Social and Historical Influences on Psychoanalytic Thought

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Just as psychoanalysis shows how psychological factors influence the course of history and society, sociological analysis reveals that psychoanalysis, like other sciences, far from being a pure embodiment of disinterested reason is itself, to a considerable degree, a social product. If we need a psychoanalysis of philosophy to trace the personal roots of intellectual production, we also need a sociology of psychoanalysis to cast light on the social, economic and historical forces influencing the production, reproduction, and failures of reproduction—the rise and decline—of psychoanalytic ideas. In a recent paper presented to the International Federation for Psychoanalytic Education (IFPE) on his receipt of the 20th Hans Loewald Memorial Award (2013), Arnold Richards wrote: "Ludwik Fleck was the father of this field – a Polish physician and immunologist whose 1936 book, *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact,* has been credited as seminal by Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn, and many other eminent historians of science. Fleck's great contribution was the recognition that science does not develop in pure culture, but that scientists (and the facts they discover) are influenced by social, historical, cultural, personal, and psychological factors. The study of these factors is now called the sociology of scientific knowledge … and psychoanalytic knowledge is as subject to it as any other field of study." Without in any way asserting strict determination of the ideological superstructure by the economic substructure, if Fleck is the father in this field then Marx is clearly the grandfather.

Beginning as early as the 1950s, what Freud himself regarded as "the preferred field of work for psychoanalysis," namely "the problems which the unconscious sense of guilt has opened up, its connections with morality, education, crime and delinquency" (*New Introductory Lectures,* 61, 1933), began to be neglected in favor of a range of other preoccupations: abuse, neglect, trauma, narcissism, shame, self, relatedness, intersubjectivity and, most recently, the neurological foundations of mind. For decades, psychoanalytic attention has been deflected away from what Freud himself regarded as its preferred field of work. Prior to the 1960s, most mainstream Freudian and Kleinian analysts viewed superego analysis as central to the analytic process, for it was widely agreed that the dynamics of guilt and self-punishment play a crucial role in both psychopathology and cure. Some analysts never lost sight of such fundamental psychoanalytic insights, recognizing that in addition to the ego-id conflicts resulting in neurosis there are the ubiquitous ego-superego conflicts that result in what I think of as "the psychopathy of everyday life" that Leo Rangell ("Lessons from Watergate: A Derivative for Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* 45: 37-61, 1976) called the "syndrome of the compromise of integrity." But I think it is fair to say that many of the newer psychoanalytic theories that came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, the types of object-relational theory and relational psychoanalysis that draw on those parts of Winnicott's multifarious thinking that stress "ego-relatedness" and on Kohut's "self psychology" that is so congruent with this, tended to downplay intrapsychic conflict among superego, ego, and id in favor of an emphasis upon trauma, deprivation, abuse, and neglect by caretakers, that is, the ways in which we are more injured than injurious.

Four decades have now passed since Karl Menninger (1973) asked *Whatever Became of Sin?* In so doing, he drew attention to a de-moralizing trend in psychiatry and psychoanalysis mirroring that of the wider culture. By the 1950s we had begun to reject Cassius's conviction that "the fault…lies not in our stars, but in ourselves" (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2) in favor of that proto-narcissist Lear's protestation that we are "more sinned against than sinning" (*King Lear*, 3.2). Such de-moralization, such guilt evasion, is only to be expected in the culture of narcissism. If, as the old saying has it, the superego is soluble in alcohol, then in narcissism it seems it may be liquidated altogether. But this is merely an appearance, for when the anesthetic wears off the superego takes its sadistic revenge—it may even have cunningly instigated the whole process precisely to be able to do so.

By the late 1950s, Sandler had already noticed that in the indexing of cases at the Hampstead clinic there was a "tendency to veer away from the conceptualization of material in superego terms"; he was wondering why "therapists have preferred to sort their clinical material in terms of object relationships, ego activities, and the transference, rather than in terms of the participation of the superego" ("On the Concept of the Superego," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, *15*: 128-162, 1960). Two decades later, Arlow observed that "superego function has been shunted to one side by the current preoccupation with the persistence of the regressive reactivation of archaic idealizations" and that "the concept superego itself rarely appears as the central topic of a clinical or theoretical contribution" ("Problems of the Superego Concept," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 37: 229-244, 1982). Würmser referred to the superego as the "sleeping giant" of contemporary psychoanalysis ("A Dissenting Comment about 'Borderline Pathology,'" *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 8, 1998: 373-397).

