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Psychomythology: A Phenomenological Critique of Psychohistory

Historical context is indispensable to the understanding of human action. If there is such a thing as human nature, it is only made manifest within the particularities of historical situations. In this sense, then, man has no nature but history.

Belatedly, historians and psychologists have recognized the interdependence of their disciplines. But out of this recognition no historical psychology nor psychological history has developed. What has developed is psychohistory, the application of the therapeutic model of psychoanalysis to history. As presently practised, however, psychohistory is inadequate to the task of understanding why human beings in the past thought and acted the way they did. There are three reasons for this inadequacy.

First, psychoanalysis is anti-historical in philosophy and method. It is therefore incapable of viewing man within his historical context. History, to the psychoanalyst, is merely a series of variations on a known theme. Second, psychoanalysis denies the historical significance of conscious motivation. In psychoanalytical terms, the activities of men's conscious minds in the past are symptoms of deeper, underlying unconscious motivations. This emphasis on the unconscious at the expense of the conscious removes consciousness from consideration as a phenomenon in its own right. The conscious mind, under the scrutiny of the psychohistorian, becomes merely a complex web of a symptoms, a psychopathology, and nothing more. Third, psychoanalysis is excessively reductionist; it reduces the historical actor to his motivational origins. In broader terms, it reduces all of history to "the return of the repressed."¹ I shall now elaborate on these three criticisms of psychohistory in relationship to both psychoanalytical theory and historical method.

The statement that psychoanalysis is fundamentally anti-historical is clearly controversial. According to Donald B. Meyer:

psychoanalysis is the most radically historical of all psychologies . . . Freud made the most radical effort to explain the existence of these historical agents 'mind', 'spirit', 'instinct', the 'individual', the 'self', 'human nature' itself in exclusively historical terms.²

H. Stuart Hughes makes a similar point:

In the writing of history how and why are inseparable questions. In the theory and practice of psychoanalysis the same is true. With both disciplines the prime quest is for human motives. . . Both strive for a precise, detailed reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding an action. . . In history as in psychoanalysis, understanding implies the pursuit of what is hidden or only imperfectly known.³

In light of these arguments, how can it be said that psychoanalysis is anti-historical?

On the face of it, psychoanalysis appears to be historically oriented. It places almost exclusive emphasis upon the past, whether it be the personal past of an individual or the collective past of a people. However, a concern for the past is not, in and of itself, a criterion for determining whether or not a particular attitude or theory is historical. Concern for the past and a desire to mediate in some way between the past and the present can be expressed in a number of ways, including myth and tradition. All approaches to the interpretation of the past are characterized by a particular attitude toward time.⁴ It is my contention that the psychoanalytical attitude toward time is mythical rather than historical. Psychoanalysis attempts to transcend time in the manner of myth by postulating a conception of human nature that is timeless and unchanging. The essentially mythical nature of psychoanalysis is most strikingly revealed in its terminology the Oedipus complex, Eros, Thanatos, etc. The very language of psychoanalysis is dependent on eternal constructs expressed in mythical metaphors. It has been pointed out that Freud, "approaching man as a biological rather than as a social entity, tended to treat the social environment as something historically given rather than as something in constant process of creation by man himself."⁵ The theory of time that Freud outlined in *Moses and Monotheism* illustrates clearly how psychoanalysis views man as a static biological entity, an entity understandable only in mythical terms.

Freud contrasts two kinds of time Chronos and Kairos. Chronos is serial time, composed of qualitatively identical units. Kairos, on the other hand, is "that crucial time in the past that is decisive for what then must come after. . . . This identifies Kairos with traumatic event."⁶ Kairos is a traumatic event in the life of a people which it cannot deal with consciously and which it consequently represses. The Kairotic event that Freud singles out as the basis for the Jewish religious tradition is the slaying of Moses. Kairos lives on as tradition, which is defined as "the historical content of the mass unconscious."⁷ Fixation is "the intrinsic nature of a tradition."⁸ In other words, all traditions are fixated on some eternal image, usually that of the universal Father. Kairos occurs but once in a given tradition and all subsequent developments in that tradition are mere epiphenomena of the original traumatic event.

What are the implications of Freud's theory of time for the writing of history? First, it must be emphasized that Kairos is not an historical event; it is never explicitly recorded. Kairos is pre-historical. It nevertheless determines all subsequent events. This remarkable theory implies a view of human nature that is essentially static. Man represses the traumatic event of Kairos and continues this repression in the form of a tradition. Thus the events that determine the nature of history are not themselves the subject of history, and man is forever condemned by his very nature to repress and continue them.

