

A WSWS contributor responds to Intrepid Thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union and Frank Brenner replies

An exchange of letters on Freudianism and Marxism

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We are publishing the following exchange of letters on Freudianism and Marxism for the information of our readers. The first letter is the response of a WSWS contributing writer, Allen Whyte, to Intrepid Thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union (written by Frank Brenner and published by the World Socialist Web Site in two parts, 11 and 12 June 1999); the second is Brenner's reply.

We believe this discussion is valuable, although the editorial board of the WSWS does not necessarily endorse the views as presented here by either Whyte or Brenner. While in our view a "synthesis" of Marxism and Freudianism is at least problematical, we believe that Marxists need to recognize Freud's contribution to an understanding of human psychology and assimilate some of his extraordinary insights.

Dear WSWS:

I would like to congratulate Frank Brenner on his excellent article evaluating the relationship between the Bolsheviks and psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union in the early twenties. He has successfully demonstrated how the work on Freudian psychology played a critical role in the cultural renaissance that was taking place in so many different fields in the young Soviet society at that time. He has also made an important contribution in explaining how and why the Stalinist bureaucracy suppressed psychoanalytical thought and research. The emerging bureaucracy clearly saw in the progressive educational techniques that were being advanced and practiced by the Soviet Freudians a threat to its power, which relied so much on the repression of intellectual and emotional freedom.

The relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis is a very rich and complex subject, and it was not possible for Mr. Brenner to exhaustively examine, as he states in a number of places, many of the points of debate raised by the subject. Such a discussion is perhaps long overdue, and the fact that he has raised it in this article is an expression of his own intrepid thought. Although I am far from an expert on Freudian psychology, it seems to me worthwhile to examine further some of the issues that Mr. Brenner has touched on.

Mr. Brenner begins the second part of his article with a brief introduction to some of the criticisms that were made in the Soviet Union to psychoanalysis. In this regard, he raises two points. The first deals with the role of sexuality in human behavior. However, the second point he raises is, I believe, much more important.

To quote from the article: "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.)"[1]

This is entirely true, but unfortunately this point is not developed. I realize that Mr. Brenner was focusing on the contributions that Freud was making and not his weaknesses. This is perfectly legitimate, but I think that a deeper probe of Freud's idealism is not only worthwhile in its own right, but, ironically, makes it somewhat easier to appreciate what a contribution psychoanalysis can make when placed on a materialist foundation. Since the central thrust of Mr. Brenner's article is the relationship of Marxism to psychoanalysis, it might be helpful to read what Freud himself wrote on the subject.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, originally published in 1931, Freud writes the following: "The communists believe that they have found the path to deliverance from our evils. According to them, man is wholly good and is well-disposed to his neighbor; but the institution of private property has corrupted his nature. The ownership of private wealth gives the individual power, and with it the temptation to ill-treat his neighbor; while the man who is excluded from possession is bound to rebel in hostility against his oppressor. If private property were abolished, all wealth held in common, and everyone allowed to share in the enjoyment of it, ill-will and hostility would disappear among men. Since everyone's needs would be satisfied, no one would have any reason to regard another as his enemy; all would willingly undertake the work that was necessary. I have no concern with any economic criticisms of the communist system; I cannot enquire into whether the abolition of private property is expedient or advantageous. But I am able to recognize that the psychological premises on which the system is based are an untenable illusion. In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments.... Aggressiveness was not created by property. It reigned almost without limit in primitive times, when property was still very scanty, and it shows itself in the nursery almost before property has given up its primal, anal form; it forms the basis of every relation of affection and love among people.... If we do away with personal rights over material wealth, there still remains prerogative in the field of sexual

relationships, which is bound to become the source of the strongest dislike and the most violent hostility among men who are in other respects on an equal footing. If we were to remove this factor, too, by allowing complete freedom of sexual life and thus abolishing the family, the germ-cell of civilization, we cannot, it is true, easily foresee what new paths the development of civilization could take; but one thing we can expect, and that is that this indestructible feature of human nature will follow it there.”[2]

Theoretically, Freud came to these conclusions based on his postulation of a death instinct. This instinctual drive should be understood literally. According to this conception, all human beings from the moment of birth have an innate desire to commit suicide. However, this drive is repelled by the life instincts, and so is sublimated into the carrying out of acts of aggression against other people.

In this book Freud develops an entire sociology of history based on the conflict of these two drives. Originally, when mankind is in a primal society, only one person, the father, has the opportunity to enjoy his instinctual drives, and the rest, which are his sons, essentially are also his slaves. Eventually the sons revolt and they kill the father, or at least carry out activities in that direction. In any event, the father's power has been overthrown. Since the sons both love and hate their father, they feel remorse. Remorse is the source of guilt that grows over time. Eventually, guilt, morality or the super-ego develops to the point of, and is the defining characteristic of, modern civilization. Civilization requires this super-ego which represses the instinctual drives of mankind. Without it, mutual destruction and total chaos would result.