While the giant slept, having been anesthetized in both society at large and the psychoanalytic thinking it encouraged, Thatcher, Reagan, Milton Friedman, Friedrich von Hayek, Ayn Rand, Alan Greenspan, and a host of others laid the foundations for the dismantlement of the social state and, with the avid assistance of the "banksters" and "fraudsters" of Wall Street and "the City," prepared the ground for the economic crisis of 2007-8. To a sociological imagination committed to exposing the public roots of private troubles, it is no coincidence that the "de-moralizing" shift in psychoanalytic thought emerged with what Christopher Lasch (1979) called "the culture of narcissism" and the rise of market fundamentalism. The individualistic ideology of neo-liberalism undermines social conscience and liberates the narcissism of predatory exploiters, while at the same time placing the blame for the injustice and extreme inequality bred by late capitalism squarely upon its victims.

Might it have been easier to bear guilt back in the days when the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man, of our intrinsic moral imperfection, was widely accepted, or when the need for capitalist accumulation made self-restraint a virtue, than in late capitalist consumer societies promoting oral-narcissistic regression and instinctual release rather than repression? Today the idea of moral imperfection as an intrinsic feature of being human—"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (*Romans* 3:23 *KJV*)—is widely rejected. Some years ago I clipped out a letter to the editor of the Toronto *Globe & Mail* and put it on reserve in the College library for my students. A woman wrote that though she had left the church in early adolescence, she now had two young daughters whom she felt were receiving insufficient values education so she'd been looking around for a Sunday School, but wherever she went in their sermons the priests, pastors, or ministers would imply she was a sinner—and, she insisted, she wasn't! I'm not sure many of my students got the point. What is the point? One need not be

religious or a superego-dominated moralist to raise one's eyebrows at what, on the surface at least, appears to be moral obtuseness: anyone with any degree of developed conscience is likely to be more or less constantly aware of their myriad moral failures and shortcomings whether or not they employ the language of "sin" to describe them.

In referring to the displacement of psychoanalytic focus from intrapsychic conflict to issues of trauma, deprivation, abuse, and neglect by carers, there is no intention to deny the significance of such factors in generating emotional disturbance. But one of the ways in which trauma, deprivation, abuse, and neglect are damaging is that they cause the victim to become a hateful and sadistic agent towards the self and others. Such reactive hate, envy, and destructiveness, however understandable in terms of the conditions that elicit them, lead either to guilt, or if guilt is unbearable, to an unconscious need for punishment that takes the form of the self-sabotaging and self-tormenting behaviors inflicted by Freud's sadistic superego or Fairbairn's "internal saboteur." Psychoanalysis cannot eradicate past trauma and deprivation, but it can help patients understand how their responses to these events have been destructive and assist them in finding better ways of coping. But the Freudian and Kleinian approaches that focused on such interior conflict, on issues of "crime and punishment," have been marginalized over the past half-century.

While earlier writers such as Alexander, Ferenczi, and Strachey accepted Freud's view of the superego's sadism and therefore sought to either radically modify it or eliminate it altogether as a bad internal persecutory object, Schafer, reacting against Freud's own focus upon its sadism, advanced the idea of "the loving and beloved superego of Freud's structural theory" ("*Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 15, 1960: 163-188), a concept that he constructed from small hints and suggestions appearing here and there in Freud's writings but that Freud himself had notably not allowed to alter his overall view. Admitting that "Freud was not prepared to pursue to its end the line of thought leading to a loving and beloved superego or to integrate such a conception with his decisive treatment of the criticizing and feared superego" (163), Schafer nevertheless proceeded to do the job for him. Subsequent readers of Schafer's paper, no doubt aided by wish-fulfillment, seem to have thought the paper revealed that Freud himself recognized a more benign in addition to the sadistic superego, when what the paper truly revealed was what Schafer and others *wished* had been Freud's view of the superego, not the superego he actually gave us.

A sociologist might suggest that whereas Freud himself gave us a late 19th-century European father-superego, Schafer gave us that of mid-20th-century America. If this were so, it would imply that we were getting a more modulated view of the superego because superegos had become modulated. But is that fact or wish? At the very time Schafer was advancing his view of the superego as more "Pop" than "*Vater*," Kohut was celebrating the passing of "Guilty Man" altogether in our culture (*The Restoration of the Self*, 1977). Although deploring rather than celebrating the fact, Marcuse was in essential agreement. In "The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man" (*Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics and Utopia*. J. J. Shapiro & S. M. Weber [trans.], 1963), he argued that central aspects of Freudian theory had "become obsolescent to the degree to which their object, namely, 'the individual' as the embodiment of id, ego, and superego has become obsolescent in the social reality" (44).