Freud was repeating on a broader scale the approach that he used in individual psychotherapy. The significant, determining events in a patient's life, according to Freud, were not those of the present, or even of the recent past. Rather, they belong to the distant past, a past which precedes conscious memory just as Kairos precedes history:⁹

Not in the present did Freud locate the causes of the symptoms, but always further in the past. He who, on principle, resorts to the past is obliged to retreat ever deeper there. For the past has once been present and for that reason was part of the dangers which exist in the present. Only when the past loses itself in primeval ages, in other words, only when the character of the present has been substantially erased from the past—only when the past has been made entirely imaginary and so unreal—only then is the regression halted.

The essence of Freud's anti-historical thought is that the presentness that the sympathetic historian sees as a characteristic of the past, that is, of a time that was once the present, is intolerable to Freud. To Freud the essence of the past is Kairos, a timeless, prehistorical and therefore mythical event.¹⁰

The anti-historical nature of Freud's thought has been widely influential, even among Freudian revisionists. This influence is evident in one of the most sophisticated attempts that has been made to apply psychoanalysis to history, that of Erik Erikson in *Young Man Luther*.¹¹ Erikson is by no means an orthodox Freudian. He rejects many of Freud's tenets. Erikson's most original contribution to psychoanalytical thought is his notion of the "identity crisis." According to Erikson the identity crisis "occurs in that period of the life cycle when each youth must forge for himself some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood. . . ."¹² Erikson argues that Luther underwent a crisis of this kind sometime during his adolescence, a crisis that proved to be of central importance in determining his later attitudes and actions.

One event, symptomatic of this crisis, that Erikson seizes upon is what he terms "the fit in the choir." This was an instance in which Luther was reported to have fallen to the ground and screamed either, "It isn't me!" or, "I am not!" depending upon whether one prefers the Latin or the German version. Erikson was attracted to the story of the fit in the choir because he suspected "that the words revealed the fit to be part of a most severe identity crisis—a crisis in which the young monk felt obliged to protest what he was *not* (possessed, sick, sinful) perhaps in order to break through to what he was or was to be."¹³ Although the fit in the choir is more legend than historical event, Erikson says, "We are . . . obliged to accept half-legend as half-history, provided only that a reported episode does not contradict other well-established facts; persists in having a ring of truth; and yields a meaning consistent with psychological theory."¹⁴ It is not unfair to infer from these words that a legend which does not yield a meaning consistent with Erikson's psychological theory probably would not persist in having a ring of truth and could therefore safely be discarded. In other words. Erikson prefers to use only that evidence which supports his own pre-conceived notions, regardless of its reliability. Indeed, Erikson bases his entire interpretation of Luther's personality on the fit in the choir. That nothing can sway him from the interpretation he places on this episode is evidenced by his remark that "Even the possibly legendary aspects of this fit reflect an unconscious understanding on the part of the legend-makers, here Martin's monastic brothers, as to what was going on inside him."¹⁵

The anti-historical nature of Erikson's method is here quite evident. He assumes without proving it that identity crises are a

universal characteristic of human beings in all ages. He seeks to explain the reasons for Luther's greatness by investigating Luther's past, especially his young adulthood. And yet what is known of this past? As Erikson admits, there are "very few reliable data on Luther's childhood and youth."¹⁶ It is therefore a past shrouded in mystery, filled with legends. But Erikson does not follow the historian's method of relying upon the best data. On the contrary, he introduces his argument with an analysis of an event that many scholars doubt ever took place. Like Freud, Erikson prefers to deal with a past that has been rendered unreal and imaginary, a mythical past.

That psychohistory denies the validity of conscious motivation is often overlooked by some of its more zealous advocates and practitioners. With characteristic eclecticism, many historians believe that there is a place in history for both "surface" and "depth" analysis of past human actions. Conscious motivations can be explicated in the manner of the idealist but the search for "deeper" motivations must be conducted with the assistance of psychoanalytical techniques. A representative example of this school of thought is H. Stuart Hughes. According to Hughes, the idealists did very well in dealing with rational motivation. Where they failed was in their attempts to grapple with the irrational:

the idealist historians recognized the irrational without knowing what to do with it. They could subsume it under the love of God; they could quake in holy terror before an inexplicable force whose echoes, muffled by dutiful lives of scholarship, resounded within their own breast; they could extract from it the scattered elements that were capable of logical categorization But . . . they found it impossible to embrace the precise contours of behaviour and emotion which remained foreign to them.¹⁷

The only way to understand the role of the irrational in history, according to Hughes, is to delve beneath appearances using depth-psychological techniques.

However, this argument rests on at least three presuppositions—that the irrational plays a role in history; that the irrational can only be understood as the product of unconscious motivation; that there is no contradiction between seeking irrational motivation in the unconscious and rational motivation in the conscious mind. Let us examine these presuppositions in turn.

