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**FORUM:**

**FREUD, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND POLITICS  
OR  
THE TROUBLE WITH CIVILIZATION**

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**Abstract:** Freud's theory of psychoanalysis grew out of work with individuals, yet increasingly he wrote about groups, culture and civilization. Today the politics of the left sometimes dismisses Freud or psychoanalysis with the accusation of political irrelevance. This paper considers the trouble with such arguments: unfamiliarity with the primary texts, with the political context in which Freud wrote, and with the misleading translation of '*Kultur*' as 'civilization'.

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Freud's psychoanalytic research attempts to diagnose and decipher manifestations of psychological distress including the destructiveness we all direct against others and ourselves.

Implicit in his work is the coincidentally Marxist notion that the world we inhabit transforms us as we in turn transform it. We are all human, share the same basic mental structure and are all subject to the same drives. For global transformation to occur, it will require that each individual make reasonable sacrifices and forego certain pleasures in order to become a different kind of individual for the sake of the common good. However, unlike Marx whose dialectical theory of social transformation is similarly unitary, Freud argued that significant cultural transformations would take eons to occur.

An underlying impediment to the process of transformation is that we refuse to surrender our pleasures for the sake of the common good. The evidence of Freud's theory confirms the precedents of history: global social change for the better is impossible. Or rather, it has never happened yet. In his optimism Marx was, compared to Freud, a Romantic. For Freud, the idea of social transformation was utopian: an illusion.

Somewhere in this quarter lies an explanation for the frequency with which the relevance of psychoanalysis to politics is ignored or, perhaps unconsciously, dismissed. Anyone of a radical inclination who stops to consider how dark are the conclusions of psychoanalysis would perforce find all their revolutionary ardour dampened. They would perhaps rather believe that Freud has nothing to say about changing the world. Indeed, pushed to it, one might even concur with this. However, he has rather a lot to say about why the world does not change.

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This paper was prompted by an erudite piece in *Unbound* by the psychoanalytic scholar, Mladen Dolar, entitled *Freud and the Political* (Dolar, 2008: 15-29). We may note the definite article. The present response will not be as abstract or theory-based as is this paper, and the word 'politics' will be used broadly and lightly to mean both a strategy to interpret and to transform society. We will consider assumptions that have hovered over conversations about psychoanalysis ever since the age of quick therapy determined that Freud's reputation had shifted from outrageous to outlandish, from cutting-edge to fuddy-duddy, from subversive to elitist.

On those occasions when psychoanalysis is being disparaged, it is not unusual to hear the aside that psychoanalysis is 'conservative' or applies only to 19<sup>th</sup> century Viennese bourgeois analysands or, as the renowned philosopher Jean-Claude Milner has famously argued, that Freud was 'indifferent' to political matters.<sup>1</sup> There is often a suspicion that Freud was disdainful of the masses. In his article, Dolar seems partly to defend Freud's theory, suggesting that while the theory of psychoanalysis may be regarded as of the struggle, in person, Freud was outside it.

This familiar proposal demands a response. Ways of 'being political' are numerous. Perhaps there is a need for a really close reading of Freud's writings even when most of us have the disadvantage of access only to translations. For instance, we are hampered by the translation of '*Kultur*' as 'civilization', where the English word omits the fascistic overtones of the original German, with which Freud subtly plays. It is useful to have some idea of the context in which he wrote. In this paper, the point of reference on cultural questions is *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud, 1927, 1964: 3-56), one of a series of later writings in which Freud tackles social and political matters as directly as psychoanalytic theory will permit.

### Reading Freud

A reason for the mistaken notion of Freud's irrelevance to politics could be that people do not really read Freud. In their accepting the usual verdicts, all they have is the tail end of what we non-p.c. children used to call a game of Chinese Whispers. One of his techniques is to present a string of supposedly credible arguments, showing each in turn to be flawed. Perhaps sometimes those who do read him abandon the text early and are left with the wrong idea. Perhaps some readers mistake Freud's literal description of his findings for conditional prescription.

