Langan Teele, ed. *Field Experiments and Their Critics: The Uses and Abuses of Experimentation in the Social Sciences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 20016) and the symposium (Henry Brady, Yannis Krupnikov, Jessica Robinson-Preece, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, Betsy Sinclair) on this volume in *Perspectives on Politics* 14, 4 (December 2016).

⁴ Eli Zaretsky, Peter Barham, Lisa Appignanesi, and the late John Forrester are among exceptions that come to mind.

⁵ See Neil McLaughlin, ‘How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual: Intellectual Movements and the Rise and Fall of Erich Fromm.’ *Sociological Forum* 13, 2 (January 1998) and Russell Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁶ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1973, 5th ed), p. 7.

Jerrold Post spent a career heading the CIA's personality profiling division, which, like counterparts in spook agencies elsewhere, strived to pinpoint predisposing conditions under which one might expect foreign leaders' quirky emotional make-ups to make an appreciable difference in how they act and react.⁷ Daniel Pick, and others, reminds us that this scrying practice has been around a long time, probably since Sparta and Athens squared off.⁸ Such state agencies, as Edward Snowden confirmed, are just as intensely interested in profiling their own populations so as to anticipate and smother dissent. So neither scholars nor the political-administrative strata dismiss the value of spelunking our inner lives, even if they must construe them—like the gloomy Stasi agent in *The Lives of Others*—through the dark glass of their own misshapen psyches. In this vein Dusan Makavejev, director of *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, incisively characterized his screen protagonists from the old Yugoslav Party hierarchy as control freaks who could not control themselves.⁹

Psychoanalysis has never existed in a tidy, hermetically sealed, history-proof chamber, except perhaps through willful disregard by a few practitioners populating Park Avenue or Hampstead.¹⁰ Otto Fenichel in the mid-1930s, when asked what is the most pressing problem for psychoanalysis, replied, 'The question of whether the Nazis come to power in Vienna.'¹¹ Donald Trump is not a threat of the same order of magnitude, but his volatile rightwing administration has raised acute concerns. In 2017 the American Psychiatric Association was sorely tempted to suspend its 'Goldwater rule' (against 'guesstimate' analysis of political leaders) on the grounds that, during this careening Trump presidency, the rule amounted to a 'gag,' and so it was against the public interest for fretful shrinks in their role as citizens to keep their long-distance cable channel pundit 'diagnoses' all to themselves.¹²

Alarmed attendees at a Yale School of Medicine psychiatric conference last July averred that President Trump suffered a 'dangerous mental illness' and exhibited 'paranoid and delusional' traits, which makes one regret that among its proliferating categories the DSM lacks the rude but indispensable colloquial term 'arse----'.¹³ For it

⁷ Jerrold Post, *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

⁸ See Daniel Pick, *The Pursuit of the Nazi Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Robert Waite, *The Psychopathic God* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

⁹ Kurt Jacobsen, *Maverick Voices: Conversations with Political and Cultural Rebels* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 241.

¹⁰ An infamous sketch of that extreme category appears in Janet Malcolm's *Psychoanalysis The Impossible Profession* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

¹¹ Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s* (New York: Harper & Row 1986), p. 222.

¹² Jake Johnson, 'Psychiatric Group Tells Member it's OK to Break Silence on Trump's Bizarre Behavior.' *Common Dreams* 25 July 2017.

¹³ May Bulman, 'Donald Trump has "Dangerous Mental Illness" Say Psychiatry Experts at Yale Conference.' *The Independent* 21 April, 2017.

is still neither a crime nor a mental derangement to be stupid or vain or a bully, or all three. We'd all be behind bars or sectioned if that were the case, though Martin Luther King's comments on 'conscientious stupidity' and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's mordant words on stupidity, which he reckoned as worse than intentional evil, are worth revisiting.¹⁴ Sword and Zimbardo in *Psychology Today* even opined that 'the Goldwater rule is not relevant because it was established before the DSM made diagnosis behaviorally based.'¹⁵ So now it's trustworthy. Scouts' honor, (On the flip side, Bruce Malzlish only secured permission to publish a psychobiography of Jimmy Carter in return for endorsing Carter for the Presidency.)¹⁶ Shrinks, for the most part, remain only marginally better suited at political diagnostic tasks than, say, the fleeting, foul-mouthed White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci, who pronounced his White House rival Reince Preibus a 'f----- paranoid schizophrenic.'¹⁷ We are entitled to our opinions, but not necessarily to our diagnoses, even if they should, in a twice-a-day broken clock manner, turn out to be f----- correct.¹⁸

So even proud hard-nosed skeptics concede that it pays to ask who we are in our inner worlds as well as in our outer guises when we examine the world around us, insofar as it is truly distinct from us.¹⁹ Cognitive psychology models flatteringly exempt practitioners from inspection, which suits the paleo-positivist thrust of so much of contemporary social science. One ordinarily resorts to the psychoanalyst when observable excesses form or augur a damaging pattern regarding self and/or others. Freud certainly intended psychoanalysis to contribute to the social sciences. Such explorations, though, demand an ample knowledge of psychoanalysis and also of the social scientific field into which one introduces analytic concepts, which can be a burdensome and daunting requirement, especially in an era when graduate programs, for a variety of good and bad reasons, try to hasten students through extremely expensive doctoral programs. Still, each side - psychoanalyst and, for lack of a better

¹⁴ 'Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.' Reverend Martin Luther King, Speech, New York City, 12 September 1962; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'After Ten Years,' in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 43.

¹⁵ Rosemary K. M. Sword and Philip Zimbardo, 'Shrinks Battle over Diagnosing Donald Trump.' *Psychology Today* 31 January 2017.

¹⁶ The biography in question was Bruce Mazlish and Edwin Diamond, *Jimmy Carter: An Interpretive Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

¹⁷ Jeet Heer, 'Trump, "Mooch" and the Rise of the New York Douchebag.' *New Republic* 28 July 2017, p. 42.

¹⁸ For those who cannot resist, see Bandy X. Lee, *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* (New York: Macmillan, 2017) and, arguing Trump is more 'bad than mad,' Allen Francis, *Twilight of American Sanity: A Psychiatrist Analyzes the Age of Trump* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017). A more telling and useful volume, because it eschews diagnoses of politicians alone, is Tristram Adams, *The Psychopath Factory: How Capitalism Organizes Empathy* (London: Repeater Press, 2017)

¹⁹ 'What [psychoanalysis] aims at and achieve is nothing less than the uncovering of what is unconscious in mental life.' Sigmund Freud, 'The Common Neurotic State.' *Introductory Lectures* (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 389.

term, materialist - must be willing to give the devious devil on the other side its due in order to do any conceptual good at all.²⁰

What some observers deem wholly rational in politics often is judged wildly irrational by beholders elsewhere on the political or methodological spectrum. ‘You can’t be too careful,’ for example, is a common mind-numbing bromide that can spur dangerous tendencies leading, if unchecked, all the way to a retraction of democratic rights or nuclear Armageddon. Rationality, after all, is what we, or our manifestly imperfect political and economic elites, choose to make of it, and our masters and their minions historically have preferred security (of their power and assets) to liberty or social justice.²¹ Rational notions of a sort unleavened by human experience inevitably entail distorted depictions of action and motives, and therefore mislead us.²² Too often rationality also is invoked as crude rationalization, a defense mechanism cloaking other motives, which are not always conscious, even if starkly apparent to outsiders.

