

## PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SOCIAL THEORY

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**Keywords:** Conscious, unconscious, the decentred subject, "de-psychologization" of the subject, narcissism, utopic dimension, repression, repetition, negativity, repression, drives, representation, trauma, narcissism, denial, displacement: selfhood the Oedipus complex, Frankfurt School, "post-psychological individual", fascism, totalitarian societies, repression- "basic" and "surplus", "repressive desublimation"

### Contents

1. Introduction
  2. Freud and the Interpretation of the Social
    - 2.1 Human Subjectivity
    - 2.2 Social Analysis
    - 2.3 Epistemology.
  3. The Legacy of Freud
  4. Psychopathologies of Rationality: The Frankfurt School
    - 4.1 Erich Fromm
    - 4.2 Herbert Marcuse
  5. Contemporary Critical Theory: Habermas's Reading of Freud and the Theorem of Distorted Communication
  6. Returning to Freud: Jacques Lacan
  7. Advantages and Limitations of Lacan's Theory
  8. Lacanian and Post-Lacanian Contexts
  9. Feminist Psychoanalytic Criticism
  10. Psychoanalysis and Postmodern Theory
- Acknowledgement  
Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

### Summary

Social theory has the task of providing conceptions of the nature of human agency, social life and the cultural products of human action which can be placed in the services of the social sciences and humanities in general. Among other problems, social theory is concerned with language and the interpretation of meaning, the character of social institutions, the explication of social practices and processes, questions of social transformation and the like. The reproduction of social life, however, is never only a matter of impersonal "processes" and "structures": it is also created and lived within, in the depths of an inner world, of our most personal needs, passions and desires. Love, empathy, anxiety, shame, guilt, depression: no study of social life can be successfully carried out, or meaningfully interpreted, without reference to the human element of agency. Modernity is the age in which this human element is constituted as a systematic field of knowledge. That field of knowledge is known as psychoanalysis.

## 1. Introduction

Psychoanalysis, a product of the culture of late nineteenth-century Europe, has had a profound influence on contemporary social thought. Psychoanalysis, as elaborated by Freud and his followers, has been enthusiastically taken up by social and political theorists, literary and cultural critics, and by feminists and postmodernists, such is its rich theoretical suggestiveness and powerful diagnosis of our contemporary cultural malaise. The importance of psychoanalysis to social theory, although a focus of much intellectual debate and controversy, can be seen in quite specific areas, especially as concerns contemporary debates on human subjectivity, sexuality, gender hierarchy and political debates over culture.

Indeed, Freudian concepts and theories have played a vital role in the construction of contemporary social theory itself. The writings of social theorists as diverse as Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Louis Althusser, Jürgen Habermas, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-François Lyotard all share a Freudian debt. Yet there can be little doubt that the motivating reason for this turn to Freud among social theorists is as much political as intellectual. In a century which witnessed the rise of totalitarianism, Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and the possibility of a "nuclear winter", social theory has demanded a language which is able to grapple with modernity's unleashing of its unprecedented powers of destruction. Psychoanalysis has provided that conceptual vocabulary.

In this chapter, after indicating the impacts of Freud on social theory, some of the core trajectories of psychoanalytic theory are briefly summarized and then the relevance and power of psychoanalysis in terms of social-theoretical debates in the human sciences is examined. Throughout, the article attempts to defend the view that psychoanalytic theory has much to offer social theorists, including feminists and postmodernists, in the analysis of subjectivity, ideology, sexual politics, and in coming to terms with crises in contemporary culture.