Another possibility is that some of our current assumptions skew readings of his texts. For instance, today we regard it as a truism that politics divides into left, right, and middle-of-the-road. Political structures were more complex at the time and place he was developing his theory, first within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then in Austria after its defeat in World War I and then in Ostmark after the Nazis' *Anschluss*. Today it is almost *de rigueur* for writers to offer up their personal and political positions in the midst of academic discourse and their readers hardly separate personal values and scientific pursuits: a writer's public esteem is upheld according to his private beliefs, if not actions. Add to this the Chinese Whispers syndrome and we are not surprised to happen upon conversations about a so-called Freudian idea that the nuclear family ought to be composed of a father, a mother and a son with an Oedipus complex; or that that is what should not happen; or whichever it is, that Freud was on a mission to get us all doing something obscurely sexual. Or perhaps not doing it.

Some fifty years ago, Philip Rieff (1922-2006), editor of the ten-volume edition of Freud's collected papers translated mainly by Joan Rivière, scored a hit with the publication of *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (Rieff, 1959).<sup>2</sup> He wrote authoritatively of Freud's insights into politics, ethics and society. It is disconcerting to discover that Rieff misread key texts – and this is not to nit-pick about the occasional embarrassing blunder that we all make sometimes. His misreadings inflect his interpretation of Freud. For example, on a randomly selected page, we find the following three examples amongst others: 'By psychologizing social revolt and coercion Freud weights his scale against impulse and in favour of law ...' This is not so. Nowhere does Freud say he favours either. He was describing them. Then, supposedly this is Freud's view: 'Envy is the characteristic passion of the weak, only the

strong are not “burning” with it ...’. The strong, the weak, self-righteous judgement? Such presumptuousness is entirely un-Freudian. And: ‘As he revered heroic lawmakers like Moses, considering them the creators of cultures, Freud nevertheless sympathized with the heroic lawbreakers who mock at their culture and liberate the instincts’. Ignoring Rieff’s contradiction of himself on the same page, this is wrong too. Simply denigrating or extolling a group’s viewpoint is not a feature of Freud’s working procedure. Rieff keeps going off on a judgemental tangent all his own, calling it Freud’s (Rieff, 1959: 227).

Freud’s psychoanalytic papers are methodical accounts of his findings in his practice. They are not personal musings, political or otherwise. Ideological reverence or sympathy play little part in his intent and it is inappropriate for a critic to look for them. A critic may disagree with Freud’s method or find fault with the logic of his argument but once he accepts their validity he can hardly take issue with the conclusions to which they lead. Aside from that, is not the entire aim of the psychoanalytic project, Freud’s project, precisely to explore the engines of affective processes – including reverence and sympathy – and not to brandish them in the interests of persuasion?

The Slovenian scholar, Mladen Dolar, based at the University of Ljubljana and lecturing in tandem with his even more famous colleague, Slavoj Žižek, is a *doyen* of Freudian studies. We are reminded of Jean-Claude Milner when Dolar argues that even indifference is a political stance, and also that for Reich, Marcuse and the rhetoricians of May 1968, a radical politics followed from Freud’s theory. Dolar notes that these theorists deem Freud to be political where psychoanalysis presumes no boundary between the psyche and the collective: in psychoanalysis there is no individual but rather a ‘knot of social ties’ (Dolar, 2008: 17).

However for Dolar this is not at all evidence that psychoanalysis is political. For him, politics resides at ‘a seam’, a Lacanian *point de capiton* entailing an act or change that precisely forbids Freud’s elision of person and *polis*. According to Dolar, it is at this fissure of discontinuity that the revolutionary masses will make their transformation so that they too can partake of the ‘achievements of civilization’ (Dolar: 29). Dolar finds Freud oblivious of this inevitability. On the other hand, he concedes that there are, by Dolar’s definition, indications of the political act where for instance psychoanalysis fails to launch any political consensus, fails to establish its own hermetic, uncontroversial and therefore toothless institution. Thereby, perhaps paradoxically, psychoanalysis confirms its conflictual edge within the political domain.