Should we be more careful in resorting to invisible factors – what is ‘in actors’ heads’ - when a scan of material factors apparently does the job in explaining political activity? As Barham writes of First World War shell shock casualties, ‘Lives were despoiled by the degradations of the system to which they were subjected, as much as by an originating disturbance.’²³ Psychoanalysts can offer a useful grounded interpretive approach to the ways in which power is wielded and resisted. What is the significance in political life of the unconscious, that is, of motives and forces of which we are unaware, and at what point are we overreaching when invoking them?²⁴ What limits ought psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically attuned writers keep in mind as they decipher the political world? Given that psychoanalysis in most guises asserts that preoedipal, or hyper-discursive, issues permeate every sphere of human activity, how far is too far to go in these veins? While there are no absolute answers to these queries, a reflex-like tendency to suffer theoretical slippage, a reversion to one's training and/or earliest inclinations, needs to be borne firmly in mind when stepping into any fraught interpretive fray in the realm of politics.

The Predicament of Reality

Few psychoanalysts, if confronted directly with the question, dispute that institutional structures in which we are raised are powerful interactive shapers of our drives and intentions, although far too often this looming factor is discounted—or

²⁰ Freud viewed psychoanalysis as the most empirical, and therefore materialist, of sciences.

²¹ Worth reading on this score is Fred Halliday. *Rethinking International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

²² Stephen Toulmin, ‘The Idol of Stability.’ Tanner Lectures on Human Values, University of Southern California, 1998, p. 354. Also see Toulmin's *Return to Reason* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002).

²³ Peter Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 3. Also see his comments on Virginia Woolf and W. H. Rivers (pp. 32-33).

²⁴ Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought* (London: Hogarth Press, 1969), p. ix.

converted into nothing but funhouse mirror reflections—the moment they begin, or midway through, a political analysis. In the 2016 documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* the late James Baldwin got to the heart of the prickly matter when he stated that while he cannot know the soul of any individual he justifiably could draw reliable conclusions about groups (composed of that individual and others) through the observable actions of their racist and class-bound institutions. Complicity is unavoidable, unless one takes action against them.²⁵ Demurrals, if any, will be most interesting to hear.

Nor would psychoanalysts discount the influence of economic and global systems surrounding and enveloping us, though most practitioners are no more able than the general public to assess why and how that happens.²⁶ These external influences, which are never entirely external insofar as we add our personal ingredient to them, interpenetrate to different (and debatable) degrees in different situations. Structural materialists, by contrast, see such systems as impelling individuals and organizations, whatever their internal misgivings or intentions, to fall into alignment with designated and observable behavioral grooves, calling attention to what one renowned critic calls ‘more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation.’²⁷ So political analysis and psychoanalysis seem, at first blush, to be dead opposites, in that the former tends to exclude all but external influences and the latter is inclined to severely downplay or even disregard external influences.

Yet psychoanalysis (and phenomenology too) is persuasive in arguing that agents respond not to an *unequivocal* material stimulus but, in part, to a projection of their internal imagery, parental and social indoctrination, and disowned motives. In this rich vein Fromm wrote of the prevalence of paranoid thinking among collectivities (which seems to be a policy goal of many governments) as featuring a logical possibility but while relinquishing the ‘aspect of realistic probability’ without which ‘there is no chance for realistic and sensible political action.’²⁸ Political scientist Harold Lasswell long ago speculated on how ruling groups, whom he tended to overvalue, can go about ‘guiding mass insecurities,’ for the good of all, though much more likely the gain of elites guiding the public according to their own self-serving delusions and deceitful scenarios.²⁹ WMD in Iraq, anyone?

²⁵ *I Am Not Your Negro*. Magnolia Pictures. 2016. Dir. Raoul Peck.

²⁶ A welcome exception is the annual Psychoanalysis and Politics conference with the upcoming 2018 one addressing ‘psychodynamics in times of austerity.’

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 8.

²⁸ Fromm, *May Man Prevail?: Facts and Fictions of Foreign Policy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), pp. 20, 21.

²⁹ Harold D. Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1935), p. 8.

The sources and management of fear thus are fair game for psychoanalytic accounts so long as institutional imperatives and sheer political cynicism are understood as possible factors too. On the upbeat side, psychoanalysis anticipates that transformative experiences can usher afflicted agents into sober 'ordinary unhappiness.' Learning, grudgingly, takes place, a learning that is 'worked through' by non-elite individuals, and may result in much more self-aware activity. Psychoanalysis strongly implies that self-aware actors then can work, if they so choose, to change the goals and dynamics of the institutions they operate within or, at least, alter their own reactions to these institutions in beneficial ways. Restraint in attributing causes of behavior to external forces is quite prudent for clinicians, who cannot conduct anything approaching reliable reality checks on clients, but there is every reason for both non-clinicians and clinical investigators in the public realm to address these factors as more than the wispy reflections they detect in their effects on patients' inner lives.

Transference and Politics

Psychoanalysis posits that we exist within a welter of transferences of earlier emotional relations onto later ones, of which we are usually unaware.³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, a Lacanian, and Jacquelyn Rose, a Kleinian, are among the too few who also probe the structural aspects of psychological influences that pervade and constrain the political field as individuals experience it. 'All perceptions of the world are refracted through the prism of our inner life,' Loewenberg notes. 'No phenomena has an inherent meaning. It becomes a datum by being assigned a frame of reference which confers meaning [so that all] research is unconsciously self-relevant.'³¹ There is a profoundly subversive (though liberating, if conscious) sense in which everything we perceive is liable to contain an element of projection. Even so, to coin an expression, is that all there is? Does this insight give license to reduce everything to what we untrustworthily perceive, as if there were no concrete core to which we more or less approach the truth, however provisional or contingent, of external things?

Psychoanalysts can strive to illuminate Donald Trump's egocentricity, Pol Pot's homicidal lunacy, or Kim Jong-un's apparent megalomania - and the effect of these traits on their applications of power, but why assume upon doing so that their job is done?³² What if Stalin had taken uppers or Mao free-associated on the couch or Nixon laid off the martinis or taken his Quaker roots seriously?³³ These leaders still each have headed strong states, equipped with bureaucratic apparatuses with their own

³⁰ Peter Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 58.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 12, 58.

³² And 'which psychiatrist diagnosed Kim?' Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), p. 96.

³³ In *Moby Dick* Herman Melville offered interesting observations on a militant strand of Quakerism. Also see the Melvillean introduction in John D. Kelly, Kurt Jacobsen and Marston H. Morgan eds. *Reconsidering American Power: Social Sciences and The Pax Americana* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2018)

operational codes, and festooned with ambitious advisers of every imaginable personality type promoting ideologically inflected worldviews. Why it's even their duty, as they see it, to do so.³⁴ They all were socialized, channeled and promoted within potent structures and systems. So one must tread carefully in tricky terrain where what is mad or bad for an ordinary citizen is deemed meritorious for leaders ensnarled in economic rivalries or military conflicts, which is not to say we must accept exculpatory self-definitions of their activities either. The minimalist definition of sociopath ('antisocial personality disorder' for DSM mavens) - an exploitive person without conscience - fits quite snugly with everyday political bargaining, financial market activity, and the rational choice paradigm.³⁵ All the foregoing endeavors may ultimately be judged as quite crazy ones but that does not mean they are seen as such now or are going away soon or lack systemic sources.

The interplay between external and internal forces must be kept uppermost in mind whenever we try to sort out how canny political actors—as canny as any of us—interpret the environments they operate in. Freud demonstrated that we are not 'masters in our own house,' which is surely no more welcome a point now to rational choice modelers or champions of cognitive models than to forerunner counterparts in his time.³⁶ Indeed, people who embrace rational modeling likely are seeking any seemingly calm port in the analytic storm, away from untamed complexities roiling within themselves or in others nearby. The reasons why personalities gravitate to formal models and rational choice, and others do not, would itself be as intriguing an object of investigation as why some people strongly prefer individualist explanations to systemic structural ones and indeed employ them to dissipate any interest in external influences.³⁷ Here is where methodological individualists and Lacanian analysts metaphorically clasp hands.