Freud's writings show the ego not to be master in its own home. The unconscious, repression, libido, narcissism: these are the core dimensions of Freud's psychoanalytic dislocation of the subject. Moreover, it is because of this fragmentation of identity that the concept of identification is so crucial in psychoanalytic theory: the subject creates identity by means of identification with other persons, located in the symbolic context of society, culture and politics. The psychoanalytic dislocation of the subject emerges in various guises in contemporary social theory. In the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, it is part of an attempt to rethink the powerlessness of identity in the face of the objectifying aspects of contemporary science, technology, and bureaucracy. In Habermas, it is a series of claims about the nature of distorted intersubjective and public communication as a means of theorizing repressive ideologies. In Lacan, it is a means for tracing imaginary constructions of self-concealment, as linked to the idea that language is what founds the repressed unconscious. In Lacanian and post-structuralist feminism, it is harnessed to a thoroughgoing political critique of sexual difference and gender hierarchy. In the postmodern works of Deleuze and Guattari, and of Lyotard, it is primarily a set of socio-political observations about psychic fragmentation and dislocation in the face of global capitalism.

## **2. Freud and the Interpretation of the Social**

Freudian psychoanalysis is of signal importance to three major areas of concern in the social sciences and the humanities, and each of these covers a diversity of issues and problems:

- The First Is The Theory Of Human Subjectivity;
- The Second Is That Of Social Analysis; And
- The Third Concerns Epistemology.

### **2.1 Human Subjectivity**

Freud compels us to question, to endeavour to reflect upon, the construction of meaning - representation, affects, desires – as pertaining to human subjectivity, intersubjectivity and cultural processes more generally. Against the ontology of determinacy which has pervaded the history of Western social thought, Freud argues that this world is not predetermined but is actively created, in and through the production of psychical representations and significations. The psyche is the launching pad from which people make meaning; and, as Freud says, the registration of meaning is split between the production of conscious and unconscious representation. Another way of putting this point is to say that meaning is always over-determined: people make more meaning that they can psychically process at any one time. This is what Freud meant by the unconscious: he sought to underscore radical ruptures in the life of the mind of the subject which arise as a consequence of the registration and storing of psychical representatives, or affective signification.

Freud's underwriting of the complexity of our unconscious erotic lives has been tremendously influential in contemporary social and political theory. A preoccupation with unconscious sources of human motivation is evident in social-theoretical approaches as diverse as the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the sociological departures of Talcott Parsons and the philosophical postmodernism of Jean-Francois Lyotard. Indeed, the theme of the decentring of the subject in structuralist and post-structuralist traditions derives much of its impetus from Lacan's "return to Freud" - specifically, his reconceptualization of the conscious/unconscious dualism as a linguistic relation. But while the general theme of the decentred subject has gained ascendancy throughout the academy, much current social-theoretical debate has focused on the detour needed to recover a sense of human agency as well as to account for multi-dimensional forms of human imagination. In Kristeva's discussion of the semiotic dimension of human experience, the imagination is primarily assessed in terms of the semiotic structuration of psychic space. In Ricoeur, it is a series of claims about the hermeneutics of imagination, giving of course special attention to the narratives of ideology and utopia, experience and norm. In Deleuze, it is part of an attempt to reconnect the productivities of desire to the affective force-field of postmodern culture.

### **2.2 Social Analysis**

This leads into a consideration of the complex ways in which Freud's work has served as a theoretical framework for the analysis of contemporary culture and modern societies. The Frankfurt School was for many years the key reference point here. Well

before the rise of Lacanian social theory, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm articulated a conception of psychoanalysis as an account of self-divided, alienated individuals, which was understood as the subjective correlate of the capitalist economic order. While Marcuse's work became celebrated in the 1960s as offering a route to revolution, it has been Adorno's interpretation of Freud which has exercised perhaps most influence upon contemporary scholars seeking to rethink the psychic ambivalences of modernity itself. In this connection, Adorno's thesis that psychoanalysis uncovers a "de-psychologization" of the subject is now the subject of widespread discussion. Those who share this vision of modernity place emphasis on the rise of consumer society, the seductive imagery of mass media and the pervasiveness of narcissism.