Throughout his career, Freud struggled with the problem of aggression. To what extent is it an offshoot of Eros, or does it have an independent instinctual existence? On this question Brenner writes, “Freud revised his instinct theory in the early twenties, bringing in a highly speculative notion of a death instinct...”[3]

However, the question must be asked: was the Freudian conception of Thanatos merely speculation, or was it a necessary ingredient of psychoanalytic theory? In answering this question Mr. Brenner makes an important observation when he writes, “the centerpiece of psychoanalysis, its theory of neurosis, held that neurotic illness arose from a conflict between instincts...” [4] This sentence was written in a different context than the one in which I am using it. Brenner is making this point in opposition to all those who condemn Freud for maintaining that sex is everything. Mr. Brenner points out that, as Alexander Luria explained, this is nonsense since there would be no conflict between instincts if there were only sexual instincts. It is in this context that the conflict between sexual drives and the drive for self-preservation is considered the source of neurosis.

The point that I wish to raise here is the following: is it possible to believe that all human psychopathologies, as well as the entire historical record of human brutality, are the result of a conflict between sexual needs and the need of self-preservation? Clearly not; indeed, it is hard to imagine why there is a conflict between these drives at all. Freud's postulation of a death instinct, or at least some form of an innate need for aggression, was not speculation, but a necessary ingredient of his conflict theory. Without Thanatos, the entire basis of psychoanalytic theory collapses like a house of cards.

As a matter of fact, this is a critical issue that raises a serious problem for all those who seek to synthesize socialism and Freudian psychology on the basis of his instinct theories. In one way or another, they must modify, neutralize or eliminate the death instinct, or else, as Freud's anti-communism makes clear, the project is impossible. Along these lines, it is necessary to examine what Mr. Brenner has written on this subject.

Quoting from the article: “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.”[5] Later on, Brenner refers to Trotsky's notebooks and views on the subject of psychoanalysis. He quotes the editor of the notebooks Philip Pomper who, as Mr. Brenner explained, “contends that Trotsky was pointing to a new and revolutionary interpretation of psychoanalysis.”[6]

Pomper writes, “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 a connection 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.”[7]

Brenner concludes, “This is a fascinating point—one of many in regards to this history—that deserves further consideration.”[8]

It is perhaps a bit generous to describe some of these thinkers as Marxists. Be that as it may, let us examine what Herbert Marcuse has actually written on this subject. As the above quote indicates, he attempted to synthesize socialism and psychoanalysis through a reexamination of Freud's instinct theories. For this to happen, he must, as already indicated, deal with the problem of the death instinct, whose very existence is incompatible, at least according to Freud, with communism. How does Marcuse handle this problem?

In his major work on the subject, *Eros and Civilization*, Mr. Marcuse writes the following: “The death instinct operates under the Nirvana principle: it tends toward that state of ‘constant gratification’ where no tension is felt—a state without want. This trend of the instinct implies that its *destructive* [original emphasis] manifestations would be minimized as it approached such a state. If the instinct's basic objective is not the termination of life but of pain—the absence of tension—then paradoxically, in terms of the instinct, the conflict between life and death is the more reduced, the greater life approaches the state of gratification. Pleasure principle and Nirvana principle then converge. At the same time, Eros freed from surplus—repression, would be strengthened, and the strengthened Eros would, as it were, absorb the objective of the death instinct.”[9] In other words, “Death would cease to be an instinctual goal.”[10]

Nirvana, of course, is the Buddhist ideal of heavenly peace. Instead of death, what is postulated here is a desire for a kind of meditative repose. Marcuse's conception is that the revolutionary and subversive side of Freud lies in the nature of instincts which modern society must repress. Marcuse reinterprets the death instinct in order to prove that the problem of civilization lies not in man's inherent conflict, but in the repressive nature of civilization itself.

According to Freud, it is the biological struggle within man's nature that is the source of all modern conflicts such as war, the class struggle, racism, neurosis, etc. If the cause of all historical conflict is the instinctual energies that reside in the id, then clearly those energies must, by their very nature, be in conflict or nothing can be explained. However, if now, according to Marcuse, the two major instincts are Eros and Nirvana, where is the conflict? Clearly, there is none, since the whole purpose of postulating Nirvana is to eliminate the instinctual conflict. In doing this, Marcuse has managed to explain absolutely nothing.

This man, who was a prominent figure in the idealist German Frankfurt school of philosophy and social thought, seeks to merge socialist or left conceptions through a reexamination of the id. Marxism has an entirely different starting point.

Marx and Engels discovered the basis of cultural evolution before Darwin discovered the basis of biological evolution. The essential

defining characteristic of man is his ability to labor with the use of and development of tools. Other animals of course use tools, but it is only humans who are able to develop them. These forces of production create a necessary social relationship of production. It is the dynamic relationship of these interconnected factors that is the real source of all cultural or historical development. In other words, biological evolution has produced a species that can evolve, independently of its physiology. It is this socioeconomic base which is the real source of man's social consciousness, in all spheres of his intellectual and emotional life, and it is the contradiction between the social relations and the productive forces which is the source of human conflict.