Slippery Slope Ontology

For the *uber*-Lacanian Zizek we mere mortals are beset by 'original sin,' in that we all are born at the rate of more than one a minute with an inveterate sucker's craving for the chimerical object of fantasy, *petit objet a*, the one non-thing guaranteed

³⁴ For a virtuoso of duplicitous diplomacy see Greg Grandin, *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015). What is reality? In his senior Harvard thesis Kissinger tellingly wrote, 'The West needs nothing so much as men who create their own reality.' (p. 16)

³⁵ Hervey Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity* (New York: New American Library, 1982, rev. ed.), p. 382.

³⁶ On intellectual repercussions see H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought* ((New York: Knopf, 1958) and Floyd Matson, *The Broken Image: Man, Science and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1964).

³⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, Brown notes, 'sees science as one-sided, as one aspect of a total cultural situation - 'a 'dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material endlessly, meaninglessly' Brown finds it 'is an awe-inspiring attack on the life of the universe; in more technical psychoanalytic terms, its anal-sadistic intent is plain.' Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 316.

to not satisfy any of our needs, except of course the imputed compulsive need for the particular elusive non-thing. Zizek provides the piquant example of Jane Austen's would-be lovers 'working through' their delusive views (his pride and her prejudice) of each other, but this 'working through' is a redemption, or ascent, that for Lacanians hardly ever happens in the real world.³⁸ One is more likely to be struck by an asteroid than by a liberating insight. The original sin remains fastened regardless of our puny efforts to illuminate the sources of our own future downfalls. Luis Bunuels' cinematic obscure object of desire, even if momentarily nabbed and possessed, fails to satisfy because it (not he or she) springs from an internally motivated and impervious delusion. You might think someone would leave the experience of it sadder but wised up, and perhaps better primed for a future happier ending, as Freud himself anticipated would be the case with more or less successful analyses, but no. Not a bit of it.

The reason is - and here is why Lacan (though not Freud) appeals to those contemporary social scientists bedazzled by rational choice - that we supposedly never can wriggle free from our individual plights into the social realm, or even understand the interactivity of the two. There is no such thing as what C. Wright Mills urged us to develop, a 'sociological imagination' capable of extending from the biographical to the historical realm and thereby understand both better. This position perfectly suits the methodological individualists and, for that matter, neoliberal ideologists, however much Lacanians like Zizek criticize the latter. 'There is no such thing as society,' for devout Lacanians as much as for the most Thatcherite of Tories.

We are forever receding, according to this dire creed, into selfish delusion-spawning selves, just like City bankers and Wall Street grifters can afford to do when the wider society they otherwise scorn comes on cue to their rescue to transfer vast sums from poorer individuals into the coffers of the rich. Only chosen Lacanians apparently rise above the psychic suckers, which they do because they certify each other as having done so. This is hardly a prescription, or an analytical framework, for encouraging a democratic participatory society. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, also Lacanian devotees, scorn radical practices instead for a middling sphere where nothing but middling and, at most, mischievous things can occur. It's difficult for the unbesotted to read them without spotting what hidebound Burkean conservatives they actually are in the upshot of their patrician advice.³⁹ Zizek himself does not deny systemic sources of violence; far from it, but this iconoclastic quasi-Marxist manages to recognize them in spite of, or sidewise from, his Lacanian bent.⁴⁰

Equating Marx's fetishism of commodities with Lacan's distinction of the Real and the real cannot help but produce a fitful muddle, though one weighted on Lacan's side.⁴¹ The moment you believe you depict the power of capital sufficiently through

³⁸ Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 66.

³⁹ For a critique with different prescriptive lessons, see Geoffrey Boucher, *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* (Victoria: Re-press publishers, 2009).

⁴⁰ Zizek, *Violence*, pp. 8-9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

the metaphor of 'spectrality' you lodge every brutally material thing - stock exchanges, police, courts, etc - in that evocative but airy term. All that is solid obligingly melts into the spectrality of capital. What Marx treats as a conditional 'as if' situation congeals in the Lacanian rendition into an inescapable mental snare. But how spectral, for example, were the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and NYPD riot police as they huddled intimately in offices with Wall Street brokers to oust the Occupy Wall Street movement from Zucotti Park in 2011?⁴² Zizek worries about people being unaware of the permeative power of capital that sets parameters for their behavior, but he does so here at the ironic price of inviting us into 'forgetting about its foundations in real people [in hierarchically organized institutions] and their relations.'

Zizek admirably illuminates 'the direct reign of abstract universality which imposes its law mechanically and with utter disregard to the concerned subject caught in its web,' which unfortunately and exactly describes the average human being caught in the language web woven around them by Lacanianism, 'doomed to symbolize.'⁴³ What goes on here is akin to the working out of the perennial question whether one has free will or not. A decision, not a theoretical diktat, inescapably is involved. As Ellul observed, deciding you don't have free will guarantees it.⁴⁴ Minsky trenchantly argued earlier in these pages about Lacanian psychoanalysis that the ardent emphasizing of 'language and signification to the exclusion of the body and intuitiveness' bespeaks a project that 'may unconsciously use theory omnipotently to maintain a sense that we and the culture are in control of who we are rather than, more realistically, a complex web of cultural, biological and unconscious factors.'⁴⁵ This is more than a pity because we cannot afford to reduce our 'eclectic range of potential insights.' How psychoanalysts and psychodynamic analysts are themselves are not only laden with pre-existing conditioning and training biases, to which they readily and unwittingly revert, is one element we must be prepared to detect. The point is not to eradicate these sorts of influences, which is impossible, but to recognize them for what they are and are not.⁴⁶

Psychoanalysis versus Everything?

Freud appears most resolutely elitist in *The Future of an Illusion* where the 'masses are lazy and unintelligent, they have no love for instinctual renunciation, they are not to be convinced of its inevitability by argument,' which sounds quite like the current US President and much of his administration staff.⁴⁷ If Freud was an elitist it

⁴² Investigators found 'these federal agencies functioning as a de facto intelligence arm of Wall Street and Corporate America.' Naomi Prins, 'How The FBI Coordinated the Crackdown on Occupy.' *The Guardian* 29 December 2012.

⁴³ Zizek, *Violence*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964), p. xxix.

⁴⁵ Ros Minsky, 'Fragrant theory: The Sweet Scent of Signifiers.' *Free Associations*, 45 (2000), p. 12.

⁴⁶ See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1954).

⁴⁷ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 7.

was not in the sense of class but rather of high character, ethics, and merit. Only fools fix any of the latter qualities to one's position in the class structure. Anyway, it beggars the imagination that 'elite' clients whose petty fantasies, tiresome obsessions, conceited quirks, vicious biases and self-serving delusions he listened to hour after hour over a lifetime could have struck Freud as by nature or circumstance a superior brand of mankind.

Freud's reputation as a political conservative is mistaken too.⁴⁸ Marxism was given its due 'for what it reveals about how economic circumstance influence other elements'⁴⁹ Freud, as (it later came to light) did Engels and Marx themselves, cautioned that it '*cannot be assumed that economic motives are the only ones that determine the behaviors of human beings in society*; for not only were these reactions concerned in establishing the economic conditions, but even under the domination of these conditions, men can only bring their original instinctual impulses into play – their self-preservative instinct, their aggressiveness, their need to be loved, their drive towards obtaining pleasure and avoiding 'unpleasure.' There are 'also the claims of the super-ego, [which] represent tradition and the ideals of the parents, [and] will for a time resist the incentives of a new economic situation.'⁵⁰ Cultural development then is 'a process influenced by other factors but able to influence them independently too.'