Some versions of Freudian-inspired social theory, however, have stressed more creative and imaginative political possibilities. Against the tide of Lacanian and postmodern currents of thought, several general frameworks for understanding modernity and postmodern culture as an open-ended process have emerged. What is distinctive about this kind of Freudian social thought is its understanding of everyday life as a form of dreaming or fantasizing; there is an emphasis on the pluralism of imagined worlds, the complexity of the intertwining of psychical and social life, as well as alternative political possibilities. This insistence on the utopic dimension of Freudian thought is characteristic of much recent social and cultural theory; but it is also the case that various standpoints assign a high priority to issues of repression, repetition and negativity. Freud was, of course, much concerned with emotional problems generated by repetition, the actions people cannot stop repeating or the narratives people cannot stop recounting. He understood such repetitions as symptomatic of a failure to remember, the closing down of creative imagination. For Freud, the aims of analysis centered on the uncovering of the deep psychological forces of such repressed motivations; free association, the pleasures of imagination and the freedom to explore fantasy are at once method and outcome in psychoanalysis. Such concerns are also central to contemporary social and political thought, as Freud has been drawn upon with profit to map the paths through which individuals and collectivities remember and repress the past, at once psychical and social-historical.

For many social critics, the power of imagination is inescapably situated within the project of modernity, played out at the level of identity-politics, feminism, postmodern aesthetics and the like. Notwithstanding current techniques of domination and technologies of the self, there are many who claim that the postmodern phase of modernity unleashes a radical experimentation with alternative states of mind and possible selves. At the core of this perspective there is an interpretation about the restructuring of tradition as well as transformations of personal identity and world-views which necessarily alter the conditions of social life today. (The thesis of modernity as a reflexive process of detraditionalization is proposed by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. Giddens is receptive to psychoanalysis and uses it in his social theory, but Beck rejects psychoanalytic theory). Broadly speaking, traditional ways of doing things are said to give way to actively debated courses of action, such that individuals confront their own personal and social choices as individuals. On this account, there is a reflexive awareness of an internal relation of subjectivity to desire, for personal identity is increasingly defined on its own experimental terms. Such an excavation of the psychological conditions of subjectivity and inter-subjective relations

clearly has profound implications for the nature of contemporary politics as well as the democratic organization of society.

### **2.3 Epistemology.**

Finally, social thought has been revitalized through its engagement with Freud as a form of emancipatory critique. This concern is motivated by a conviction that critical social theory should offer paths for transforming self and world in the interests of autonomy. Habermas is perhaps the most important social theorist who has drawn from Freud in developing a model of emancipatory critique in social analysis. Freudian theory, in Habermas's interpretation, is directed towards freeing the patient from the repetition compulsions that dominate her or his unconscious psychological life, and thereby altering the possibilities for reflective, autonomous subjectivity. However, a reading of the emancipatory dimensions of Freudian psychoanalysis which is more in keeping with a postmodern position is one in which desire is viewed as integral to the construction of alternative selves and possible collective futures. In this reading, it is not a matter of doing away with the distorting dross of fantasy, but rather of responding to, and engaging with, the passions of the self as a means of enlarging the radical imagination and creative life.

### **3. The Legacy of Freud**

It is now more than a century since psychoanalysis emerged under the direction of a single man, Sigmund Freud. Freud, working from his private neurological practice, founded psychoanalysis in late nineteenth-century Vienna as both therapy and a theory of the human mind. Therapeutically, psychoanalysis is perhaps best known as the "talking cure" - a slogan used to describe the magical power of language to relieve mental suffering. The nub of the talking cure is known as "free association." The patient says to the analyst everything that comes to mind, no matter how trivial or unpleasant. This gives the analyst access to the patient's imagined desires and narrative histories, which may then be interpreted and reconstructed within a clinical session. The aim of psychoanalysis as a clinical practice is to uncover the hidden passions and disruptive emotional conflicts that fuel neurosis and other forms of mental suffering, in order to relieve the patient of his or her distressing symptoms.