Dolar concludes that psychoanalysis circumscribes a locus, a site of the political without itself being political or engaging in politics. This is because if it fails to observe its ethical limits and passes a certain threshold, it ceases to be psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis ‘displays the stuff that politics is made of without making politics of it’ (Dolar: 29).

### **The Context**

In Germany and Austria after the end of World War I, Freud’s generation witnessed the left being progressively vanquished by the private armies of national socialism, that is to say, Nazism. Before WWI, in *Totem and Taboo* (1913a, 1955), Freud was already exploring why deep, long-lasting political and social change requires a great deal more than alternative opinions, or a temporary swing in party votes, or war. Much of his later work focuses directly on culture and society, on the psychoanalytic evidence that social change cannot occur without broad and profound and – in particular – consensual alteration of the individual psyche.

Freud himself made the observation that in the mid-1920s, when he was in his late 60s, he returned to an interest in cultural problems that had preoccupied him as ‘a youth scarcely old enough for thinking’ (Freud, 1935: 72). His self-confessed years of detour through the natural sciences, medicine and psychotherapy served what turned out to be a life’s project to uncover the engines propelling the ordinary human psyche’s distress and destructiveness.

When he was born in Moravia on 6 May 1856, just four years had passed since Emperor Franz Josef began to relax regulations to which Jews were subject. Freud’s parents moved their family to Vienna when he was three; he was eleven when Jews were for the first time granted equal legal rights to other Austrians. In the course of his lifetime, Vienna became a cultural centre of Europe with a continuing increase in Jewish immigration, Jews being permitted to enter the professions of law, medicine, business and finance, where they flourished.

Despite or because of this, the sympathetic Emperor was unable to prevent the appointment of the notorious Karl Lüger as mayor of Vienna between 1897-1910. Lüger, a Catholic, was directly assisted in his initial elevation by Pope Leo XIII. This was not an anomaly: almost every right-wing dictator in Europe was Catholic and was supported during his career by the Vatican. After WWII, not one was excommunicated for his war crimes.

Lüger founded the Christian Social Party, the model for the Nazi movement. (Hitler was a resident of Vienna from 1907 to 1913.) His mayoral innovations included, for instance, forbidding Jews to work in the city's administration or in its factories. He was a self-confessed admirer of France's founding fascist, Edouard Drumont; in their turn, all the fascist leaders, including Hitler, acknowledged Lüger's inspiration.

In 1881, Freud graduated as a medical doctor and found that, while there was no constraint upon Jews being admitted to university posts, there were limitations upon advancement. Thus when he married at 30, he set up a private neurological practice. Not far below society's surface, the deeper problem showed itself even in Viennese etiquette. For example, it would have been deemed not quite acceptable for a 'respectable' Christian woman to visit Freud's Jewish wife.

Freud was 40 when he named his treatment 'psychoanalysis' and began analyzing his dreams towards the book published in 1900 that would establish his international reputation as a formidable innovator. Two years later, he was made an Associate Professor at the University; only twenty years later, was he made a full Professor of Neurology. He continued to develop his theory until he died at the age of 83 on 23 September 1939 – living for his last sixteen years with cancer of the jaw.

Back in the early 1920s, along with every other Austrian, Freud and his family were surviving the difficulties wrought by the country's defeat in WWI, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the inevitable post-war horrors and privations. Unemployment soared and destitute refugees flooded across the borders. Paradoxically – or perhaps not – at the same time as Vienna continued to be a centre of high and alternative culture, militant Austro-fascism was flourishing. Newly armed worker groups such as the socialist *Schutzbund* clashed with private Nazi-fied armies, especially the *Heimwehr*. The Social Democrat Party was the only political party that allowed Jews to join. Always pro-Austrian, as they had been in WWI, Jews became prominent in the movement, also establishing other smaller parties until the *Heimwehr* silenced all opposition.