If a central question is 'whether and, if so, when material interests are basic to the explanation of individual behavior and of collective outcomes' (versus non-material factors such as neuroses), then Freud for good reason seems to have straddled the fence.⁵¹ Lukes and Tilly reckoned the concept of power includes the capacity 'to prevent, people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their roles in the existing order of things.'⁵² One hardly has to read Marx to understand that cultures avidly work to produce people who fit the system, to the point of performing atrocities for its sake (a point explored further below)⁵³ Political scientist Adam

⁴⁸ See Kurt Jacobsen, 'Escape From The Treadmill: Education, Politics and The Mainsprings of Child Analysis.' in Stephen E. Bronner and F. Peter Wagner, eds. *Vienna: World of Yesterday 1889-1914* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997). On Freud's flexibility in the therapeutic realm see Paul Roazan, *How Freud Worked* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995).

⁴⁹ Joseph Wortis, *Fragments of an Analysis with Freud* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), p. 120.

⁵⁰ The child's superego is constructed on the model not of its' parents but of its parents superego . . . It seems likely that what are known as materialistic views of history sin in underestimating this factor. They brush it aside with the remark that human ideologies are nothing other than the product and superstructure of their contemporary economic conditions. That is true, but very probably not the whole truth. Mankind never lives entirely in the present.' Freud, 'The Dissection of Personality.' *New Introductory Lectures*, p. 60.

⁵¹ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 9.

⁵² Tilly, quoted in *Ibid*.

⁵³ See Jules Henry, *On Sham, Vulnerability and other Forms of Self-Destruction* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

Przeworski elsewhere asserts the underlying point that consent to capitalism, or any other system, ‘does not consist of individual states of mind but of behavioral characteristics of organizations.’⁵⁴ It’s not that nothing psychological is going on - everything is psychologically processed, so to speak - but that the primary mover is a materialist cultural system aiming to reproduce itself and its power structure.

Freud, far from eschewing politics as a shaper of the material environment, ‘sympathized with reforms proposed by the Socialist party.’⁵⁵ In 1927 he endorsed the Austrian Social Democrats.⁵⁶ Freud was extremely skeptical of the Soviet Union experiment but, as is well known, many in his inner circle were committed socialists and social democrats.⁵⁷ Few of them could afford to be oblivious to, or content with, their milieu. ‘Freud’s subversiveness is derived from his concepts and not from his stated political opinions,’ Jacoby stresses. ‘This disjunction is absolutely crucial to recognize.’⁵⁸ Freud was alert to the interaction of the environment with the developing psyche. The derisive ‘psychologizing’ of the 1960s antiwar movement by refugee analysts is a case where earlier experiences – usually when they were up against anti-Semitic student majorities in universities of their youth – colored the way that they construed events, clouding for them the real world plights to which the antiwar movement responded.

Freud ‘recognized that ego and superego are continuously enmeshed with outside forces - family, politics, religion.’⁵⁹ Some psychoanalysts, especially given the subsequent medicalization and, some charge, neutering of the profession, showed scant regard for external influences until ego psychology, spurred by Heinz Hartmann and Erik Erikson, come to the fore by the 1960s, viewing man explicitly in a social context. Ego psychology accepted that environment shapes the ego and drives, and that the ego at the same time has its own initiative. (People of a Reichian disposition might call this relation a dialectical one.) Under Freud’s earlier drive theory, one conceived society’s major function as inhibiting or channeling hostility.⁶⁰ Freud later

⁵⁴ Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1985), p. 31.

⁵⁵ Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), p. 353.

⁵⁶ Edward Timms, *Karl Krauss; Apocalyptic Satirist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 250.

⁵⁷ Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 25.

⁵⁹ Peter Gay, *The Naked Heart: The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud*, (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 9.

⁶⁰As opposed to Hobbesian assumptions, Todorov may be right that the ‘war of all against all’ is not a natural state of mankind, rather it must be enforced from outside . . . as the German concentration camps prove.’ Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme* ((New York: Henry Holt, 1999), p. 39. Also on this point see Marshall Sahlins. *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

softened this position, ‘we suggest one can ameliorate the condition of civilization imposing such costs for renunciation and to avoid suffering that is indeed avoidable, though not all of it is avoidable.’⁶¹ Here already at the core of Freud’s thought was what Frosh called a ‘social construction of individuality, including the permeation of subjectivity by interpersonal and social–structural forces.’⁶²

Psychosocial Studies and Eriksonian Psychohistory

What there is in psychosocial studies that is new and improved over, say, Eriksonian psychohistory, stirs serious head scratching. A decade ago Frosh and Baraitser offered a sensible warning regarding a rash trend in British psychosocial studies that treated psychoanalysis in a ‘sometimes pious way’ as if only it and only it, rankling for other disciplines, ‘harbours the deep truths of human nature.’⁶³ But why did this elementary lesson, and other such lessons, need to be relearned? The eminent Wellfleet Group included Erikson with *Childhood and Society*, *Gandhi’s Truth*, and *Young Man Luther*, Robert Jay Lifton’s *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, *The Nazi Doctors*, *Home from The War*, and his National Book Award-winning *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*. India experts Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph distilled their own close study of Gandhi (which triggered ructions with a touchy Erikson).⁶⁴ Also allied with this group were Robert Coles with his multi-volume *Children of Crisis* series, *The Mind’s Fate* and many other books plus Kenneth Keniston with his *The Uncommitted*, *Young Radicals* and *Youth and Dissent* too. Somewhat less estimably but noteworthy were Bruce Mazlish’s *The Revolutionary Ascetic* and his escapades into long-range analyses of Nixon, Kissinger and Carter.

What should have been an enticing marriage of psychology and history turned out to be anything but as disciplinary strictures came inexorably to the fore. Gergen characterizes the largely unforeseen clash as ‘the central goal of the psychologist - for prediction and control - [standing] in contrast to the predominant concern among historians for contextual understanding’—when a hopelessly naive scholar might imagine both fields ought to be concerned foremost with the latter.⁶⁵ A recent volume surveying the turbulent terrain cites a medley of scholars urging that ‘psychology ought to be more attentive to the historical contingency of psychological phenomena

⁶¹ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 62.

⁶² Stephen Frosh, *The Politics of Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) p. 244.

⁶³ See most especially Stephen Frosh and Lisa Baraitser’s ‘Psychoanalysis and Psychosocial Studies.’ *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 13, 4 (December 2008). In the same issue, on the role of ‘wider political and institutional conditions,’ also see Erica Burman, ‘Resisting the Deradicalization of Psychosocial Analyses’ and, stressing the complementarity of social studies and psychoanalysis, likewise see Paul Hogget, ‘What’s in A Hyphen? Reconstructing Psychosocial Studies.’ Fine pieces all, but my point below is it’s *deja vu* all over again yet again.

⁶⁴ Personal communication.

⁶⁵ Kenneth J. Gergen, cited in Teleaga and Byford, *Psychology and History*, p. 1.

and pay closer attention to the issue of how historical conditions, ideologies and cultural conditions produce and sustain particular forms of individual and collective actions and thought.⁶⁶ Those who read the Wellfleet psychohistorians understood this caveat and had imagined this advice was understood everywhere all along. Likewise plainly understood way back then was the contrary point warning overzealous investigators to guard against tendencies to treat their findings as if they were independent of historical and cultural conditioning.