Theoretically, psychoanalysis is rooted in a set of dynamic models relating to the human subject's articulations of desire. The unconscious, repression, drives, representation, trauma, narcissism, denial, displacement: these are the core dimensions of the Freudian account of selfhood. For Freud, the subject does not exist independently of sexuality, libidinal enjoyment, fantasy, or the social and patriarchal codes of cultural life. In fact, the human subject of Enlightenment reason - an identity seemingly self-identical to itself - is deconstructed by psychoanalysis as a fantasy which is itself secretly libidinal. Knowledge, for Freud as for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, is internal to the world of desire. In the light of Freudian psychoanalysis, a whole series of contemporary ideological oppositions - the intellect and emotion, commerce and pleasure, masculinity and femininity, rationality and irrationality - are potentially open to displacement.

In order to detail an accurate map of the intersections between psychoanalysis and

social theory, it is necessary to outline some of the basic concepts of Freudian theory. These concepts have become so familiar that they require only a schematic commentary. Moreover, the theoretical ambiguities and political ambivalences pervading Freud's work will be noted only in passing. .

"All our conscious motives are superficial phenomena: behind them stands the conflict of our drives . . . The great basic activity is unconscious. Our consciousness limps along afterward." It was Friedrich Nietzsche, not Freud, who wrote this. Similarly, Romantic poets, such as Goethe and Schiller, and nineteenth-century philosophers, such as Schopenhauer and Feuerbach, also placed the determinate effects of unconscious passion at the centre of human subjectivity. Freud was aware of these insights, and often referred to them in his own writings, although he was also skeptical about the Romantic idealization of the unconscious.

If these poets and philosophers looked at the nature of unconscious passion in terms of the aesthetic, Freud traced repressed desire in terms of human sexuality and the psyche. Freud's originality is to be found in his critical analysis of the unconscious as repressed. One of Freud's most substantial findings is that there are psychical phenomena which are not available to consciousness, but which nevertheless exert a determining influence on everyday life. In his celebrated meta-psychological essay "The Unconscious" written in 1914, Freud argued that the individual's self-understanding is not immediately available to itself, that consciousness is not the expression of some core of continuous selfhood. On the contrary, the human subject is for Freud a split subject, torn between consciousness of self and repressed desire. For Freud, examination of the language of his patients revealed a profound turbulence of passion behind all draftings of self-identity, a radical otherness at the heart of subjective life. In discussing human subjectivity, Freud divides the psyche into the unconscious, preconscious and conscious. The preconscious can be thought of as a vast storehouse of memories, most of which may be recalled at will. By contrast, unconscious memories and desires are cut off, or buried, from consciousness. According to Freud, the unconscious is not "another" consciousness but a separate psychic system with its own distinct processes and mechanisms. The unconscious, Freud comments, is indifferent to reality; it knows no causality or contradiction or logic or negation; it is entirely given over to the search for pleasure and libidinal enjoyment. Moreover, the unconscious cannot be known directly, and is rather detected only through its effects, through the distortions it inflicts on consciousness.

Freud's unmasking of the human subject as an endless flow of unconscious love and loathing is pressed into a psychoanalytic deconstruction of inherited Western conceptions of ontology. Rejecting the idea that consciousness can provide a foundation for subjectivity and knowledge, Freud traces the psychic effects of our early dependence on others - usually our parents - in terms of our biologically fixed needs. The infant, Freud says, is incapable of surviving without the provision of care, warmth and nourishment from others. However - and this is fundamental in Freud - human needs always outstrip the biological, linked as needs are to the attaining of pleasure. Freud's exemplary case is the small child sucking milk from her or his mother's breast. After the infant's biological need for nourishment is satisfied, there is the emergence of a certain pleasure in sucking itself, which for Freud is a kind of prototype for the complexity of our erotic lives. As Freud writes:

The baby's obstinate persistence in sucking gives evidence at an early stage of a need for satisfaction which, though it originate from and is instigated by the taking of nourishment, nevertheless strives to obtain pleasure independently of nourishment and for that reason may and should be termed sexual.

