

Intrepid thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union—Part 2

By Frank Brenner
12 June 1999

This is the second, and concluding, section of a two-part article. The first part was posted on Friday, June 11.

Part 2.

A detailed account of the Soviet debates isn't possible here, but it would be useful to consider a few of the most common criticisms that were raised so as to shed light on the issue of the compatibility of Marxism and psychoanalysis.

First and foremost was the view that, according to Freud, sex is everything. This is known in the literature as the theory of “pan-sexualism” and it is a caricature that has dogged psychoanalysis since its inception. In the Stalinist era, this image of psychoanalysis became so commonplace in the Soviet Union that Freud and his ideas became quite literally dirty words, associated with sexual depravity.[1]

In truth, however, (as Alexander Luria pointed out) pan-sexualism was as much a vulgarization of psychoanalysis as the notion that “economics is everything” was a vulgarization of Marxism.[2] To begin with, sexuality was never the only instinct in Freudian theory; just as fundamental was the instinct of self-preservation. This was critical because the centerpiece of psychoanalysis, its theory of neurosis, held that neurotic illness arose from a *conflict* between instincts, and for a conflict to take place, sex couldn't be “everything.”[3] But, of course, it was also true that sexuality did play a prominent role in psychoanalysis, which dealt with this instinct honestly and objectively. This was the real sticking point because, for centuries, sexuality had been treated as sin, as weakness, as something morally repulsive and degrading. The “sin” of psychoanalysis was that it brought sexuality out into the open and uncovered its many “hiding places” in the mind, the family and society at large.

There was also a basic confusion over the meaning of sexuality: many of Freud's critics understood the term in its conventional sense, i.e., as genital intercourse for reproduction, so that much of psychoanalytic theory, especially about the sexual life of children, must have seemed absurd. But the conventional notion of sexuality was itself problematic: it couldn't account for a broad range of behaviors from children masturbating to homosexuality to perversions such as sadism and masochism. Freud broadened the concept of sexuality (in an entirely materialist direction) by defining it as “the function of obtaining pleasure from zones of the body,”[4] which opened the way to explaining not only the diversity but also the evolution of sexual behavior. And, via the concepts of repression and sublimation, it also opened the way to a materialist understanding of emotions: by showing that love and hate (and their various permutations and combinations) had instinctual roots in sexuality, psychoanalysis dealt a major blow to the metaphysical notion of “spirit” and thus to every brand of religion and mystification that relied on it.

(Today, in reading the Soviet criticism of Freud from this period, one is struck by how little discussion there was of sexuality. For the most part the issue was dismissed out of hand—even by critics who were themselves

opponents of Stalinism—as being so obviously a symptom of the decadence of bourgeois culture as not to merit serious consideration. One of the points Trotsky felt called upon to make in intervening in the debates was that the analysis of sexuality was a legitimate concern and that, whatever differences there might be in evaluating its significance, “this is already a dispute within the frontiers of materialism.”[5] But Stalinism had simply made it impossible by then to have an open and honest engagement of this dispute. This meant that in much of the Soviet criticism of psychoanalysis there was no account taken of one of the foundations of that theory.)

The second major issue was the relationship of individual to social psychology. Freud's critics charged that in psychoanalysis the individual was seen as an isolated being, entirely apart from society. There were good grounds for this criticism: like most scientists in bourgeois society, Freud was only a materialist in his own field, and his theory had no coherent materialist perspective with regard to history or sociology. (And, not surprisingly, this vacuum tended to be filled in an idealist way, often with psychology entirely supplanting history and sociology.)

But it was also true that a psychology that dug deeply enough into the lives of individuals was bound to come up against the bedrock of social life. As Freud himself observed: “In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object [i.e., of desire], as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology ... is at the same time social psychology as well.”[6] (Indeed, in Freudian theory, an infant can only become an “ego” or an “I” by entering into a relationship with another human being—its mother.) Thus, rather than being an escape from social life, psychoanalysis could offer a unique and potentially valuable viewpoint on it by uncovering the psychological process by which the individual becomes socialized.