What is at work here is a pronounced tendency of practitioners in either field to be corralled, voluntarily or otherwise, by their initial disciplinary training (most likely elected out of personal affinity), and over time reverting to type, or to safe harbor. Erikson's brand of psychohistory drew some valid if overdrawn criticism for its basis being more in ego psychology than in Freudian analysis, and for promoting—quite unsuccessfully, mind you—a particular notion of compatibility between history and psychology that ‘undercut the critical possibilities of their interaction.’⁶⁷ Still, there are not the slightest grounds to believe that psychoanalysis of a severe orthodox stripe would be welcomed in historians' ranks either, or that those who employed it would not favor their own primal methodological training in the working out of interpretations of records and other materials.

Erikson from the start was interested not only in ‘psychoanalysis as a historical tool’ but in ‘throwing light’ on psychoanalysis as a tool of history’ inasmuch ‘[as] a system of observation [psychoanalysis] takes history; as a system of ideas it makes history.’⁶⁸ Psychoanalysis, he wrote, itself operated in a changing historical milieu and, like any other paradigm, was ‘a system of thought subject to fashionable manipulation by molders of public opinion.’ Instead of ‘being weightlessly suspended in an a historical-nonpsychological space,’ Lifton added, ‘this ‘instrument’ is subject to the gravitational pulls of its immediate setting and its prior commitments.’⁶⁹ (Lifton dropped formal psychoanalytical training because he found it too stifling for his investigative purposes.) In the late 1950s, before the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* became known and Gramsci became popularized (though Fromm and the Frankfurt school were around), Erikson instinctively disdained the stunted stilted Marxism that he knew of because it ‘ignores introspective psychology and makes a man's economic position the fulcrum of his acts and thoughts.’⁷⁰ While Lifton regarded the psychohistorical enterprise as, by nature, ‘investigative radicalism,’ the political convenience in American scholarship of omitting ‘tainted’ Marxist work is hard to deny even if one can prove nothing.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Teleaga and Byford, ‘Introduction.’ *Psychology and History*, p. 2.

⁶⁷ See Joan W. Scott, ‘The Incommensurability of Psychoanalysis and History.’ *History and Theory* 51, 1 (January 2012).

⁶⁸ Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), pp. 16, 17.

⁶⁹ Robert Jay Lifton, ‘Introduction: On Being a Psychohistorian.’ In *History and Human Survival* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 5.

⁷⁰ Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, p. 17.

⁷¹ Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, p. 3.

Erikson also incensed many an orthodox practitioner with his mockery of 'originology,' defined as a 'a habit of thinking; reduction which reduces every situation to an analogy with an earlier one, and most of all to that earliest, simplest, and most infantile precursor which is assumed to be its 'origin' ⁷² Or, presumably, its earliest, abstruse and primordially semiotic precursor too. The aspiring psycho-historian must strive to remain alert to shortcomings in historical and in psychological/psychoanalytic methods and, even at the best of occasions, must acknowledge that he or she 'will always have to make some kind of convincing philosophy out of a state of partial knowledges.'⁷³ So the humble investigator 'in committing himself to influencing what he observes [then] becomes part of the historical process he studies' and that process can misguide or capture the unwary.⁷⁴ Quite likely no one can remain wary enough or all the time - Erikson and others of the Wellfleet Group surely can be cited for slippages - but one must try. It is tempting to term the ever-lasting temptation to favor the methods in which one first eagerly trained as, with a wink, reversion compulsion.

Psychoanalysis, and by extension most Wellfleet psycho-historians, far from viewing us as passive receptors of social cues or as analogical dupes, interposes 'psychic reality' between the nettlesome subject and the social order, enabling the project of 'revealing the construction of the subject, without necessitating a mirroring relation,' such as one finds at the coreless heart of Mead-inspired constructivism and of Lacanian analysis. Freud found 'every individual is virtually an enemy of culture' because their instinctive needs are at war with social restrictions.⁷⁵ To affirm instincts is to 'range oneself squarely against domestication.'⁷⁶ One accordingly must be wary of one's own interiorizing or abstract inclinations. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of The Ego* Freud edged out of the consulting room to explain irrational cohesion and conformity. He was aware of the many pitfalls of doing so, which does not mean any were avoided.⁷⁷ Scanning a stoutly symbolic account of Gandhi's march to protest the colonial salt tax, Robert Coles comments that in the colonial context of chronic semi-starvation 'it would seem appropriate, first of all, that salt means salt.'⁷⁸ An accompanying caveat is that it's advisable to exhaust 'situational' explanations before relying on psychoanalytic probes. The abiding question is how do

⁷² Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, p. 18. For prim pushback see Howard I. Kushner, 'Pathology and Adjustment in Psychohistory: A Critique of the Erikson Model,' *Psychoanalytic Review* 505 (1977).

⁷³ Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, p. 19.

⁷⁴ Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), p. 16.

⁷⁵ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, p. 158.

⁷⁷ See Kurt Jacobsen, *Freud's Foes: Psychoanalysis, Science, and Resistance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) and Paul Robinson, *Freud and his Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁷⁸ Robert Coles, 'Erikson's Search for Gandhi.' In Fred Greenstein and Michael Lerner, eds. *A Sourcebook for the Study of Personality and Politics* (Chicago: Markham Publishing, 1971), p. 149.

we square structural or materialist explanations with psychological inquiries into irrational forces, or decide in what instance which approach comes uppermost? Psychoanalysis, at its best, sticks to a person's subjectivity without losing sight of the biological basis of social life.⁷⁹

Warfare, to which we turn next for a case study, is a phenomenon that attracts crude reductionisms of all kinds. Freud, however, declined to blame warfare on instincts run amok; in the background, he recognized, were powerful institutions and their manipulators. Erikson, apart from once refusing to sign a loyalty oath, was reluctant to take political stands, but at a time of civil and imperial turmoil most of the group, and especially Wellfleet host Lifton, were rambunctious dissenters. The Wellfleet Group became well-known enough in that regard that a *New York Times* hack was tasked to compose an arduously snide article on their Hiroshima day gathering in 1971, which belittled whistleblower guest Daniel Ellsberg as well as antiwar stalwart Eqbal Ahmed, who the reporter never heard of (nor did she twig that the 'Irish version' of 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again' is the ferociously bitter antiwar song 'Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye').⁸⁰ That's how it goes. At the 1974 Wellfleet meeting, though, Erikson himself, whose view of America was rosily colored by an illustrious immigrant's gratitude, finally had been driven to wonder aloud, 'How much of America is My Lai?'⁸¹

Massacreology and Its Vicissitudes

Systems—economic, political, or military—are devoted to the enculturation of members who thereby are inclined consciously and unconsciously to obey, who even will commit atrocities at the system's bidding, and fail to recognize or else deny they are atrocities at all. Nazi Germany and fascist Japan spring instantly to mind, but democracies in need of military fodder are not radically different. Is a Russian drill instructor any different than an American or British one? Systems are never 100% successful at indoctrinatory tasks, but they do not have to be superlative Svengalis in order to function. Our case here is the American phase of the Vietnam War, whose notorious escalation swiftly turned South Vietnam into a 'sea of fire,' and which was summed up for many in the My Lai massacre of 1968, its cover-up and exposure, and its agonizing playing out in the Calley trial and attendant public controversy.⁸²

What can a Lacanian, or any individual-centered psychoanalytical, account add to (or supervene in) a systemic understanding of the potent forces at play in the massacre, the investigation and trial, and aftermath? Is it possible to understand any

⁷⁹ Seymour Fisher and Roger P. Greenberg, *Freud Scientifically Appraised* (New York: John Wiley 1996), p. 8.