Does the irrational play a role in history? At first glance it would seem so. Such historical phenomena as ultra-nationalism, the Holocaust, and the Gulag suggest that it does. On the other hand is

not "irrational" a term we apply either to events whose causes may be explicable but whose effects are unpleasant, for example a war, or to the actions of people we do not like or do not understand? It is easier and perhaps safer to call Hitler a psychopath than it is to understand him. Psychohistory may enlarge one's repertoire of derisive epithets but does it actually enlarge our historical understanding? "A truly historical view of human history," wrote R.G. Collingwood, "sees everything in that history as having its own *raison d'être* and coming into existence in order to serve the needs of the men whose minds have corporately created it. To think of any phase in history as altogether irrational is to look at it not as an historian but as a publicist, a polemical writer of tracts for the times."¹⁸

Assuming for the sake of argument that the irrational does play a role in history, must we therefore search for it in the realm of the unconscious? Is it impossible that irrational actions can be carried out consciously, intentionally? The concept of the unconscious introduces an invidious dualism into the study of the past. It divides the historical actor into compartments, each neatly labeled as to their contents. The unconscious is a catch-all concept which precludes serious consideration of conscious motivation. Did Hitler, from our perspective, act irrationally? Very well, then, we must look to the unconscious for our explanation of him. The conscious mind becomes nothing more than a filter of facts through which we perceive the inner workings of the mind. But is the unconscious an aid in historical explanation or a substitute for it? What is the doctrine of the unconscious but a "convenient blank check on which *any* causal explanation can be written or as a reservoir from which *any* deterministic theory can be drawn?"¹⁹

The assumption that there is no contradiction between seeking irrational motivation in the unconscious and rational motivation in the conscious mind is incorrect. In terms of psychoanalytical theory, all motivation is irrational; all human actions stem from the unconscious. "The unconscious . . . is a source of energy and a part of the mind where 'thoughts' are manufactured" ²⁰ Such apparently innocent activities as laughing at a joke or forgetting one's coat are symptoms which reveal unconscious processes at work. From the point of view of methodological consistency, the psychohistorian must look for the sources of all behaviour in the unconscious.

Erik Erikson, unlike other practitioners of psychohistory, is at least consistent in this respect. Not only does he attempt to explain such seemingly irrational episodes in Luther's life as the fit in the choir by

appealing to the doctrine of the unconscious, but he places every event in Luther's life before this court of final judgment. Here is Erikson discussing the significance of Luther's singing and his conversations about women:

I will state, as a clinician's judgment, that nobody could speak and sing as Luther later did if his mother's voice had not sung to him of some heaven; that nobody could be as torn between his masculine and feminine sides, nor have such a range of both, who did not at one time feel that he was like his mother; but also, that nobody would discuss women and marriage in the way he often did who had not been deeply disappointed by his mother—and had become loath to succumb the way she did to the father, to fate.²¹

In this passage we can easily recognize Erikson's insistence on interpreting all of Luther's actions from the standpoint of the unconscious.

In order to understand how the implications of this approach are expressed on a larger scale we need only recall Freud's theory of *Kairos*. The most remarkable characteristic of this theory is that all important events in history take place on the unconscious level, the repression of the *Kairotic* event, the fixation on a particular aspect of that event, and the incorporation of the event into a particular tradition. If looking at history in such a way reminds one of looking at the sequence of events in a dream, it is not surprising. History, to Freud, was a dream from which none of us shall ever awake, a dream from which the activities of the conscious mind are forever prevented from having any meaning, any import, of their own.

Psychohistorians are often quite willing to admit that psychohistory has often, in the past, been reductionist. This, they argue, has been the result of amateurs working in a field that requires the subtlety of trained professionals.²² But it is difficult to see how psychoanalysis, applied in any rigorous or consistent way to the past, can be anything but reductionist. Psychoanalysis reduces the historian's search for motivation to the domain of the unconscious. It similarly reduces historical actors themselves to their motivations. In Erikson's words, psychoanalysis has "developed a kind of originology . . . a habit of thinking which reduces every human 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'."²³ Psychohistorians assume that if they have explained the motivational origin of a particular action, they have explained all. This is the

“genetic fallacy.” Explanations in terms of origins, even assuming that they are valid, tell us very little. The grandeur, the drama, the complexity of human beings and human history cannot be reduced to a discussion of origins. Human beings are more than just the mechanical product of their inner conflicts. They make decisions; they act; they create. We want to know how these processes are conducted, not simply what their origins may be. Psychohistory is reductionist in precisely these senses: that is discusses little more than origins, that such a discussion of origins is deemed a sufficient explanation of a person or an event, and that the great and the small alike, of all ages, of either sex, in all periods of human history are susceptible to such discussion.