The first theorist to perceive that value came from the Soviet psychoanalytic movement. His name was Mikhail Reisner, another remarkable figure in a remarkable generation. One of the few Russian academics to side with the Bolsheviks, he helped draft the first Soviet constitution, worked with Lunacharsky in revamping higher education, helped found the Communist Academy, and then headed the social psychology division at the Institute of Experimental Psychology. (He was also the father of the celebrated Bolshevik activist and writer Larisa Reisner.[7])

In two lengthy essays from the mid-twenties, Reisner opened up the discussion of the relationship between individual and social psychology. His first essay was about religion, and here he raised an intriguing problem: from a Marxist standpoint, it was evident why religion was necessary to the ruling class, but it wasn't evident why the masses would find religion appealing. Here, Reisner argued, Marxism needed to be supplemented by a psychology of religion, and the key to that lay in Freudian theory. The appeal of religion was that it provided a solace for feelings of worthlessness and dependence (and, one might add, guilt), feelings that themselves grew out of unresolved infantile sexual conflicts

and fantasies. It was a type of solace, of course, that was designed to support traditional class hierarchies: by preaching humility, submission and self-abnegation, it redirected (or “displaced”) emotional conflicts in such a way as to make them the psychological ground for social conformity.

(Marx in some of his early writings discussed the appeal that religion had to the masses subjected to exploitation and misery. He described religion as “the fantastic realization of the human being inasmuch as the human being possesses no true reality.... Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.” This profound insight into the social psychology of religious belief was in line with the insights into individual psychology that Reisner had drawn from Freud. From Miller's summary, however, it isn't clear whether Reisner was aware of or to what extent he took account of Marx's ideas.)

In any case, what was true about religion could be applied to ruling class ideology as a whole, and in his second essay Reisner tried to deal with these wider implications. Since, as Marxism contended, the dominant ideology of any class society was the ideology of the ruling class, this meant that the oppressed for the most part accepted the ideology of their oppressors, and again, the question was why? Perceptively, Reisner drew attention to the mythology of the patriarchal family, noting, for instance, the manipulation of mass sentiment evident in the image of the tsar as the “little father” or the characterization of a nation state as a “fatherland” or “motherland.”

What was being fostered here was a symbolic identification, one which served to mitigate social problems and unconscious emotional conflicts in an illusory way. Reisner had hit upon something vitally important here—the way in which class society anchors itself *emotionally* in each individual. The key to that process was the family, the “ideological nucleus of society,” as Reich once called it.[8]

In the traditional family, parents become the prototype of authority figures to whom the child submits far less out of fear than out of love, which is a much more effective kind of submission and one that can be made use of, once the child has grown up, by the various institutions of bourgeois society, from a company to a government to an army. Mother Jones, the famous American labor militant, tells a story which illustrates quite vividly how this emotional identification functions in everyday life. On her way to work one day in a South Carolina textile mill, she met a woman carrying a baby coming home from the night shift: “How old is the baby?” “Three days. I just went back this morning. The boss was good and saved my place.” “When did you leave?” “The boss was good; he let me off early the night the baby was born.” “What do you do with the baby while you work?” “Oh, the boss is good and he lets me have a little box with a pillow in it beside the loom. The baby sleeps there and when it cries, I nurse it.”[9]

Nowhere was this exploitation of mass psychology taken further than in fascist ideology, which was saturated in family symbols and metaphors, most obviously the “führer” as a stern father figure and the nation as a fatherland. Reisner's ideas could have been of great help to a revolutionary movement fighting fascist mystification, and indeed a similar line of thinking about mass psychology was later developed by Marxist analysts, such as Reich, Otto Fenichel and Erich Fromm, who lived through the rise of Nazism in the thirties. But by then Reisner's work was languishing in obscurity and the German labor movement was fatally disoriented, both circumstances ultimately due to the same cause—Stalinism. Still, Reisner's contribution to the Soviet debates on psychoanalysis in the twenties demonstrated the important theoretical insights that could be gained through a reworking of Freudian theory along Marxist lines.

