

Was Freud right when he claimed psychoanalysis is concerned with ‘social phenomenon’ including politics?

Boring Piece (Fo Yo Plagiarism) #1

Burn Shit

January 14, 2012

Sigmund Freud’s seminal texts on psychoanalysis sealed his position as the unofficial father of modern psychology. Whilst not subscribing to any explicitly political *weltanschauung* – or world-view – the idea that the study of the individual psyche was inseparable from the social psychology of the group underpins his work. His theoretical analyses of the unconscious mind and the concept of regression, libidinal development and its sublimation, the division of the mind into three antagonistic parts – Id, ego and superego, and the pleasure instincts and death drives inherent in all human beings are evidently attempts at explaining social phenomenon, currents and patterns of human behaviour that run throughout the history of civilisation. The significance and importance of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century is self-evident; the rise and fall of fascism and its quasi-masochistic ‘mob mentality’, the war of ideologies and the allure of their self-appointed leaders and vanguards, the rise in mental health problems and the incessant categorisation and sub-categorisation of diseases of the mind, the parallel growth of marketing, advertising and consumer psychology in the business world and public relations and spin in the world of politics – all symptomatic of a the Freudian assertion that the mind cannot be understood as a rational and coherent whole, but is in fact irrational, manipulatable and is shaped obliviously by desires and drives that we have no control over.

Modern consumer capitalism has artfully mastered the techniques of the manipulation of the psyche and even turned the practice into an industry in itself; advertising, public relations and marketing. Advanced capitalism’s ability to exploit general tendencies in the human mind, particularly the unconscious mind has led to a proliferation of a sophisticated propaganda racket that shapes public opinion and governs people’s behaviour. Freud’s nephew Edward Bernays saw this development in a highly positive light, arguing that, “intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society”, and that somewhat paradoxically to any vision of ‘democratic’ society the ‘socially necessary’ manipulators, “constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power in our country”. Appropriately and true to his word, Bernays managed to re-brand his position as a propagandist

by euphemistically renaming propaganda, 'public relations'. The advertising and marketing industries have developed tried and tested techniques of selling commodities. The methods stem from the psychoanalytical idea of tapping into the unconscious, appealing to repressed desires, sublimating them through buying power and promises of personal fulfilment, empowerment, pleasure and strength through expenditure. We find our identities in what we buy and express our self through the commodities we own. Buying has become a process of self-affirmation and what we buy determines not only our status, but can signify our belonging to a group, our belief in an ideal or our loyalty to a brand. Consumer trends, fashion and fads are a testament to the relevance of 'the herd instinct' that Freud examines in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In an appraisal of the work of Gustave Le Bon, Freud states that, "we have an impression of a state in which an individual's separate emotion and personal intellectual act are too weak to come to anything by themselves and are absolutely obliged to wait till they are reinforced through being repeated in a similar way in the other members of the group." Rampant consumerism, from a psychoanalytical point of view, can be seen as an expression of libidinal desires sublimated with 'retail therapy' or the instinctual drive of human beings to be part of 'the herd'. The success of advertising is measured by its ability to convince potential consumers that a ownership of a certain product will guarantee them a place in that herd or that their fears, anxieties and internal conflicts can be resolved and pleasure attained through the simple act of buying.

A 1921 handbook for aspiring salesmen wrote that, "In a retail store, you have a wonderful chance to study human beings... Who are they? What are their chief characteristics? Why do they act and talk as they do? Where are they going? For what purposes do they buy various articles?" Rachel Bowlby points out, "an intimate connection, institutionally and intellectually, between psychology and marketing during the first forty years of this century and beyond." As psychology became a separate discipline moving away from both philosophy and neurology, its primary concerns were entwined with the concerns of marketing experts – the scientific study of human behaviour and the human mind's susceptibility to suggestion along with the impulses and desires of our psyches and subconscious and the exploitation of these desires. The consumerist ethic wasn't too far removed from the ethos of psychology – an individualistic and almost narcissistic obsession with an irrational self and troubled and malleable ego, whilst promoting the idea that either psychotherapy or retail therapy can resolve internal mental instabilities.