⁸⁰ Anne Bernats, 'Radical Chic at The Cape.' *New York Times* 4 September 1971.

⁸¹ Lawrence J. Friedman, 'Erik Erikson and Robert Jay Lifton: The Pattern of a Relationship.' In Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn, eds. *Trauma and Self* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), p. 145.

⁸² Gabriel Kolko, 'War Crimes and The Nature of the Vietnam War.' In Richard Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton, eds. *Crimes of War* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 412.

part of this dark train of ugly events better by examining only the presumed psychopathology of participants? Can we detach the perpetrators on the ground in 'Pinkville' (as the area of the massacre was listed on Army maps) from the wider set of structural forces diligently 'generating their subjectivities'? Why would one even attempt such an individualized exercise except in order to exculpate the command structure, imperial routines, and the geopolitical grand strategy?

Few psychoanalytically astute critics at the time were inclined to absolve implicated soldiers such as Lieutenant William Calley. 'If I have committed a crime, the only crime I have committed is in my judgment of values,' Calley defiantly told his jurors. 'Apparently, I valued the lives of my troops more than I did that of the enemy.' Herbert Marcuse, aghast, rebuked the sudden swelling of public support by people who cast Calley as a hapless or dutiful martyr.⁸³ Calley, the only person convicted, clearly was a dim 'shake and bake' junior officer, but just how did he really differ from the 96% of American lieutenants in a suppressed survey who said they would readily resort to torture in service of their missions?⁸⁴ Calley doubtless killed women and children, yet he and his mostly compliant platoon were deeply steeped for months in a brutal indiscriminate counterinsurgency milieu that Robert Jay Lifton mildly termed an 'atrocious-producing situation' - a world of 'all-encompassing absurdity and moral inversion.'⁸⁵

Former Army officer Francis West attested that battalion commanders failing to meet kill quotas 'had a 30-50% chance of being relieved of command.'⁸⁶ Perhaps the most zealous commander in this gruesome regard was General Julian Ewell of the 9th Infantry Division, which operated with *carte blanche* trigger-happiness in the Mekong Delta a year *after* My Lai.⁸⁷ Every civilian was treated as a concealed enemy, with predictable consequences that any SS unit tracking Russian partisans instantly would understand. Ordinary men commit atrocities out of conformity, out of blind or craven duty, or fear of reprisal for disobedience.⁸⁸ The American perpetrators, as many pointed out, did not hustle over to Vietnam on their own volition in order to harm strange Asian peasants. Appy estimates 'a third were true volunteers, a third were draft-induced volunteers and a third were draftees,' yet the meaning of 'true volunteer' in the context of mass conscription takes on a tenuous meaning too since many

⁸³ Herbert Marcuse, 'Reflections on Calley.' *New York Times* 13 May 1971.

⁸⁴ Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013). p. 223.

⁸⁵ Robert Jay Lifton, *Home From the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).

⁸⁶ Cited in Samuel Lipsman, ed. *The Vietnam Experience: War In the Shadows* (Boston: Boston Publishing, 1988), p. 67.

⁸⁷ Kurt Jacobsen, *Pacification and Its Discontents* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009); Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*.

⁸⁸ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and The Final Solution* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 114-132.

thereby sought a sly way out of combat roles, if what transpired in 'Pinkville' could be so described.⁸⁹

On the morning of 16 March 1968 Charlie Company of the 23rd Americal Division burst into the small hamlet of My Lai 4 in the 'free fire zone' of Quang Ngai Province in the Northeast edge of South Vietnam and, unprovoked, slaughtered 407 old men, women and children over four hours. A separate unit a mile away that same morning in the hamlet of My Khe 4 murdered 97 more villagers. The combined total of 504 deaths included 56 infants. That is the My Lai Museum's final count, but numbers were inexact for decades, which says a great deal about the importance, or lack thereof, of the victims to the executioners and to the canny brass up the organizational chart.⁹⁰ The victims of the killings, maiming and rapes duly were labeled 'Vietcong' to swell the prized body count. The single American casualty was a self-inflicted gunshot wound by a soldier seeking a way out of complicity in the horrors. An unknown small minority of soldiers did refrain from the vicious war crimes.

Helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson and his crew intervened to save some villagers, threatening to machine gun rampaging troops if they did not back off—an act that was held against him later by rightwing Congressmen. Thompson reported the events, to no avail. Lawrence Colburn, the door gunner on Thompson's helicopter, witnessed company commander Captain Ernest Medina, who, like everyone but Calley, avoided conviction, shoot dead a young wounded woman. Another company member Michael Bernhardt on an earlier occasion saw Lieutenant Calley forcing a woman into oral sex with a .45 pistol to her head: 'I saw him as pure evil.'⁹¹ Weeks before Calley also was witnessed throwing an old man down a well and shooting him. Yet the evident evil was systemic too and, in a colloquial sense, contagious. Calley much earlier witnessed Saigon police gun down several defenseless young Vietnamese women in Wild West fashion.⁹² Casual hideous executions anywhere and everywhere set a tone.

Thompson, for his valiance, was assigned to ever more hazardous duties, likely in hope that he would be conveniently killed in action, and long afterward was reviled by superiors, Nixonite Congressmen, and yahoos who regarded him – and in effect spit upon him – as a traitor because he threatened their cherished public image of a morally pristine military (which they did not necessarily believe). President Nixon, worried about popularity, interfered in the investigation to discredit the accusers.⁹³ The

⁸⁹ Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking 2003), p. 163.

⁹⁰ Seymour Hersh, 'Scene of the Crime.' *The New Yorker* 30 March 2015.

⁹¹ Appy, *Patriots*, p. 310.

⁹² Howard Jones, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press 2017), Chapter 1.

⁹³ Evie Saloman, 'Documents Point to Nixon in My Lai Cover-Up Attempt.' 23 March 2014. CBS News.com

intimate face-to-face nature of this massacre is what drew attention to the event, as opposed to casualties inflicted customarily by calling in air strikes or artillery bombardment on unwitting inhabited areas from afar. A Pentagon contract study afterward found that perhaps 3% of alleged Vietcong rubbed out by the repugnant Phoenix Program over 1968-1971 were actually members.

The massacre occurred under free fire zone rules, or rather ruthless rulenessness, in contested areas whose pacification was the premeditated 'result of the depopulation of large areas once controlled by the revolution, as a consequence of incessant bombing and shelling.'⁹⁴ The previous year in the Central Highlands a special detachment of the 101st Airborne called the Tiger Force, bullied and murdered their way across the region with total impunity.⁹⁵ A 'blind eye' was what officials reliably turned to such activities, which they well knew were inevitable given the crass conduct of the war. From very early on, war correspondent Jonathan Schell testified, 'the idea that the US military was operating under constraints in South Vietnam was ridiculous.'⁹⁶ 'There weren't any friendlies in the village. The orders were to shoot anything that moved.' Another officer testifies, 'It could happen to any of us. [Calley] has killed and has seen a lot of killing. Killing becomes nothing in Vietnam.'⁹⁷

That there was 'a My Lai every day' may be closer to the truth than the US military's plea that it was just an unfortunate aberration.⁹⁸ The automatic response in the US military bureaucracy - like any military or police bureaucracy anywhere - was to cover up, as it did numerous other indiscriminate killings. A guerrilla war by its very nature cannot help but generate a genocidal motive, if not the carrying out of complete genocide, in any counterrevolutionary power determined to crush guerrillas. The massacre was brought to official attention more than a year later through the persistence of a soldier who had heard rumors of it. Lieutenant Calley would be court-martialed on the charge of killing one hundred and nine 'oriental human beings.' In November 1969 journalist Seymour Hersh ushered the event into public view.⁹⁹ In

⁹⁴ David W. P. Elliot, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (M E. Sharpe, 2003) Vol. 1, p. 1211.