From this angle, sexuality is not some preordained, unitary biological force that springs into existence fully formed at birth. Sexuality is created, not pre-packaged. For Freud, sexuality is "polymorphously perverse": subjectivity emerges as a precarious and contingent organization of libidinal pleasures, an interestingly mobile set of identity-constructions, all carried on within the tangled frame of infantile sexuality.

Any emotional investment put into an object or other becomes for Freud a form of self-definition, and so shot through with unconscious ambivalence. In a series of path-breaking essays written on the eve of the First World War, Freud tied the constitution of the ego to mourning, melancholia, and grief. In "On Narcissism: An Introduction", Freud argued that the ego is not simply a defensive product of the self-preservative reality principle, but is rather a structured sedimentation of lost objects; such lost loves are, in turn, incorporated into the tissue of subjectivity itself. The loss of a loved person, says Freud, necessarily involves an introjection of this absent other into the ego. As Freud explains the link between loss and ego-formation:

We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that [in overcoming this hurt] an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego - that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is. Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its "character."

Ego-identity is constituted as a fantasy substitution, through multiple, narcissistic identifications with significant other persons.

We become the identities we are in Freud's view because we have inside us buried identifications with people we have previously loved (and also hated), most usually our parents. And yet the foundational loss to which we must respond, and which in effect sets in motion the unfolding of our unconscious sexual fantasies, remains that of the maternal body. The break-up or restructuring of our primary emotional tie to the maternal body is, in fact, so significant that it becomes the founding moment not only of individuation and differentiation, but also sexual and gender difference. Loss and gender affinity are directly linked in Freud's theory to the Oedipus complex, the psyche's entry into received social meanings. For Freud, the Oedipus complex is the nodal point of sexual development, the symbolic internalization of a lost, tabooed object of desire. In the act of internalizing the loss of the pre-Oedipal mother, the infant's relationship with the father (or, more accurately, symbolic representations of paternal power) becomes crucial for the consolidation of both selfhood and gender identity. Trust in the inter-subjective nature of social life begin here: the father, holding a structural position which is outside and other to this imaginary sphere, functions to break the child/mother dyad, thus referring the child to the wider culture and social network. The paternal prohibition on desire for the mother, which is experienced as

castration, at once instantiates repressed desire and refers the infant beyond itself, to an external world of social meanings. And yet the work of culture, according to Freud, is always outstripped by unconscious desire, the return of the repressed. Identity, sexuality, gender, and signification: these are all radically divided between an ongoing development of conscious self-awareness and the unconscious, or repressed desire.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Anthony Elliott** was appointed Professor of Sociology at Flinders University in 2006, where he is currently Head of Department. He has served as Associate Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research). He also holds a Visiting Research Professorship in the Department of Sociology at the Open University, UK, and is also Visiting Professor at the Department of Sociology, University College Dublin, Ireland. He was formerly Chair of Sociology at the University of Kent at Canterbury 2004-6, and prior to that Foundation Director of the Centre for Critical Theory at the University of the West of England (UWE), UK between 2000-2004. Professor Elliott is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, a Fellow of the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust and a member of King's College, Cambridge.

Professor Elliott's writings have been translated into sixteen languages, and he has lectured at over one hundred institutions worldwide. His recent books include *Social Theory Since Freud* (2004), *Making the Cut: How Cosmetic Surgery is Transforming our Lives* (2008), *Contemporary Social Theory: An*

Introduction (2009), *The New Individualism* (2009, with Charles Lemert), and *Mobile Lives* (2010, with John Urry). He is the editor of *The Routledge Companion to Social Theory* (2010) and co-editor of *Globalization: A Reader* (2010).

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