There remains one further issue that deserves some comment: what is a science of the mind? For one thing, psychoanalysis didn't conform to the

usual image of a science. It was interpretative rather than empirical and had none of the reproducible experiments or quantifiable data one expects to find in “hard sciences” such as physics or chemistry. Also, it dealt mostly with dreams, emotions, slips of the tongue, forgetting names, etc.—some of these extremely fleeting aspects of mental life and all of them having to do with how we experience ourselves *subjectively*. In the Soviet Union at that time, the theory of reflexes was very much in vogue, associated with the renowned figure of Ivan Pavlov (and influential psychologists like Vladimir Bekhterev). Here was an approach to the mind that was solidly objective and scientific, and it became commonplace in the Soviet debates to counterpose the materialism of Pavlov to the supposed idealism of Freud.

But this view of the matter obscured something deeply problematic about reflex theory—its reductionism. Feelings, dreams, even consciousness—none of these were considered real, so far as the proponents of an “objective” psychology were concerned. A typical example was the critique of Freud by the famous literary critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. He argued that when a person thinks about his mental life in terms of “feelings, desires, and presentations [i.e., perceptions],” this was an illusion, and that in an objective analysis “we shall find no such elements anywhere in the makeup of behavior. External, objective apprehension has to rely on different—material—elementary components of behavior, components that have nothing in common with desires, feelings, and presentations.”[10]

The problem was that if the mind really were reduced to components that had “nothing in common” with subjective experience, then the mind itself would all but disappear. If we were to take something as simple as a smile, we could conceivably discover a mountain of data about the reflexes, neural circuitry, biochemistry, etc., that went into producing this behavior, but all this information would tell us nothing about its *meaning*, nothing about the feelings of the person (and these could range from happiness to pride to anxiety to cynicism, etc.) that made him behave this way.

It was the person—the human subject—who got lost in such a conception of the mind. And this had consequences not just for individual psychology, but for social psychology as well, since in principle class consciousness was just as reducible to “elementary components of behavior” as love or anger. Thus, even Marx wasn't safe from this kind of reductionism, as the following remark of a Soviet reflexologist indicates: “Marx's law, ‘social existence determines consciousness,’ naturally referred not to ‘consciousness’ but to the external form of man's behavior. For sociology, consciousness has no significance. Its task is to talk only of behavior, of man's adaptive activity.”[11] One shudders to think what a supposedly Marxist sociology would look like that held to the view that “consciousness has no significance.”

Engels, with great prescience, had foreseen this problem in a comment he made in *Dialectics of Nature*: “One day we shall certainly ‘reduce’ thought experimentally to molecular and chemical motions in the brain; but does that exhaust the essence of thought?”[12] Those who thought it did were putting forward an essentially mechanical view of the mind. Their reductionism took no account of the qualitative difference between physiology and psychology. The mind wasn't merely brain function, any more than it was merely a mirror-like reflection of external reality.

Here, an important but as yet largely unknown contribution made by Trotsky needs to be considered. (In the debates of the twenties, Trotsky intervened primarily to argue against the simplistic counterposing of Pavlov and Freud: “The idealists tell us that the psyche is an independent entity, that the ‘soul’ is a bottomless well. Both Pavlov and Freud think that the bottom of the ‘soul’ is physiology. But Pavlov, like a diver, descends to the bottom and laboriously investigates the well from there upwards, while Freud stands over the well and with a penetrating gaze tries to pierce its ever-shifting and troubled waters and to make out or

guess the shape of things down below.”[13] But Trotsky's interest in psychoanalysis went back to 1908 when, through Joffe, he had become acquainted with Alfred Adler, then one of Freud's leading disciples, and devoted some time to reading Freudian theory and attending meetings on psychoanalysis. The influence of psychoanalytic ideas is evident in passages of a number of his writings, particularly those on art and his autobiography, *My Life*.) In the thirties, Trotsky, then in exile, returned to the question of psychology in some unpublished notes that only saw the light of day a half century later. These notes, amounting to a half dozen printed pages, were his most extensive discussion of the subject and his focus was on what distinguished a dialectical from a mechanical approach. In essence, they unfold a line of thought that is implicit in Engels's comment.