Freud—and as can be seen from the above examination of Marcuse, not only Freud—has it all backwards. It is not man's physiological needs, as he and others postulate, that are the source of all the variations of human culture, but on the contrary, it is cultural variation that profoundly modifies innate biological needs. For example, in the *German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels write that “the satisfaction of the first need, the action of satisfying it and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired, lead to new needs...”[11] All humans must eat food, and experience hunger; but what type of food a person is hungry for depends on what man is able to obtain through his labor from nature, and this depends not only on the physical environment, but more fundamentally on the mode of production. It is the development of the instruments of production and the social relations that they are a part of that creates new needs that are socially acquired. Obviously, one can not have the taste for movies in societies where the technology of film does not exist. Biological needs are constant, and cannot explain history. The development, acquisition, refinement, and sometimes the debasement of human needs are cultural products which have as their source the evolution of the social relations and forces of production.

Furthermore, it is hard to imagine how Freud's death instinct makes sense in light of Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin discovered how the struggle for life against death was the driving force for biological development. Considering this, one wonders how a species would evolve that from birth seeks its own death.

I realize that Mr. Brenner wrote his article with a certain focus; nevertheless, it is somewhat unfortunate that he chose never to mention the writings of Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky on Freud. Voronsky was a participant in the disputes on psychoanalysis in the early twenties in the Soviet Union, the very period that Brenner is dealing with. Furthermore, Mehring Books has recently published a selection of writings, entitled *Art as the Cognition of Life*. One of the essays, entitled “Freudianism and Art,” deals very intelligently with the relationship of Marxism and psychoanalysis. To deepen our understanding of this subject, it is essential to consider the content of this essay.

Voronsky observes that “in Freud's doctrine of ‘ego’ and ‘id’, only the dependence of consciousness on the “id-unconscious” is established. Freud mentions the outer world as well, but nowhere is the dependence of consciousness on the realm ever examined or analyzed.”[12] In other words, Freud believed that the instinctual energies that are in the id are the source of all behaviors. These energies flow into the ego, which does its best to satisfy the instinctual needs. The ego must deal with the outer world, but the ego-consciousness is essentially not a reflection of that realm, but is rather a reflection of and is concerned with the satisfaction of the id. Truth for Freud, Voronsky charges, is not the external world, but the internal world of instinctual energies.

Brenner, however, places a somewhat different slant on this question. Quoting from his article: “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.’ (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.”

We apparently have two different points of view as to what exactly is the nature of Freudian psychology as a theory of knowledge. Is Voronsky correct with charging Freud with a conception that the ego-consciousness is essentially a reflection of only inner needs residing in the id, or does Brenner's point that psychoanalysis is also a social psychology put Voronsky's accusation to rest? It must be remembered that Voronsky does recognize, as well as Brenner does, that Freud takes into account the role of the external world, but he feels that Freud fails to philosophically examine this aspect of ego development.

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine how Voronsky developed his argument. It must be kept in mind that he was very concerned with the role that art plays as a form of cognition of the objective world. It is central to Marxism as a theory of knowledge to recognize that what is reflected in subjective consciousness is based on the objective world. Art, although in a different form than science, is a means of obtaining knowledge about man and his place in the universe as a whole. Artistic works, like scientific ones, both in form and content, are to be judged by their ability to correctly comprehend the material world.

Quoting from Voronsky: “In their analysis of artistic works, Freudians usually limit themselves to explaining how the unconscious impulses of the artist are hidden in symbol images. They neither investigate nor resolve the problem of the reflection of reality. From their point of view this is completely consistent. Whoever adheres to an idealist system of views may limit himself to an explanation of the reflection in our consciousness of intentions alone, for only intentions really exist, and the world is their symbol; the object, independent of us, either does not exist, or we know nothing about it.”[13]

This does not mean that an analysis of the motivations of the artist is not important or that it doesn't play its part in the objective historical process. However, there is the question as to which is the more important—the motivations of the artist, or the stage of historical development that his motivations reflect. Engels discussed this question by explaining that in examining history, one must take into account not only the motivations of men, but also, and more importantly, the motivations behind the motivations, i.e., the stage of economic development that inspires men to act in the way that they do.

Voronsky put the matter in the following matter: “The task of the critic in each case amounts to explaining the intentions of the artist, but this is only one side of the matter. Another, no less important, task consists in revealing the extent to which these intentions have helped or hindered the reproduction of reality. The most extreme scholasticism is to decide which is more important in the analysis of a work—the discovery of the hidden or open motives of the artist, or the explanation of how faithfully and in what manner life is reflected in the work.”[14]

Voronsky concludes: “The proposition that consciousness depends not only on the unconscious, but first and foremost on being, on the external world, fundamentally undermines the foundations of Freud's theory....Whoever thinks according to Freud inevitably becomes tangled in the thought that truth is only an expression of our intentions, i.e., in subjectivism.”[15] To put the matter another way, if the artist, or for that matter the scientist or anyone else, is driven by unconscious irrational forces (this point will be developed later), how is it possible for mankind to achieve a rational understanding, either through art or science, of reality?