According to Freud, the pleasure-seeking childlike part of the psyche – the Id – is repressed by artificial boundaries imposed on it by society which are internalised mentally and represented in the 'superego' of the mind. Our egos are an amalgamation of these two conflicting parts of the psyche, working in conjunction and opposition with both, striving after the pleasure principle sought after by the our primordial Ids whilst maintaining the respectability and socially appropriate behaviour demanded by our superegos. The ego is the part of the mind with the ability to exercise direct control over the body, as we try to reconcile our love-instincts and drives for pleasure with the innately repressive functions of our superegos which, "[displaying] particular severity and [raging] against the ego with the utmost cruelty" demand conformity and submission and cause an inevitable internal conflict that manifests itself in depression, anxiety, neuroses, pathology and sometimes hysteria that characterise modern 'civilisation'. This categorisation of the minds three metaphysical sectors necessarily leads to an all-encompassing explanation of various social problems and phenomenon. Generalised internalised repression, first of our Oedipus complex (the precursor to our superegos), incestuous desires and primary identification with our patriarchal figures serves as a crucial stepping stone to understanding the

widespread psycho-pathologies in human beings, as well a general explanation of our modern political structures which arise from a, “universalisation of the father-son relationship into a prototypical mould underlying all political formations.” Additionally, sublimation of crude, primary drives associated with our Ids and repressed libidos can, to some extent, satiate these drives. The creation of works of art, ‘progress’ in the sciences and technological invention, general interests and hobbies as well as obsession with the accumulation of more and more consumer goods which distinguishes our modern ‘civilisation’ from our primitive past are merely the reification of our abstract instinctual desires materialised and substituted for other socially constructed desires that fit in more neatly with the norms and values of our particular epoch. In Freudian terms, the anguish that we suffer due to the subjugation of our desires is partly avoidable. A, “technique for avoiding suffering makes use of the displacements of the libido that are permitted by our psychical apparatus... Sublimation of the drives plays a part in this... the artist’s joy in creating, in fashioning forth the products of his imagination, or the scientist’s in solving problems and discovering truths.” But Freud states in a typically elitist fashion that these palliative reliefs were reserved for only a small and privileged minority that possess the, “special aptitudes and gifts that are not exactly common.” This assumption is indicative of Freud’s tendency in his writings to reserve psychoanalysis and psychotherapy as a firmly bourgeois pursuit and see little or no hope in the crowd or *masse* seeking ‘higher pursuits’ or ‘socially useful’ ones to quash the instinctive pleasures of the Id.

We could postulate that had Freud been alive today, to a degree he could have included social phenomena such as television, spectator sports, mainstream cinema or celebrity culture in a long list of, “powerful distractions, which cause us to make light of our misery, substitutive factions, which diminish it” and particularly, “intoxicants, which anaesthetise us to it.” It could easily be argued that the entire ‘Society of the Spectacle’ serves to lull all of us into an inertia that keeps us blissfully unaware of the causes of our collective miseries and frustrations. Disenfranchisement and apathy are the hallmarks of advanced consumer-(spectacular)-capitalism, along with civilisation’s distinctive features analysed by Freud that cause extensive damage to our mental and physical well-being and forbid the realisation of our desires and aspirations. But the organisation of the ‘Spectacle’, its invasion into every part of our daily lives and encroachment into our psyches keeps us all sufficiently docile and submissive, despite the very real internal antagonisms and contradictions imposed on us by the external world. “Those who organise the world organise both suffering and the anaesthetics for dealing with it; this much is common knowledge. Most people live like sleepwalkers, torn between the gratification of neurosis and the traumatic prospect of a return to real life.” Psychoanalysis and especially psychiatry has, to some extent, become part of the repressive machinery of society. It has been co-opted and put into use as a lubricant for the cogs of oppression and can therefore be defined as a tool not just for explaining social phenomenon, but for keeping social, political and economic structures in place and consequently is a highly politicised discipline. The Foucauldian notion that psychiatry, like all other specialised branches of knowledge, science and ideology, has become part of a vast superstructure of oppressive control and manipulation here rings true.