Trotsky's first point was that there wasn't a simple or direct identity between consciousness and the rest of nature. “Consciousness is a quite original *part* of nature, possessing peculiarities and regularities that are completely absent in the remaining part of nature. Subjective dialectics must by virtue of this be a distinctive part of objective dialectics—with its own special forms and regularities.” As to the view that consciousness was merely a manifestation of the physiology of the brain, if this were the case “then one would have to ask: What is the need of consciousness? If consciousness has no *independent* function, which rises *above* physiological processes in the brain and nerves, then it is unnecessary, useless; it is harmful because it is a superfluous complication—and what a complication!”

What such reductive views ignored was that there was a “a break in the gradualness, a transition from quantity into quality” between physiology and psychology: “the psyche, arising from matter, is ‘freed’ from the determinism of matter, so that it can independently—by its own laws—influence matter.” For that reason, and despite the frequent tendency of Freudians to veer off in idealist directions, “the method of psychoanalysis, taking as its point of departure the ‘autonomy’ of psychological phenomena, in no way contradicts materialism. Quite the contrary, it is precisely dialectical materialism that prompts us to the idea that the psyche could not even be formed unless it played an autonomous, that is, within certain limits, an independent role in the life of the individual and the species.”[14] From a philosophical standpoint, it would be hard to make a more convincing case for the compatibility of Marxism and psychoanalysis.

(Trotsky's views on psychoanalysis deserve a more extensive discussion than can be presented here. The editor of the notebooks, Philip Pomper, contends that Trotsky was pointing the way towards a new and revolutionary interpretation of psychoanalysis: “Trotsky had made the unconscious less a source of human misery—a realm of darkness and primitiveness—than a reservoir of primal energy.... He had transformed the pessimistic Freudian vision of the role of the unconscious into an optimistic revolutionary one. The unconscious mind's resources might be pressed into the service of revolution. In this respect, Trotsky was a forerunner of thinkers like [Herbert] Marcuse, who not only saw connections between the repression of Eros and social domination, but believed that the unconscious was not merely a burden, that it contained creative resources that might further historical progress.”[15] This is a fascinating point—one of many in regards to this history—that deserves further consideration.)

The outcome of the debates on psychoanalysis was decided not by force of argument but by bureaucratic fiat: as of 1930, all activities of the Soviet psychoanalytic movement were halted and the only mention permitted of Freudian theory from then on was for the purpose of denouncing it. Like so many other promising cultural developments nourished by the revolution, psychoanalysis was uprooted and destroyed by Stalinist terror. Ironically, though this suppression was carried out in the name of Marxism, the instinctive hostility with which the Stalinist

bureaucrats regarded psychoanalysis was yet a further indication of the underlying affinity of psychoanalysis to *genuine* Marxism. And it has to be said that this attack was more than just a case of intolerance typical of a totalitarian regime: if the Soviet Freudians were right—i.e., if psychoanalysis really had uncovered fundamental truths about human nature—then what was really under attack, in the deepest sense, was the socialist ideal of a transformed human nature, of a fully human personality.

Stalinism, it needs to be understood, represented the revenge of everything backward and retrogressive on the revolution. The Bolsheviks had taken power counting on the world revolution to come to their aid and alleviate the terrible material hardship (greatly compounded by the devastation of war and imperialist economic blockade) that Russia faced. The idea that one could build “socialism in one country”—to say nothing of a country as backward as Russia—would have struck them as absurd. Socialism required a level of economic development beyond the most advanced capitalism, a level that would allow for eliminating material scarcity and the competition for goods that such scarcity inevitably engenders. Where there isn't enough to go around for everyone, Marx once observed, “the struggle for necessities begins again, and that means that all the old crap must revive.”[16] Here, as Trotsky pointed out, was the key to understanding Stalinism: it was the political expression of “all the old crap” being revived within the Soviet Union because the revolution hadn't succeeded outside its borders.