Voronsky developed these arguments in a polemic against a soviet Freudian art critic by the name of I. Grigoriev. Perhaps the charge could be made that he was not arguing against what Freud really believed and wrote, but against a weak interpretation of Freudian psychology. As a

matter of fact, in referring to the debates on the relationship of Marxism to Freudian psychology that were taking place at this time, Brenner makes the point that “the object of criticism in these debates often wasn't Freud, but various interpreters and exponents of his ideas.”[16] Was Voronsky, in his polemic against Mr. Grigoriev, being unfair to Freud's ideas?

The best way to resolve this question is to turn the page to Freud himself. Once again, looking at *Civilization and its Discontents*, we find a revealing passage. In order to give the full flavor of Freud's thinking on the subject, it is necessary to quote him at length:

“Another technique for fending off suffering is the employment of the displacements of libido which our mental apparatus permits of and through which its function gains so much in flexibility. The task here is that of shifting the instinctual aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world. In this, sublimation of the instincts lends its assistance. One gains the most if one can sufficiently heighten the yield of pleasure from the sources of psychical and intellectual work.... A satisfaction of this kind, such as an artist's joy in creating, in giving his phantasies body, or a scientist's in solving problems or discovering truths, has a special quality which we shall certainly one day be able to characterize in metapsychological terms. At present we can only say figuratively that such satisfactions seem ‘finer and higher’. But their intensity is mild as compared with that derived from the sating of crude and primary instinctual impulses; it does not convulse our physical being. And the weak point of this method is that it is not applicable generally: it is accessible to only a few people. It presupposes the possession of special dispositions and gifts which are far from being common to any practical degree. And even to the few who do possess them, this method cannot give complete protection from suffering. It creates no impenetrable armour against the arrows of fortune, and it habitually fails when the source of suffering is a person's own body.

“While this procedure already clearly shows an intention of making oneself independent of the external world by seeking satisfaction in internal, psychical processes, the next procedure brings out those features yet more strongly. In it, the connection with reality is still further loosened; satisfaction is obtained from illusions, which are recognized as such without the discrepancy between them and reality being allowed to interfere with enjoyment. The region from which these illusions arise is the life of the imagination; at the time when the development of the sense of reality took place, this region was expressly exempted from the demands of reality testing and was set apart for the purpose of fulfilling wishes which were difficult to carry out. At the head of these satisfactions through phantasy stands the enjoyment of works of art—an enjoyment which, by the agency of the artist, is made accessible even to those who are themselves not creative. People who are receptive to the influence of art cannot set too high a value on it as a source of pleasure and consolation in life. Nevertheless the mild narcosis induced in us by art can do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs, and it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery.”[17]

Clearly for Freud, art and the appreciation of art are not means by which we cognize the world, and therefore help us discover our genuine potentials. Quite the contrary, it is a poor means, so characteristic of a psychologically repressed modern world, of satisfying our instincts. That is, it is both a means of satisfying (albeit poorly) and escaping (through the process of sublimation) the contrary instinctual demands of Eros and Thanatos. It is therefore a means of escaping reality both of the external world and of oneself. Mankind turns to these “higher” pursuits, according to Freud, not as a development of knowledge, but rather as a result of the super-ego (civilized morality), which compels mankind today, in order to avoid chaos, to suppress its most basic carnal and destructive instincts.

At this point in our inquiry, we can conclude the following. Just as Marxism begins with dialectical materialism as a sociology of mankind, it also begins with dialectical materialism as a theory of knowledge, as a

means of obtaining truth. Similarly, just as Freud's instinct theory of history is idealist, so his—what perhaps can be called here—“instinct theory of knowledge” is also idealist. Voronsky himself concluded that Freud was a subjective idealist.

Considering all the points that have just been made, the obvious question is: should Marxists be concerned with psychoanalysis at all? Brenner's response to this kind of question would appear to be that “psychology is necessarily a dangerous science in a class-divided society: because it deals with the most personal and intimate aspects of life, it inevitably arouses intense ideological resistance.”[18]

Voronsky provides another response. He says, “To a large extent, the positive features in Freud's doctrine of the dynamic unconscious (the intuitive creative process, the irrationality of deeds and actions under the influence of the elemental unconscious, the rationalization of hidden impulses and their displacement) had previously been taken into account by Marxism and in particular by Marxist art criticism, but Marxism never succumbed to the inordinate exaggerations of the Freudians.”[19]

To some extent this conclusion by Voronsky is a bit of a mystery. It is hard to fathom which Marxists art critics provided the kind of analysis that Freud or the Freudians did. In point of fact, I believe that Voronsky's conclusion was wrong. It certainly doesn't explain why genuine Marxists, especially one like Leon Trotsky, were respectful admirers of Freud.