Although in my view both Marcuse and Kohut were mistaken in their thesis that with the decline of paternal authority the superego had dissolved and an unstructured personality had emerged, I believe they were quite right to call our attention to the interconnections between

societal change and the psychoanalytic ideas affected by and also influencing it. But it is one thing to argue that such change led to the *disappearance* of *guilty man* and quite another to argue that it merely led to the *repression* of his guilt. Here we must boldly bring psychoanalytic thinking to bear and distinguish between what is conscious and what is unconscious. Perhaps due to changes in culture, gender roles, family structure, etc., harsh paternal authority had diminished and, at least on the conscious level, the authoritarian superego along with it. Yet Freud explained how a severe superego may result from a lenient upbringing, its severity having more to do with the turning of aggression against the ego than with simple internalization of parental behavior ("Civilization and Its Discontents," *S.E.*, 21, 30: 128-129). It may even be possible that the decline in parental authority has led to an *increase* in the severity of the unconscious superego. In any case, our clinical experience would suggest little decline in the role of the sadistic, tyrannical unconscious superego in psychopathology. Of course, this is a point that one is only in a position to affirm or deny to the extent that in clinical work one is still capable of what Theodore Reik called *Listening with the Third Ear* (1948) to the unconscious. Those who report the disappearance of *guilty man* in our culture and the absence of the dynamics of guilt and self-punishment in their clinical practices would appear to attest to the absence of the unconscious in their work.

Schafer's post-Freudian revision of Freud's theory of the superego has been very influential, even among analysts not usually fond of Freudian revisionism, and for several reasons. First, it compensated to some extent for the lack of any concept of a loving and forgiving conscience with which to offset the harshness of the superego. Second, it did so in the absence of any direct critique of the superego as such. Even today there is strong resistance to anything approaching a radical critique of the superego. Psychoanalysts are all in favor of its modification, its modulation, its transformation from a harsh to a more loving authority—but it remains, after all, in phantasy, the parent, and good children that we are, we must *honor* parental authority, even *defer* to it out of respect, and certainly not "act-out" our unresolved Oedipal aggression by seeking to overthrow it. Even Ronald Britton (*Sex, Death, and the Superego: Experiences in Psychoanalysis*, 2003) who possesses a clear understanding of the role of the ego-destructive and envious superego in psychopathology refrains from conceptualizing the superego as such as a bad internal object, which it generally was for Klein and also for Freud in his clinical as distinct from sociological writings. Britton seeks only to liberate the ego-destructive superego from hostile, alien, internal, bad occupying forces rather than disempower or overthrow it altogether—a U.N.-style peace-keeping, not a revolutionary operation.

In calling for the strengthening of the ego and modification of the superego, Britton would certainly be joined by mainstream, American psychoanalysis that, likewise, failing to clearly recognize the superego as an intrinsically bad object, seeks only its "maturation," not its disempowerment or displacement in favor of conscience. Like Schafer, Britton preserves the notion of a superego that is not ego-destructive. Whereas Klein and, in his clinical writings, even Freud were fairly unambivalent about the superego as an internal aggressor or persecutor, much subsequent psychoanalysis has retreated from this understanding, maintaining a much more ambiguous attitude towards it. Significantly, Ferenczi who, like Alexander, clearly recognized its destructiveness and called for its elimination was a political as well as a psychoanalytic radical. But mainstream psychoanalysis is anything but radical. It has been in love with the idea of "compromise-formation" and like contemporary liberalism has been only too eager to compromise, Chamberlain-like, with the uncompromising forces of authoritarian

reaction (superego) that would destroy the ethic of compromise (i.e., democratic institutions) altogether.