In the realm of personal life, the revival of the “old crap” meant a profound reversal in the relationship of the individual to society. As a Russian social historian has observed: “The aim of changing social conditions, adapting them to the needs of individual human beings, which was the essence of the original Marxist theory of alienation, was gradually reformulated as the task of adapting human behaviors, needs, and even feelings to the extant poor and inhuman social conditions.”[17] In other words, a return to repression and—most hateful of all—a return to putting the blame on individuals for the misery of their lives. In education, the thirties began with steps being taken to “restore the teacher to his rightful place in the school.”[18] Soon, learning by rote was back with a vengeance, so much so that, by the sixties, opponents of progressive education in the West were holding up Soviet educational methods as an example to be emulated. In law, “crime,” “punishment” and “guilt” were back on the books by the early thirties, and children as young as 12 were being dealt with as adults by the courts. A writer in *Pravda* declared at the time that children who committed crimes “must be made aware that they will not be fed on lollipops.”[19]

But it was in the area of family and sexual relations that the revival of the “old crap” was especially noticeable. The Bolsheviks had brought in full legal equality for women, the right to abortion, the ending of marriage as a legal and religious institution and the decriminalization of homosexuality—far and away the most progressive policy of any government in the world and an inspiration to opponents of sexual oppression everywhere. It was an impressive beginning towards tackling the enormous social problem of restructuring the family, but it was only a beginning. Indeed, in the short run, some of these measures actually created more problems than they solved: the breakdown of the traditional family made women more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and led to an increase in child neglect, while legalized abortion produced a drastic decline in the birth rate. The difficulty, as Trotsky pointed out, was that “you cannot ‘abolish’ the family; you have to replace it.”[20] The old patriarchal structure was breaking down under the impact of the revolution, but the new structure of the collective family was still too undeveloped—still too economically malnourished—to replace it.

The Stalinist “solution” was to bolster the old, oppressive structure. Abortion was outlawed, marriage was re-institutionalized and divorce made more difficult and expensive: the woman was back in her “place” of

domestic servitude and, to make her accept it, the regime preached the “joys of motherhood.” In the same period, homosexuality was re-criminalized, a ban on pornography (deliberately defined in vague and sweeping terms) was brought in, all scientific research into sexuality was halted and sex education was replaced by “moral education.”[21]

The lessons of Vera Schmidt's experimental school were, of course, completely ignored, and the existence of infantile sexuality was simply denied in theory and punished in practice. An experience Reich had while visiting a Soviet school in 1929 was indicative in this regard: “I was standing at the window of a kindergarten room which led into the garden. We were speaking with the head teacher. Outside, the children were playing, and I saw a little boy pull out his penis and let a little girl look at it. The children were near a tree. This happened just as the teacher was reassuring us that in her kindergarten “such things” as masturbation and sexuality did not occur.”[22]

Trotsky once aptly described the Stalinist attitude to matters like abortion as combining “the philosophy of a priest ... with the powers of a gendarme.”[23] But underlying the moral hypocrisy was, again, the standpoint of “adapting human needs to inhuman social conditions,” and with regard to sexuality, one such condition was especially noteworthy—the woeful inadequacy of housing. As a recent history of Russian sexuality points out: “Millions of people were forced to live for years—and many throughout their entire lives—in hostels or communal apartments, where several families shared one flat. Adult children frequently lived in a single room with their parents. How can one talk of sexual intimacy when everything is in view and within earshot?” And the possibility for doing anything unconventional—e.g., pre-marital, extra-marital or homosexual sex—was even more hopeless. A remark by a Moscow resident captured the grimness of having to live this way: “We are born in the hallway, we make love in the hallway, and we die in the hallway.”[24] These were the conditions that made the revival of the “old crap” of sexual puritanism an ideological necessity to the Stalinist “gendarmes.”