What is it about psychoanalysis that attracts the interest of Marxists? I think the answer is both clear and simple. Nobody before Freud examined in such brilliant, personal, and intimate detail the psychodynamics of human irrationality. Irrationality must here be properly understood, not as the mere lack of rational abilities, but the active repelling from the human mind and psyche of the search for objective truth. Freud discovered that people not only did not see, but also did not want to see the truth about themselves. They actively pursued and lived in lies. In order for this to work, their mind could not allow them to comprehend that this was what they were doing. A true understanding of themselves had to be repressed and placed in the unconscious mind. In these investigations lie the scientific and materialistic side of psychoanalysis.

The idealist side of psychoanalysis lies in the fact that for Freud this irrationality is inherent in the very nature of mankind himself, i.e., in his instinctual being. According to Freud, human beings, with their never ceasing instinctual conflicts, create all their psychic difficulties and their need to suffer repression. These conflicts drive all of their psychopathologies and irrationalities. This is really a sophisticated way of expressing the bourgeois world outlook, which maintains that the problems of mankind are not resolvable because they are rooted in the very essence of human nature. Therefore, the socialist revolution will solve nothing because it cannot overcome the inherent greed and aggressiveness of humanity. If, generally speaking, Freud removed the devil and the soul from psychology, he put it back in with the death instinct.

However, from a materialist, Marxist perspective there is much in psychoanalysis that is extremely valuable. From this perspective, the irrationality of man is not to be found in his inherent psyche, but in the irrationality of modern forms of social production, i.e., capitalism in decay.

To better appreciate Freud's contribution, it is necessary to look at three concepts: the unconscious, repression, and defense mechanisms. The unconscious is not merely what a person is not aware of at the moment, but that which has been actively repelled or repressed from the conscious mind. The two concepts, the unconscious and repression, are really the same. Defense mechanisms are those strategies that the ego employs to hide the reality that causes anxiety, while at the same time attempting to satisfy the instinctual strivings of the id. In other words, defense mechanisms are a fundamental technique of irrationality.

To help understand how this works, let us look at a classic example. A

person is a member of an anti-pornography association or perhaps a cop on the vice squad. He pursues his vocation with tremendous enthusiasm, an unbending and rigid sense of morality. He will allow nothing to stand in his way, as he believes that smut and prostitution are the downfall of modern civilization. This is a man on a mission. What he does not know is that he has a secret and forbidden desire for all that he seeks to smash up. By pursuing his vocation with such energy, he is providing his id with the opportunity to at least come close and see the forbidden fruit.

His base desires are very strong and at the same time severely repressed by a very powerful super-ego, whose forbidding sense of morality prohibits such emotions. This is a defense mechanism that Freud called reaction formation. In the example just given, the person in question achieves a kind of irrational solution. The person does the exact opposite of what he desires most in order to both satisfy his sense of morality and, at least to a small extent, satisfy his instinctual needs. This person, through his chosen vocation, has the opportunity not only to satisfy his sexual desires, as precariously as they can be satisfied in these circumstances, but also his need for aggression. In other words his basic needs are sublimated to satisfy an unforgiving super-ego.

It must be remembered that the person is not a fake. He really is not conscious, nor is it possible for him to be conscious of the genuine psychodynamics of his behavior. Reaction formation, as well as all other defense mechanisms, are employed by his ego as acts of repression in order to hide from the conscious mind the ugly truth of his immoral drives. He is driven by anxieties and frustrations that his mind will not allow him, and, in order to satisfy his super-ego, cannot allow him, to comprehend.

This man is literally split in two, moving in mutually exclusive and opposite directions. The purpose of giving this example is to provide a glimpse of the dialectical brilliance of Freud's insights. In the above example, it is the super-ego that is most available to consciousness and appearance. The essence, which is hidden and the opposite of morality, are the instinctual drives. However, these needs in their inherent conflict explain the source of and are, in that sense, identical to the super-ego.

To rescue and develop Freud's brilliant dialectical psychology, it is necessary to turn psychoanalysis upside down and place it firmly on a materialist footing. To do this, it is essential to negate the conception of instincts as the source of modern conflicts. When this is done, then the psychodynamics of the conflicting mind are explainable by the conflicts of modern society. From a materialist perspective the above is an example of someone who is psychologically split in two because the conflicts of modern society have created this pathology. Marxism can only gain by an examination of the way the conflicts of modern capitalism are reflected in the most intimate and personal dynamics of the mind—how many irrational acts of homicide and suicide, as well as all the numerous examples of psychopathology, are a testimony to the degeneration of modern capitalism. Freud's conception of the unconscious, repression, defense mechanisms, and sublimation as well, stripped of its instinctual and idealist baggage, holds great promise of deepening the Marxist's understanding of both consciousness and unconsciousness.

Human beings are very flexible animals capable of great deeds of heroism and cowardice, generosity and greed, compassion and psychopathic selfishness, creativity, and dullness, hope and despair. These characteristics are not only expressed by different persons, but sometimes by the same person at different times of his life. It is not the inherent aggressiveness of man that causes war, but war, caused by economic and geopolitical factors, that bring out the aggressive and barbaric possibilities in men, making them indifferent to human life. It is not the inherent conflict between the id and the super-ego which causes civilization to deceive itself, but the demands of profit and exploitation which cause people to deceive themselves and be totally unaware of their true potentials. It is not the irrationality of man that produces an irrational

society, but the irrational demands of modern capitalism that encourages individual irrationality, not only intellectually, but also emotionally, creating myriad forms of psychological pain.