Psychoanalytic critique of the superego has focused almost exclusively upon its destructive manifestations in the life of the individual, in self-punishment, self-sabotage, masochism, depression, and suicide, and not upon the morally objectionable internalized cultural ideologies of which the superego is comprised and that are reflected even in its normative, let alone its pathological expressions. While the id has been scapegoated and blamed for human destructiveness, the superego has been viewed as a prosocial rather than an antisocial force, despite our awareness of its destructive clinical manifestations. Even when the superego has been seen as destructive, its destructiveness has been attributed to its "pathology," thus sparing the so-called "normal" superego from critique and preserving it as a largely prosocial force. Very little critique has been directed by psychoanalysts at the racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, childism, possessive individualism, consumerism, commodity fetishism, and other ideologies of domination and exploitation that constitute the conventional and normative, yet nonetheless immoral and destructive superego. As Theodor Adorno pointed out in connection with Ferenczi's call for elimination of the superego, "A critique of the super-ego would have to turn into one of the society that produces the super-ego; if psychoanalysts stand mute here, they accommodate the ruling norm" (*Negative Dialectics*, 1983, 274). Mainstream psychoanalysis has pretty much stood mute here, accommodating the ruling norm.

The phenomenon of guilt evasion cannot be adequately comprehended exclusively from the standpoint of the psychology of the individual. Human beings have always been reluctant to face and bear guilt. But economic and sociocultural forces create conditions that may either encourage or discourage conscience and responsibility. I have argued that with brilliant exceptions, such as Erich Fromm and Erik Erikson, from the very beginning psychoanalysis sought to cloak its intrinsic moral ethic beneath a positivist, de-moralizing, pseudo-medical façade; but beginning as early as the late 1950s, the de-moralizing trend intensified leading to neglect of the concepts of guilt and the superego, concepts through which psychoanalysis had earlier managed to address moral issues even while seeking to obscure the fact. As I have indicated, I think the psychoanalytic retreat from guilt and the superego in favor of a preoccupation with the "self" was a consequence of the economic shift from productive industrial to consumer capitalism and the culture of narcissism it creates. This is a culture of release rather than restriction; a culture hostile to regulation and regulators; a culture that tolerates, even encourages, the bending or evasion of rules; a de-moralizing culture hostile to moral critique and to whistleblowers; a culture hostile to conscience. (Are any of the "banksters" responsible for the economic crisis of 2007-8 or the more recent manipulation of the Libor rate yet in jail?)

But there are indications that issues concerning the superego, guilt, and conscience are finally beginning to return from repression both in society and in the psychoanalytic thinking it shapes. Over the past decade, a number of psychoanalytic writings focusing upon issues of guilt and conscience have appeared (Sagan, *Freud, Women and Morality: The Psychology of Good and* Evil, New York, Basic, 1988; Barnett, *You Ought To! A Psychoanalytic Study of the Superego and Conscience*. London: Karnac, 2007; Reiner, *The Quest for Conscience and the Birth of the Mind*. London: Karnac, 2009; Carveth, *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience*. London: Karnac, 2013; Frattaroli, "Reflections on the absence of morality in psychoanalytic theory and practice." In: Akhtar (Ed.), *Guilt: Origins,*

Manifestations, and Management. New York: Aronson, 2013), at the same time as in the wider society moral critique of the obscene inequality and corruption of democracy brought about by neo-liberal ideology and practice has emerged in such forms as the Occupy Wall Street Movement and the sequential appearance of whistleblowers such as Assange, Manning, and, most recently, Snowdon. In the immortal words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Just as society in general needs to develop a renewed capacity to listen to the still small voice of conscience, so in psychoanalysis we need to recognize with Eli Sagan the distinction between the superego as an identification with the aggressor, with parental and social authority, and a conscience grounded not in social internalization but in our earliest experiences of attachment and love, our identification with the nurturer.

It is important not to confuse conscience with either God or the superego, for people are often led by the superego and what they take to be God to act unconscionably. Recent studies of the PTSD suffered by returning soldiers reveals its frequent grounding in "moral injury" arising from obedience to a superego shaped by familial and military authority that led them to commit unconscionable acts—and we are all aware of the atrocities people often feel called upon by "God" to perform. I have argued that whereas Freud chose to incorporate both conscience and the ego ideal into the superego, we now need to recognize conscience as a fourth component of the structural theory of the mind in order to more adequately grasp moral conflict between the pseudo-morality internalized from parents and society and the authentic morality, "the still small voice," that stems from what Winnicott called the "true self" and its attachments and libidinally grounded object relations. In rejecting the view of the superego as an intrinsically bad internal object and the goal of analysis as its replacement by conscience in favor of the goal of superego maturation, mainstream psychoanalytic theory fails to see that it is only by the standards of conscience that we can distinguish a mature from an immature superego in the first place.

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