The view that people’s actions in ‘civilised’ societies are governed not by their rational and logical decision-making capacities (but rather by the complex and often unconscious interplay of hostile elements of the mind) is echoed by several contemporary ‘anti-civilisation’ thinkers, who can loosely be described as ‘primitivists’ or ‘neo-luddite’. Themes in Freud’s analysis of civilisation, its discontents and the inescapable psychological and social harm that results from

the onset of an 'advanced organisation of society' influence the work of Theodore Kaczynski and his pamphlet *Industrial Society and Its Future*. But for Kaczynski, a well-established and prevailing sense of powerlessness, anxiety and mental instability exists not due to the internal repression of Oedipal desire or early traumatic experiences, but because of a the regulation of our lives by large-scale organisations and the lack of influence people have over their own lives. However, this isn't by any means a radical departure from Freudian thinking. Whereas Freud's psychoanalytical standpoint blames an almost factional dispute between superego and id on the incontinuity of the self, Kaczynski puts down the lack of any autonomous decision-making or 'power processes' in the creation of entire populations of psychologically perturbed subjects. But as in the texts of Freud, sublimation of real needs and desires for what Kaczynski describes as 'surrogate activities', is seen as a necessary prescription for people living in a society where mental health is, "defined largely by the extent to which an individual behaves in accord with the needs of the system and does so without showing signs of stress." Freud's sublimation can be directly equated with Kaczynski's concept of 'surrogate activities' – "an activity that is directed toward an artificial goal that people set up for themselves merely in order to have some goal to work toward, or let us say, merely for the sake of the 'fulfilment' that they get from pursuing the goal." These activities serve the purpose of what Freud calls, "palliative relief" from, "the life imposed on us [that is] too hard for us to bear: it brings too much pain, too many disappointments, too many insoluble problems." And yet a crucial difference separates Freud and Kaczynski's two perspectives on 'civilisation' and the problems that arise from it. For Kaczynski, an advocate of anarcho-primitivism, the inhuman social phenomenon and organisation of society that arise from 'progress' and 'advancement' is entirely avoidable, whereas Freud sees this as inevitable, necessary and preferable to the alternative of barbarism and submission to the whims of individual egos. Freud's inclination towards authoritarian systems of governance or perhaps reluctant acceptance of such methods of social organisation are born out of his fear of what he called the, "psychological malaise of crowds" and a "bias against those whom he called 'the masses.'" His absolute belief in the pleasure principle lead him to adopting a sort of utilitarian-realist perspective that the best vehicle for the attainment of this pleasure in a balanced and measured (i.e; the long-term achievement of this absolute goal without descending into anarchic lawlessness) was, "to give way to a middle course between total satisfaction and complete renunciation... for Freud, liberation and real pleasure always demand a self-restraint which is predicated on the internalisation of authority." In this way, a total acceptance of Freudian psychoanalysis is reactionary, conservative and must essentially be precluded by an acceptance of a pessimistic Hobbesian view of human beings as morally bankrupt, feral and self-destructive in their very nature. Human beings, for Freud are too volatile and untrustworthy not to be controlled by some external authority, the pros of civilisation vastly outweigh the cons and all of us, 'the masses', being unable to effectively manage our own psychic emotions must submit to servitude and be managed by others. Authority is legitimised and the very worst features of 'civilisation' justified, "to overcome the disturbance of communal life caused by the human drive for aggression and self-destruction." Nevertheless, like all critiques of civilisation the analysis is pointed towards the discord caused by the battle between individuals and society, an important dichotomy that for Freud, unlike radical primitivist and left-libertarian theory, can never be fully resolved, but only be mediated, controlled and limited.