Of course, to what extent and in what form Marxism can be synthesized with Freudianism can only be determined in scientific practice. Such a project is only possible based on the highest theoretical foundations. One of Mr. Brenner's references to Trotsky's notebooks makes an important point. Based on a materialist foundation, I think it is true to say that while for Freud the unconscious revealed the dark and ugly secrets of mankind, for Marxists the unconscious reveals the creative potential of mankind that can only be unshackled by socialist revolution.

Allen Whyte

Notes:

1. Frank Brenner, "Intrepid thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union," Part 2, 12 June 1999, WWSWS
2. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 1961, Norton, pp. 59-61
3. Frank Brenner, "Intrepid thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union," Part 2, 12 June 1999, WWSWS, note 3
4. Ibid, Part 2., p. 1.
5. Ibid, Part 2., p.3.
6. Ibid, Part 2., p.5.
7. Ibid, Part 2., p. 5.
8. Ibid, Part 2., p.5.
9. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Vintage, 1955, pp. 214-15.
10. Ibid, p. 215.
11. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, Progress Publishers, 1976, p. 48.
12. Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky, *Art as the Cognition of Life*, Mehring Books, 1998, p. 176
13. Ibid, p. 182
14. Ibid, p. 184
15. Ibid. p. 184
16. Frank Brenner, "Intrepid thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union," Part 1, WWSWS, 11 June 1999, p.6.
17. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 1961, Norton, pp. 26-28.
18. Frank Brenner, "Intrepid thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union," Part 1, p.2
19. Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky, *Art as the Cognition of Life*, Mehring Books, 1998, p. 198.

I want to begin by thanking Allen Whyte for his kind words about my article. And I think he is right to say that a discussion about the relationship between psychoanalysis and Marxism is long overdue; we would have to go back to Trotsky as well as to Breton and the Surrealists to find the last significant contributions on these matters from members or supporters of the revolutionary movement. Given this long hiatus and the complexity of the issues involved, there are bound to be disagreements and no small measure of confusion as we take up this discussion again. That is why it is important to keep our focus on the fundamentals. Some of Whyte's criticisms of psychoanalysis raise important issues that undoubtedly reflect the concerns of other Marxists, and so it is those points that I will try to deal with as fully as possible. Some of Whyte's other remarks, however, put forward a distorted view of psychoanalysis that can only get in the way of a meaningful discussion and so I'll begin by addressing those as briefly as possible.

* It is untenable to contend that psychoanalysis can be "brilliant" as a psychology of the irrational and yet have nothing of value to say about the rational. This is like saying that medicine can tell us a lot about disease but is useless for understanding health. This was certainly not Trotsky's view of psychoanalysis; the great merit he saw in the latter was its insights into the mental life of all human beings, not just the mentally ill.

And the applications of psychoanalysis, such as the educational work of Vera Schmidt, or the immense influence that psychoanalysis has had on art in this century, not only on particular schools like Expressionism and Surrealism but on the whole cultural climate—all this makes it evident that the relevance of psychoanalysis cannot be restricted to the irrational. (The story of the obsessed vice squad cop—which seems to reflect the clichéd view of psychoanalysis common in popular culture—only underscores how untenable this dichotomous view of psychoanalysis is. Once the "exotic" element of the vice squad is removed, what's left is a case of someone with repressed desires and a guilty conscience—a psychological profile that could apply to a great many normal people. And when Whyte goes on to tell us that such mental conflicts "are explainable by the conflicts of modern society," surely this is again true of everyone, not just "weirdo" cops.)

* To say that "without Thanatos (i.e., the death instinct), the entire basis of psychoanalytic theory collapses like a house of cards" is not credible and amounts to knocking down a straw man. The death instinct was a speculative notion that Freud developed late in his career, long after he had written the works that are the foundation of his theory—*The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and the great case studies. When Freud first presented the idea, he himself stressed that it was "speculation, often far-fetched speculation." [1] But not unlike his contemporary Einstein, he allowed himself the liberty of pursuing "thought experiments" of this kind because he found them a useful way of opening up new perspectives on problems. In this case, Freud was concerned with a number of important psychological phenomena (aggression, as Whyte indicates, but also narcissism and masochism) that didn't seem to fit conveniently into the traditional schema of ego-instincts (i.e., for self-preservation—hunger, thirst, etc.) versus sexual instincts, and so he attempted a revision of that schema. Some of what he had to say was intriguing and even profound, but it soon became apparent that the objections to the death instinct far outweighed any advantages, and for that reason most psychoanalysts rejected it, as Peter Gay points out in his authoritative biography of Freud. [2] If this proves anything, it is that psychoanalysis is like any other science: it has its share of theoretical dead-ends and it isn't a dogma where ideas, even those of a genius, are accepted uncritically. Whyte ignores this history and bases his assertion on formal logic: since the theory of neurosis requires a conflict of instincts and since there really isn't a conflict between sex and self-preservation, therefore psychoanalysis cannot be sustained without a death instinct. But why can't there be a conflict between sex and self-preservation, as the original Freudian instinct theory has it? All that Whyte tells us is that "it is hard to imagine why there is a conflict between these drives at all." But Shakespeare had no trouble imagining it in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*, and neither did countless other poets, painters, composers, etc.; indeed, in Wagnerian opera, the two words for love and death are literally fused into one—*liebestod*. And this conflict is even embedded in everyday language, for instance in the way we use "dying" in English to indicate a strong desire for something or someone, or in the French literary phrase *la petite mort* which means the moment of climax.