⁹⁵ 'The Pentagon had decided that it was better to cover up what had happened. Let the country move on' and 'noting no beneficial or constructive could result from prosecution at this time.' Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss, *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War* (Little Brown, 2006), p. 306.

⁹⁶ Schell, quoted in Appy, *Patriots*, p. 376. Also see Schell's book *The Military Half* (New York: Random House, 1968).

⁹⁷ Seymour Hersh, 'Lieutenant Accused of Murdering 109 Civilians.' *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* November 13, 1969.

⁹⁸ Turse found Army reports of 'at least six large scale killings' in the first three months of 1968 while communiqués mentioned at least 19 more. Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, p.126. Grenier found evidence of 'at least seven massacres with two more reported by soldiers who took part.' Bernd Grenier, *War Without fronts: The USA In Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale, 2009), p. 16.

⁹⁹ Seymour Hersh, *My Lai 4* (New York: Random House, 1970).

March, 1970 an Army investigation also filed charges against fourteen officers accused of covering up the massacre, and all went free. When, in 1971, an Army jury convicted Calley, who has been described as everything from a ‘robopath’ to a carrier of the ‘Lucifer Effect,’ and sentenced him to life, President Nixon ordered Calley to be placed under house arrest instead in the first of a round of reductions of punishment.¹⁰⁰ Nixon's approval ratings, on the wane, jumped 13 points. Calley ironically was freed three months after Nixon left office in disgrace (though a quarter of the American public backed Nixon beyond the bitter end).

What can one say psychoanalytically about the massacre and its deceit-strewn aftermath that augments or surpasses structural accounts examining the macabre self-protective logics of the implicated organizations (the Army, the military-industrial complex, the court system, a capitalist media, and the Presidency)? One clue, and starting point, lies in an oft-repeated observation. ‘As individuals the American soldiers were very gentle and very polite,’ attests foreign correspondent and author Gloria Emerson's interpreter Nguyn Ngoc Luong. ‘But as a unit they were very cruel.’¹⁰¹ The perpetrators in Pinkville were, according to Army investigators, ‘a typical cross section of American youth assigned to combat units.’¹⁰²

The US public detected that Calley, undoubtedly guilty, also stood in as a ‘scapegoat’ for a high command, and a ruling elite, shaping and not all that tacitly encouraging the appalling cruelty. What *objet petit a* were frenzied platoon members chasing that grisly day? In April 1971 a Gallup poll found 50% of Americans reckoned, cynically or resignedly, that My Lai atrocities were probably a common occurrence in Vietnam at the same time as 79% deemed Calley's sentence ‘too harsh.’¹⁰³ ‘Seventy percent thought the Army had let Calley *take the entire blame* for the killings,’ an investigator notes, ‘while 77% in a Louis Harris poll believed Calley had ‘been singled out unfairly as a scapegoat.’¹⁰⁴ 56% of the public asserted that ‘others *shared* in the responsibility for the massacre.’¹⁰⁵ The public knew, or suspected, something quite crucial about the unspoken realities of military service.

This peculiar overlap of opinion between those who hailed Calley as hero and those who condemned the war as immoral, actually may speak well of the public's

¹⁰⁰ See Lewis Yablonsky, *Robopaths*. (London: Pelican, 1972); Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil* (London: Rider Press, 2008) pp. 373-374 474-476; and Herbert Kelman and Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Towards a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹⁰¹ Appy, *Patriots*, p. 376.

¹⁰² Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 3.

¹⁰³ James Wright *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War* (New York: St. Martins 2017), p. 310.

¹⁰⁴ William Thomas Emerson, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 111. Jimmy Carter, then Governor of Georgia, joined protests against Calley's conviction (p. 112).

¹⁰⁵ Gallup Newsweek Poll April 1971.

ability to discern and to allocate responsibility, given the vexing mixture of circumstances. There undeniably was a diehard segment (as much as a third of the populace, who fluctuate but never go away, as Trump's election attests) who bluntly endorsed mass murder on authoritarian grounds.¹⁰⁶ Nonetheless, the month following Calley's conviction two thirds of Americans had determined that the war was 'morally wrong' and 3 of 5 demanded withdrawal even if South Vietnam's regime collapsed.¹⁰⁷ Less heartening, half the public polled at the very height of the My Lai revelations said they would follow orders to shoot unarmed villagers while a third said they would not - remarkably, the same proportion as Stanley Milgram's infamous experimental subjects.¹⁰⁸ Erich Fromm was oddly encouraged by the relatively high percentage of refuseniks.¹⁰⁹

Herbert Marcuse wondered if for Calley's most ardent supporters, whom he figured had found their own Horst Wessel, an 'intolerable sense of guilt,' which needed to be denied at all costs, had turned 'into its opposite: into the proud, sadomasochistic identification with the crime and the criminal.'¹¹⁰ Mary McCarthy reproved those antiwar activists who viewed people beneath a three star General's rank as incapable of being culprits.¹¹¹ However, the word 'scapegoat,' which imparts a sense of innocence, was never the right one for how the public deciphered Calley, and neither was the word 'patsy,' which Lee Harvey Oswald self-pityingly but possibly correctly used to describe himself. This gripe is not remotely the same as Lacanians bemoaning poor humanity for being led astray by an ill-fitting symbolic order where words are never up to the task. 'Small fry' might have been a more suitable term inasmuch as Calley was charged, observers of various political stripes discerned, so as to divert attention from the mighty whales basking in the Pentagon and the White House.

The 'American public' – by which the mass media seemed to mean anyone uninvolved in and unsympathetic to the antiwar movement – initially resisted reports of the My Lai massacre, doubting it happened, believing it was exaggerated, or else was not murder at all because the victims somehow were combatants. The public, among which were many former service personnel, was all too acutely aware of the knack of the officer corps (and especially 'lifers'), or any other boss, for dodging

¹⁰⁶ On this diehard segment in American academe see Kurt Jacobsen, *International Politics and Inner Worlds: Masks of Reason Under Scrutiny* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 109-148.

¹⁰⁷ Leo Bogart, *Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1985), p. 21.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 95; Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

¹⁰⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy Of Human Destructiveness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), p. 53.

¹¹⁰ Marcuse, 'Reflections on Calley.'

¹¹¹ Patrick Hagoopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), p. 62.

blame. 'I think that all Americans must share in Lieutenant Calley's guilt,' Captain Medina said, playing this card, 'I wonder how many people in the State Department and generals in the Army got a good night's sleep last night.'¹¹²

Neither Lieutenant Calley nor Captain Medina were scapegoats since whatever the blameworthiness of the chain of command issuing illegal orders, it 'did not eliminate the responsibility of individual agents,' Marcuse insisted. 'If the argument implies that all individual members of society are to blame then it is blatantly false and only serves to protect those who are responsible,'¹¹³ In this he was assuredly right, but Calley was seen by a vast majority as a victim not of the Vietnamese but of unreachable domestic elites who ordered him and millions of pawns like him, into a situation that guaranteed atrocities. Under the right (or wrong) set of pressures 'we are all,' one observer lamented, 'one step away from My Lai,' which is a very different lesson to draw than glibly concluding 'we' are all to blame.¹¹⁴

Why did so many soldiers commit heinous acts, and why afterward did so many citizens yearn to believe that soldiers were virtuous boy scouts abroad or else that they were justified in mass murder by dint of the flag they served under? Psychoanalysis ever since Theodor Adorno and company's Authoritarian Personality study offers interesting concepts and penetrating analyses but none that can be considered comprehensive and satisfying in explanatory scope - and most certainly not if they disregard encompassing structures of power within which people act.