By 1927, when Freud was working on *The Future of an Illusion*, Vienna had long been the vortex of fraught events. In January of that year, earlier skirmishes between the factions began to ferment. Judicial leniency with the *Heimwehr* led to a general strike and the July Revolt. There were violent demonstrations, the Ministry of Justice was set alight and protesters were killed in street battles. In 1931, a contingent of the *Heimwehr* tried – unsuccessfully – to seize Vienna. In 1933, Viennese Nazi students joined German Nazis in

holding public burnings of books, the works of Freud and Einstein and other Jews, but also the works of great numbers of liberal and Christian intellectuals. In his speech at the first Nuremberg rally that year, Goebbels said: 'When one further considers ... the fact that nearly all intellectual professions were dominated by the Jews, one has to grant that no people with any self-esteem could tolerate that for long. It was only an act of national renewal when the National Socialist [Nazi] revolution took action in this area' (Goebbels, 1933: 131-142).

In 1934, the Austrian coalition government's parliament was suspended and fascist rule by decree began. Attention was focused on inroads being made by the German Nazis and opinion at the highest level was divided regarding Austria becoming part of the German Nazi Reich. There were bombings and assassinations and continued strife between right-wing factions until March 1938, when Austria was summarily made Ostmark, a province of the Reich.

Freud had chosen not to leave Vienna in the early 1930s. He was no different from most of his compatriots in failing to foresee that the Austrian Chancellor would capitulate immediately so that the threat of the *Anschluss* overnight became a reality. Until the eleventh hour, Freud remained working in the apartment he had lived in for over forty years. Only after his daughter Anna was arrested briefly by the Gestapo did he and some of his immediate family accept help to leave the country, believing that nothing untoward could happen to his remaining four elderly sisters, Rosa, Marie, Adolphine and Pauline, who had been denied permission to join him. His sudden departure in June 1938 was bought at great cost to Freud and some risk to his wealthy supporters. Others were not as lucky. The number of Jewish Austrians put to death by their fellow Austrians between 1940-45 is estimated at 65,000. Freud died in London in 1939. In 1942, his sisters in Vienna were arrested and transported to concentration camps where they were killed.

To return to our starting point: given the context which surely stoked his researches, it seems strange to assume that politics could have been anything but central to Freud's life and work. His entire psychoanalytic *oeuvre* is nothing if not a life-time's quest to make sense of the individual and collective impulse towards self-centred destructiveness and to search for a means of undoing it.

## The Text

For those who were reading and researching in his orbit, Freud's published psychoanalytic writings constituted a coherent, ongoing, scientific refinement of his theory. From 1955, they were collected, translated, and published in London in the 24-volume *Standard Edition*. The works were not mere expressions of opinion, nor arguments of persuasion backed up by *ad hominem* authority, nor disquisitions on topics chosen to justify or to anticipate a sponsor's funding or an institution's requirements of its members as often is the motivator in our present-day academic publications.

Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* is a well-known example of his analysis of the collective which individuals comprise. It is worth alluding again to the care he takes to avoid a tactic which we do not think twice about these days when we come across it in academic papers, namely intruding personal points of view. So for instance, when he writes of civilization's 'assets', 'value' or 'ideals', he is not supposing that the reader presumes that he is referring to his personal assessment of civilization; rather, he is referring to 'civilization's' calculation of what in its own terms are, say, 'assets', 'value' or 'ideals'. Thus, a browse through a text whose tone is apparently – characteristically – conversational but which is actually a deliberate, sequential argument, may inadvertently lead the casual reader into misconstruing the text.

*The Future of an Illusion* employs the device of a Socratic interlocutor who now and then tries to attack the writer's argument which Freud then defends. The work interrogates a number of assumptions about the institutions such as the military, the law, religion – particularly religion – which constitute 'civilization'. Freud is always sceptical of the grounds for the implicit optimism of institutions whose *raison d'être* is, of course, to improve what was there to start with.