* A few words on Marcuse, whom Whyte refers to in this context. The only substantive point Whyte seems to be making is that Nirvana is a Buddhist concept, which is supposedly indicative of Marcuse's idealism. The Nirvana principle is actually Freud's term, not Marcuse's, and there was nothing religious in the use that Freud—a committed atheist—made of it; rather, the term was meant to describe a tendency in all living matter to eliminate tension, the ultimate form of which is obviously death. Whyte pulls out a quote from *Eros and Civilization* without thinking about what it means. The point Marcuse was making was that in a non-repressive—i.e., communist—society, the terror we now experience regarding death will be greatly mitigated, and that the elimination of

tension in the Nirvana principle will be served not by a tragic recourse to death but by leading a full and rewarding life. Far from this being some idealist chimera, Trotsky made a similar point at the end of *Literature and Revolution* when he talked about his vision of a liberated humanity whose "life instinct" will no longer take "the form of a pinched, morbid and hysterical fear of death, which darkens reason and which feeds the stupid and humiliating fantasies about life after death." [3] Obviously an analysis of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School can't be gone into here, but it has to be said that, as much as they deserve to be criticized, *this* kind of criticism isn't helpful. It also has to be said that on certain issues, particularly on art and psychology, we should be prepared to admit that we can learn things from such intellectuals. During the long hiatus when matters like psychoanalysis weren't discussed within the Marxist movement, intellectual life outside it didn't cease; some important work—flawed though it might be—continued to be done. As I noted in the article, even the academic who edited Trotsky's notebooks of 1933-35 recognized an affinity between Trotsky's and Marcuse's view of psychoanalysis. To simply turn our backs on a work like *Eros and Civilization* is a disservice to Marxism.

The crux of Whyte's criticism concerns the role of instinct in psychoanalytic theory, which he sees as the source both of an idealist view of history and an idealist theory of knowledge. The first thing that needs to be said is that there isn't anything necessarily idealist about instinct or indeed about Freud's definition of it as "a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body." [4] Indeed, the great scientific contribution of psychoanalysis stems precisely from the fact that it approached the mind, not as a metaphysical "soul", but in "its connection with the body." It was this very materialism that aroused—and continues to arouse—such deep animosity to psychoanalysis within bourgeois society. Not surprisingly, that animosity found a reflection within the psychoanalytic movement itself, in the form of various revisionist tendencies (notably those led by Alfred Adler and Carl Jung as well as the Neo-Freudians Erich Fromm and Karen Horney) who, despite major differences in other respects, all agreed on their rejection of Freudian instinct theory. Invariably, that rejection amounted to an abandonment of materialism and the reintroduction, in various guises, of a disembodied soul.

That being said, it is certainly true that a materialist conception of instinct is no guarantee of a materialist conception of history. In my article, I pointed out that Freud, like most other scientists in bourgeois society, tended to be a materialist only in his particular field. Since he wasn't a Marxist, we shouldn't be surprised to find dubious or even overtly reactionary notions in his writings, especially when it came to the application of psychoanalysis to society and history. The quote AW takes from *Civilization and its Discontents* is an example of such a notion, and it is by no means an isolated case. In such instances, because he had no worked-out materialist conception of history, Freud tended to fill the vacuum with psychology by making the instinctive roots of individual behavior into the fundamental motive forces of history. Since instincts were unchanging, this gave a pessimistic, even tragic, coloration to Freud's viewpoint. Philip Rieff, an astute though relatively conservative commentator on Freud, has neatly contrasted the Marxist and Freudian historical outlooks: "For Marx, the past is pregnant with the future, with the proletariat as the midwife of history. For Freud, the future is pregnant with the past, a burden of which only the physician, and luck, can deliver us." [5]