Psychoanalysis was incompatible, not with Marxism, but with a policy of adapting human needs to inhuman conditions. It was incompatible with propaganda about the joys of motherhood and family, because it revealed the “shameful” truth behind that propaganda—the psychosexual tensions within family relationships and the psychic damage inflicted on children by a traditional family upbringing. It was incompatible with sexual puritanism and with criminalizing sexual behavior like homosexuality. It was incompatible with ignorance about the sexual needs of children and with mistreating them because of that ignorance.

The Stalinists understood this quite clearly in their own way. In 1930, a major academic gathering, the Congress on Human Behavior, was organized in Moscow for the purpose of, among other things, sounding the death knell of Soviet Freudianism. The keynote speaker, Aron Zalkind, delivered a diatribe against psychoanalysis full of sarcasm and mockery (notwithstanding the fact that several years earlier, in a different political climate, he had been a defender of the theory he was now denouncing). But one of Zalkind's remarks is revealing, albeit inadvertently: “How can we use the Freudian conception of man for socialist construction? We need a socially ‘open’ man who is easily collectivized, and quickly and profoundly transformed in his behavior—a man capable of being a steady, conscious, and independent person, politically and ideologically well trained.”[25] This was a conception of man as a cipher, empty of any human needs—of any humanity—and thus capable of being molded at will to fit the political exigencies of so-called “socialist construction.” Needless to say, “Freudian man” was completely useless for such a purpose.

As for the Soviet Freudians, a few left the country, but most either kept their thoughts to themselves or adapted to the new state of affairs. (Whether any of them ended up in a gulag is unclear from Miller's

account.) Reisner was spared the worst of this, having died in 1929. Vygotsky and Luria were subjected to public criticism. In a letter to Luria after attending a lecture in which he was attacked, Vygotsky appraised the situation as being one where the party had decided that the two of them would be “beaten, but not killed.”[26] They both severed any organizational ties they had with the psychoanalytic movement and Luria published a number of officially approved denunciations of psychoanalysis which saved his career. Vygotsky died of tuberculosis in 1934. Although in his theoretical views he had moved away from psychoanalysis in the last period of his life, his ideas were no more “serviceable” to Stalinism than Freud's had been. Thus, his works were banned or left unpublished for two decades after his death, and the versions that finally did come out were edited to remove any references to disapproved-of figures, including Trotsky.[27]

As for some of the others, Vera Schmidt seems to have made her peace with Stalinism, at least if we are to judge from a remark attributed to her by Otto Fenichel.[28] Sabina Spielrein made her last theoretical contribution to psychoanalysis in 1933, after which all that is known about her is that she was shot to death by invading Nazi troops in 1941; her fate—silenced by Stalin, murdered by Hitler—has something emblematic about it.

We look back on this history across a wide gulf of time filled with momentous events from the rise of fascism and world war to the postwar boom and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. Today conventional wisdom holds that the ideas of both Marx and Freud are “dead,” and so the efforts of the Soviet Freudians to develop a synthesis of these ideas must seem quixotic, a sad footnote to the great tragic misunderstanding that was the Russian Revolution.

But in a world wracked by economic breakdown and military conflict, it is conventional wisdom that badly needs to be called into question. Recently, two American academics, writing about the current crisis in psychology, noted that the one big problem with the schools that dominate the field today (cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, developmental psychology and artificial intelligence) is that they “remove the human from psychology.”[29]

It would be hard to imagine a more devastating criticism, and one that could be applied to much else in contemporary culture besides psychology. The orientation of Soviet psychoanalysis was completely different—towards a deeper understanding of humanity (which was why it thrived in the revolution and why the betrayers of that revolution had to destroy it). And that was also the orientation of the various attempts in this century—by the Soviet Freudians, the German Freudo-Marxists, the French Surrealists and others—to rework psychoanalysis from a Marxist perspective, because out of that theoretical synthesis a vision of a new life—of a life lived to the full measure of human potential in a world made to meet human needs—could emerge. That is why the revival of Marxism will also mean the revival of psychoanalysis: when the building of a new life is again on the agenda, then we will need to know how to put the human back into psychology. In this sense, this history is still very much alive, because it reveals to us not only a record of the past, but also a view of the future.

To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>