Freud's interlocutor enquires what might be so difficult about transforming the future, such as bringing peaceful coexistence by means of adherence to new socio-political values. Freud answers that for the world to change for the better, each individual will have to find the wherewithal to change him- or herself into a person who has relinquished impulses that interfere with being fair to others. This is a process requiring, as he put it, the renunciation of instinct and the strengthening of the intellect. (For the record, in Freud's writings the misleading English word 'instinct' has nothing to do with biology's use of the word; it is merely the translator James Strachey's much criticized substitution for the German '*Trieb*' meaning drive or urge or impulse.)



Psychoanalytic research confirms that individuals are highly resistant to change, that universally the human psyche is weak and the possibility of our transforming ourselves, let alone each other or our communities, is unlikely. Freud demonstrates how generally entrenched are our wish-fulfillment fantasies and therefore how inevitable the greedy destructiveness that issues therefrom. Meanwhile there is no psychoanalytic evidence of people in the future becoming different from how we are in the present - which so closely resembles the past. And it is people who comprise society, who make politics.

But let us suppose that people can and do change themselves, as every institution insists we can and shall. What then does Freud propose that we may find? In this much-anticipated future time of political transformation, humankind will have educated itself to put aside wish-fulfilling, destructive, self-interest. For the good of the community, intelligence and reason will triumph over 'instinctual' wishes. So much for what will happen. What about *when* this will happen? Without clamour, as is Freud's way, he suggests that in considering how long we shall have to wait, we should measure in the aeons of the geologist. When that time eventually comes, 'civilization' as he defines it will no longer be necessary.

We should note that Freud is not suggesting that the best future to which we can look forward requires our submission to law and order. For Freud, reason is not synonymous with 'law' as Rieff and others seem to think he means. Freud reminds us, several times, that 'law' is not a human capacity but an institution that emerges in a society as a means to achieve 'civilization', *Kultur*. He states clearly that 'civilization' is a system of coercion and suppression that has evolved in order that the few may maintain their power and continue to wrest wealth from the masses who produce it for them.

After all this, how can one find a suitable response to Dolar or others who complain that Freud exhibits 'indifference to politics' or 'a mark of contempt' for 'the mob'? On the contrary, Freud is saying that we are all culpable. We are the masses. The institutions of state or academia or army or church or finance do not confer upon their individual members privileged access to morality or reasonable insight into the self-deceptions of the psyche. For Freud, a reference to 'the masses' is not necessarily a reference to an ordinary class from which his readers may exclude themselves - although of course this assumption is often the wishful fantasy of the reader. Thus does Dolar suppose that Freud fails to see that, after the revolutionary masses have worked their transformations, they too will partake of the 'achievements of civilization' (Dolar: 28).

Freud would have no truck with ‘civilization’. How prescient he was. It was soon to transpire that the architects and engineers of ‘civilization’s’ imminent atrocities were as likely as not to be educated, intelligent, ‘civilized’ men, a state of affairs that persists into our own days.

By the end of *The Future of an Illusion*, while Freud has indicated where the answer to our problems lies, he has also suggested that it is probably impossible for human beings to transform society given the structure of the human psyche.

This bleak conclusion is not the stuff of revolutionary action. It is no wonder that some might like to describe Freud’s work as un-political for if he is correct, who will man the barricades? Revolutionaries cannot fight in blind faith whilst knowing full well that we are *all* at the mercy of the selfish tyrant within.

Perhaps this partly explains the common need to misread Freud.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> If only Milner had not also concluded that ‘Harry Potter is a war machine against the Thatcherite-Blairist world and the “American Way of Life”’. It leads us to wonder if he supposes that J.K. Rowling knows a thing or two more than Freud ever did (Milner, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Rieff and Susan Sontag married when she was 17 and divorced 8 years later in 1959. During this time, it is widely said, they co-wrote this book. Their divorce settlement required that Sontag relinquish all claim to its authorship. One is tempted to speculate that far from this being a grand affront to Sontag, she was, did he but know it, disassociating herself from an embarrassment.

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