Erikson, well aware of these difficulties, cannot, in the final analysis, avoid reductionism. Luther not only underwent an identity crisis in his young manhood; he suffered from an unresolved Oedipus complex as well.²⁴ As Cushing Strout has pointed out, “Erikson . . . despite his emphasis on the adaptive, not merely the defensive, functions of the ego and on the neglected place of work in illness and recovery, goes beyond this logic to use libido theory and the Oedipus complex in tracking down the ultimate sources of Luther’s troubles.”²⁵

That psychohistory is reductionist when applied on a larger scale to human events is evidenced by Freud’s characterization of history as “the return of the repressed.” As pointed out above, Freud argued that the origin of the Jewish tradition was the repression by the Jews of their slaying of Moses. Freud went on to say that the Christian tradition was merely a further transformation of this Kairotic event:

Thus Christ is constructed in one sense, as the Incarnate God, Father of the rebellious sons (the People who must kill Him), thus recapitulating the primal crime. In another sense, equally true, Christ is the Son of Man, facing and suffering the Father God. Here the Father of the people becomes as well the Son, dying by the wish of the Father.²⁶

And so human history goes on, forever recapitulating the primal crime.

Such a view of history is altogether too simple (despite the complex and often confusing terminology of psychoanalysis), too limited in its objectives, too unimpressive in its results, to aid the historian in his understanding of the past. The chief purpose of psychohistory is not to demonstrate the complex relationships between the subject and his

world, the investigation of which forms the living substance of human history. Rather psychohistory is interested in affirming psychological laws in terms of their origins in the human mind. I have suggested several ways in which such a "science of the mind" is limiting in dealing with the human past. There is also a sense in which its application may be limiting for the human future as well. In the words of R.G. Collingwood:

The mental scientist, believing in the universal and therefore unalterable truth of his conclusions, thinks that the account he gives of mind holds good of all future stages in mind's history; he thinks that his science shows what mind will always be, not only what it has been in the past and is now. The historian has no gift of prophecy, and knows it; the historical study of mind, therefore, can neither foretell the future developments of human thought nor legislate for them, except so far as they must proceed—though in what direction we cannot tell—from the present as their starting-point. Not the least of the errors contained in the science of human nature is its claim to establish a framework to which all future history must conform, to close the gates of the future and bind posterity within limits due not to the nature of things . . . but to the supposed laws of the mind itself.²⁷

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York, 1939), pp. 200-201. Peter Loewenberg argues: "A common misunderstanding of psychohistory . . . is the claim that it is reductionistic. All typologies are necessarily abstractions from reality and therefore reductions." Peter Loewenberg, "Psychohistorical Perspectives on Modern German History," *Journal of Modern History* 47 (June 1975), pp. 229-279. What Loewenberg overlooks is that there are degrees of reductionism implied by different typologies. See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1967) and Donald M. Lowe, "Intentionality and the Method of History," in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, edited by M. Natanson (Evanston, 1973), Vol. 2, pp. 103-72 for examples of explanatory models which attempt to minimize reductionism. Lowe's model is based explicitly upon phenomenological methods.
2. Donald B. Meyer, "A Review of Young Man Luther," in *Psychoanalysis and History*, edited by Bruce Mazlish (New Jersey, 1963), p. 177.
3. H. Stuart Hughes, *History as Art and as Science* (New York, 1964), p. 42.
4. Discussions of mythical, traditional and historical conceptions of time may be found in Gaston Berger, "Phenomenological Approach to the Problem of Time," in *Readings in Existential Phenomenology*, edited by Nathaniel Lawrence (New York, 1967), pp. 187-204; Elaine Amedo, *Le temps dans la vie psychologique* (Paris, 1965); Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston, Illinois, 1967); and J.H. Van den Berg, *A Different Existence* (Pittsburgh, 1972).
5. J.H. Van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man* (New York, 1961), p. 7.
6. Philip Rieff, "Psychoanalysis and Time in History and Religion," in *Psychoanalysis and History*, p. 26.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
8. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 25.
9. Van den Berg, *Changing Nature of Man*, p. 136.

10. Freud was explicit concerning the timeless, ahistorical nature of the unconscious: "Unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless.' This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them." *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York, 1920), Standard Edition, vol. 18, p. 28.
11. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York, 1962).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
17. *History as Art and as Science*, p. 50.
18. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York, 1967), p. 77.
19. *Existence*, edited by Rollo May (New York, 1958), p. 91.
20. Eric Berne, *A Layman's Guide to Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1958), p. 104.
21. *Young Man Luther*, pp. 72-73.
22. Cushing Strout, "Ego Psychology and the Historian," *History and Theory* 7 (1968), pp. 281-282.
23. *Young Man Luther*, p. 18.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
25. Strout, p. 292.
26. Rieff, p. 39.
27. Collingwood, p. 220.