In many respects, psychoanalysis could be accused of externalising and applying too universally personal neuroses and turning individual mental characteristics and psychic problems into

all-encompassing explanations of social phenomena (including political structures) without placing these phenomena in their historical, cultural or social context. Applying, “to large-scale social processes and institutions the concepts and categories which he had developed on the private realm” Freud universalised his essentialist views on the individual psyche and attempted to explain *all* social phenomena through a rigid psychoanalytic grid that he himself had constructed *a priori*. Freud’s analysis of ‘crowd mentality’, particularly his explanations for the desire of people to be dominated by often tyrannical leaders (on a historical note, he resided in Vienna during Hitler’s *Anschluss* with Austria in 1938) is no exception but does nevertheless pose interesting questions and invite debate on engaging explanations of leadership, totalitarianism and humanity’s appetite for destruction. In *Group Psychology* Freud sets about analysing the psychological reasons for the allure of leaders. This broad social phenomena is again analysed from a purely psychological perspective. The leader for Freud inherits the position of the patriarch, the authority figure that provides grounding and imposes regulations, rules and absolutes in a chaotic and disturbing world. His popularity is dependant on his ability to embody unchanging moral values, convey an ordered vision of the world and bind together the mass of individuals, uniting the crowd behind them. Freud had little reservations about describing the relationship between charismatic leaders and obedient crowds as erotic – “what can unite thousands or millions of people is the relation – and the libidinal investment of this relation – of each one of them to a leader (political, religious or military) or an idea occupying the position of... a common point of reference.” The effect of this libidinous attraction is absolute adoration, servitude and willingness to submit. Seductions of power and the authority figure stem not just from personal admiration or ‘libidinal investment’, but also the enticement of being part of the crowd and the regression to the ‘herd instinct’. “What happens is that the members of the crowd are hypnotised (and that is the word Freud uses) by the leader. The leader takes place of the over-I... What he offers to individuals is a new psychological dispensation. Where the individual super-ego is inconsistent and often inaccessible because it is unconscious, the collective super-ego, the leader, is clear and absolute in his values.” The atrocities committed by ordinary people under Nazi rule in Austria give credence to the Freudian concept of the death drive. Their success and popularity lay in their willingness to allow people to commit barbarous and forbidden acts, to unleash the primordial instincts of their Ids without restraint against persecuted minorities and scapegoats, but still remain within the parameters of a new fascist legitimacy. They created a new moral order in which people could resolve their antagonisms and internal human ambivalence in collective acts of barbarism and death-driven passion in events like *Kristallnacht*. “The aim of all life,’ Freud famously declared, ‘is death.” We are prone to seek in death a resolution that we cannot achieve in life. These abominations allowed a discharge of all the anxieties and contradictions described by Freud that had been bound up in the human psyche. All the negative traits of the human mind, “the weakness of intellectual ability, the lack of emotional restraint, the incapacity for moderation and delay, the inclination to exceed every limit in the expression of emotion” were let loose as people were given licence to, “work it off completely in the form of action.” His conclusions go some way to explaining his deep-seated scepticism of states of anarchy and unbridled expressions and manifestations of instinctual drives that for Freud, would undoubtedly lead to acts of barbarity. The mistrust of a hypothetical chaotic ‘state of nature’ in which the psyche is freed without external control or the mediation of the super-ego, and the consequent support of a politically conservative but completely necessary form of hierarchical government can be understood in this light.

To conclude, Freud is correct in his assertion that psychoanalysis is concerned with social phenomenon and can the discipline be a useful and radical tool in explaining various political structures and cultural and societal trends. However, Freudian psychoanalysis in particular has a tendency to equate individual psychiatric trends with generalised trends in society. The individual and the social are inextricably linked, however, the result of universalising and generalising psychoanalysis to explain political and social phenomena often means that events are taken out of their historical and economic context and placed in a sometimes unsuitable framework and viewed from a doctrinaire perspective.

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