The core of the problem, the force that needs to be undone, is the 'habit of obedience' which lies in 'the universal teaching of all cultures not to get out of line, not even to think about that which one has not been assigned to think about, the negative motive of not having either a reason or a will to intercede,' as Howard Zinn noted.¹¹⁵ 'To be realistic in dealing with a problem', he points out in everyday circumstances, 'is to work only among the alternatives which the most powerful in society put forth.' Milgram arrived at much the same lesson, concluding that if we accept alternatives as authorities present them, we are doomed.¹¹⁶ Everything one can do as citizen, analyst or scholar to chip away at Milgram's obedient two-thirds is to be welcomed but they won't all become heroic free thinkers overnight, not in the face of a dominant and very material system. (The War Crimes Working Group files that Nick Turse stumbled across and used for his book on atrocities were yanked from the National Archive afterward.)¹¹⁷ To expect otherwise is asking too much, or for nothing at all.

¹¹² Julia T. Reed, 'Medina Comments on Calley's Conviction.' *Harvard Crimson* 31 March 1971.

¹¹³ Marcuse, 'Reflections on Calley.'

¹¹⁴ Roger Spiller quoted in Jones, *My Lai*, p. 43.

¹¹⁵ Howard Zinn, *Rule By Force* (New Delhi: Natarj Publishers, 2005), p. 119.

¹¹⁶ Stanley Milgram, 'The Compulsion to Do Evil.' *Patterns of Prejudice* 1, 6 (1967), p. 7.

¹¹⁷ Chase Madar, 'Vietnam: A War On Civilian,' *The American Conservative* 30 July 2013. <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/vietnam-a-war-on-civilians/>

Brecht's Galileo retorts to a romantic resistant youth, 'Pity the land that is in need of heroes.'¹¹⁸ Needing heroes, such as helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson or Pentagon Papers desperados Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo, signals that the land already is in deep systemic peril. How then do we go about reforming or transforming the reigning socio-economic system into one that permits the need for heroes to dwindle? Perhaps an intrepid Lacanian analyst illuminatingly can 'undertake a formalist and analytical reading' of the My Lai case 'that encircles its ontological negativity to make way for a subjective transformation,' further 'constructing a conceptual matrix foregrounding the direction of movements from one direction to another in its rotational structure,' as two scholars do in their recent enterprise 'taking issue with historicist tendencies' in another problematic arena. *Bon Voyage*.

Conclusion

In the late 1960s Robert Jay Lifton, who now endorses suspension of the Goldwater rule because of Trump, was not alone either in identifying an 'energizing paradox' in Freud between the tensions of generating 'life giving breakthroughs' and at the same time devising a 'closed system,' and duly warned against succumbing to the 'temptation to eliminate the paradox and make things very simple - either by direct and uncritical application of clinical Freudian terms to all manner of historical events, or else by making believe that neither Freud nor the emotional turmoil he described has ever existed.'¹¹⁹ The tension is ineradicable and is an asset. Psychoanalysis illuminates political cases where decisions depart from what observers reasonably agree is rational. When there are several ways to respond to objective conditions a deeper look at motivations is helpful, at least *post facto*, in estimating why one of them was selected.

Misapplications of psychoanalysis in the past commonly imposed an individualist methodology on social phenomena that are plainly the product of many contributing factors. One can behave irrationally for other than psychiatric reasons. The kamikaze pilot enmeshed in a web of juvenile idealism, patriotic custom and military compulsion, the cunning or credulous statesman lying about possessing WMD (Saddam Hussein) or statesmen apparently lying about an opponent's possession of WMD (Tony Blair and George W. Bush), the hereditary tyrant (Kim Jong-Un) anxious to augment his nuclear arsenal despite aggravating major powers around him.¹²⁰ All can be accounted for in terms other than psychological ones, and

¹¹⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 115.

¹¹⁹ Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, p. 6.

¹²⁰ See especially Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamizakes, Cherry Blossoms and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); David Rose, 'Bush and Blair Made Secret Pact for Iraq War.' *The Guardian* 4 April 2004 and Simon Tisdale, 'There's no Doubt about It; Blair was on the Warpath from early 2002.' *The Guardian* 18 October 2015.

these alternative explanations have to be considered seriously and, if possible, integrated into our explanations.

Psychoanalysis at its best goads practitioners to examine the motives behind any overvaluing of intrinsically fallible explanatory models, including whatever strand of psychoanalysis one finds congenial. Psychoanalyzing FDR, Nixon or Donald Trump from afar is too tenuous and risky. The force of the circumstances and the constraining institutions within which they act tend to override personal idiosyncrasies and inclinations. Conclusions based on either material or psychological factors alone may seem adequate from one disciplinary angle but legitimately be judged egregiously question-begging from another one.

Some crucial caveats are: beware of intrusive training biases whether one's launch pad is psychology/psychoanalysis or history/social sciences; give the devil his or her due; and exhaust situational explanations before targeting psychological factors. The psychic depths are not the first or only place to go when structural forces and material interests readily account for political actions, which does not mean that in seemingly obvious cases of overwhelming material pressures or incentives that psychoanalysis does not have something to offer in explaining choices.¹²¹ What I hope I wryly dub 'reversion compulsion' is the unwitting tendency by scholars engaged in multidisciplinary projects to retreat into the imperious methods and biases of their 'primal' training, which sabotages psycho-historical or psycho-social work. (I do not plead innocence.) Making the unconscious tendency conscious is the best anyone can do, trusting that action follows and matters.

Finally, as Russell Jacoby and lately, Joanna Ryan remind readers, the 'left Freudians' of Sigmund Freud's day, long before the advent of the postwar psycho-historians vigorously addressed class issues 'with complex understandings of the intertwining of the intra-psychic and the social,' though clearly not to any decisive or definitive or consensual end.¹²² If we are going to reconcile methods in history and in psychoanalysis to illuminate worthwhile subjects it would be useful to scour our predecessors more carefully before moving on to reinvent wheels we already are, or ought to be, rolling along on.

Kurt Jacobsen has been a research associate (lately, associate) in the Political Science Department at the University of Chicago since 1984. He has been a visiting

¹²¹ In the clinical realm of treating children, the corresponding rule is 'even when there is ill-treatment, it is still important to disentangle reality from the child's interpretation of events.' Julia Segal, *Melanie Klein*, (London: Sage, 1997), p. 29.

¹²² Joanna Ryan, *Class and Psychoanalysis: Landscapes of Inequality* (London: Routledge 2017), p. 137; Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*.

scholar at the London School of Economics many times and also has taught at Rutgers University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke University and Imperial College London. He is the author or editor of eleven books, including Freud's Foes: Psychoanalysis, Science and Resistance, Pacification and its Discontents, International Politics and Inner Worlds: Masks of Reason under Scrutiny and the forthcoming co-edited Reconsidering American Power: Social Sciences and the Pax Americana (Oxford University Press). His articles and reviews have appeared in Psychoanalytic Review, Free Associations, History of Psychiatry, Clio's Psyche, Psychoanalytic Studies, and many other professional journals. He has contributed to the Guardian, The Observer, The Irish Times, The Independent, The Sunday Tribune (Ireland), New Statesman & Society, Le Monde Diplomatique, Chicago Tribune, Chicago Reader (as film critic), The Statesman (India) and dozens of other popular outlets. He is book review editor at Logos: A Journal of Modern Society & Culture since 2002 and is an award-winning documentary filmmaker.