However, if that were all there was to say on the matter, then one wonders why Freudian theory was championed by so many left-wing intellectuals in the Twenties and Thirties or why the Nazis were so hostile to it, to the point of burning Freud's books. Clearly both supporters and opponents saw something deeply subversive in Freudian theory. But this subversive element can easily be lost sight of if one chooses to read Freud

selectively. Here, for instance, is another passage from the same work AW quoted: "The tendency on the part of civilization to restrict sexual life is no less clear than its other tendency to expand the cultural unit ... Here, as we already know, civilization is obeying the laws of economic necessity, since a large amount of the psychical energy which it uses for its own purposes has to be withdrawn from sexuality. In this respect civilization behaves towards sexuality as a people or a stratum of its population does which has subjected another one to its exploitation. Fear of a revolt by the suppressed elements drives it to stricter precautionary measures. A high-water mark in such a development has been reached in our Western European civilization." [6] Here, Freud appears in quite a different light, as a trenchant critic of capitalist society. And that criticism derives precisely from his instinct theory, from the underlying link he suggests between instinctual repression and class oppression. Nor can this be dismissed as an isolated remark; on the contrary, the antagonism between human instinct and modern civilization was one of the great themes of Freudian theory, and the very thing that provoked such intense reactions to it on both sides of the ideological divide.

That Freud tended to see no alternative to the civilization he lived in was ultimately a reflection of his own ideological prejudices as a middle class intellectual (as were his superficial and banal views of what was going on in the Soviet Union), but for those who didn't share such prejudices, the scientific discoveries of psychoanalysis could be read in a radically different way—as a powerful indictment of the inhumanity of class society. As Gad Horowitz, author of a valuable study on the theory of repression, has pointed out, Freud's pessimism "is restricted to obiter dicta, expressions of his personal temperament and world-outlook. Pessimism is not inherent in the conceptual framework of Freudian theory or any essential proposition of that theory. It is possible to be optimistic and radical, as well as pessimistic and conservative, while adhering strictly to every major tenet of classical Freudianism." [7] Indeed, on occasion even Freud himself, despite his political conservatism, was led to draw revolutionary conclusions, as in the following remark from *The Future of an Illusion*: "It goes without saying that a civilization which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence." [8]

Moreover, it should be noted that for Freud the determining factor for instinctual repression by civilization was not instinct itself but "the laws of economic necessity." Again, this was not an isolated remark; elsewhere he stated categorically: "The motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one; since it does not possess enough provisions to keep its members alive unless they work, it must restrict the number of its members and divert their energies from sexual activity to work. It is faced, in short, by the eternal, primeval exigencies of life, which are with us to this day." [9] It is therefore an oversimplification to claim, as Whyte does, that, "according to Freud, it is the biological struggle within man's nature that is the source of all modern conflicts." Freud's view of history wasn't consistently idealist, but rather vacillated between materialism and idealism, and this distinction is important to make because the materialist vacillations allowed for some of Freud's most important insights into social life. Of course this doesn't mean that we ignore Freud's antipathy to Marxism and his historical pessimism, but we also have to keep in mind that Freud wasn't a bourgeois politician or ideologue. Our purpose in reading him isn't to unmask his hidden ideological agenda but to assimilate and make use of the great discoveries he made about the human mind. In other words, without making concessions to backwardness, we don't start from that in our assessment of Freud's science; otherwise, we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. And it should be added that nowhere is that risk greater than in psychology, because of the very nature of its subject matter.

(One word more on pessimism: we should be careful to distinguish our position from the much more common line of attack on Freud from the

right on this score. From the Neo-Freudians of the fifties to the pop psychologists of today, the constant complaint directed at Freud has been that he was too "negative." The basic attitude of all these tendencies—aptly grouped under the term conformist psychology—is expressed in the slogan, "Accentuate the positive." Marcuse caught the essence of their objection to psychoanalysis: "Freud was right; life is bad, repressive, destructive—but it isn't *so* bad, repressive, destructive. There are also the constructive, productive aspects. Society is not only this, but also that; man is not only against himself but also for himself." [10] This sort of optimism—which holds out hope for a better life *within* class society—is actually much further removed from Marxism than the pessimism of Freud. Insofar as *this* civilization is concerned, Marxists are as pessimistic about the possibilities for human happiness as Freud was; our optimism stems from our understanding that this isn't the only possible civilization.)

As I indicated in my article, in the past there have been a number of Marxist intellectuals—notably Mikhail Reisner in the Soviet Union and later Wilhelm Reich and his Freudo-Marxist colleagues in Germany—who argued that the Marxist movement had much to gain from the application of Freudian insights, particularly in relation to mass psychology. The value of those insights stemmed from the fact that Freud's approach to individual psychology was both materialist and historical. By the latter I mean that for Freud, the mind of a patient (or of any person) could only be understood, not as something given like a biological organ, but rather as the congealed expression of the life-history of the individual, of all of his or her experiences—including the inner experiences of feelings, dreams, fantasies, etc. This is why another name for psychoanalysis is "depth psychology": the only way to uncover the secrets of the soul (and to cure its ills) is by digging into the individual's past, all the way back to childhood. But it stands to reason, from a dialectical point of view, that the more deeply one digs into the life of an individual, the more one comes up against its opposite, i.e., those aspects of life that are common to all individuals rather than unique to any particular one. Thus, the great light shed by psychoanalysis on childhood is precisely the source of its social relevance, because childhood is the period of life when individuality is least developed and when society embeds itself in the soul.

Here an important insight of psychoanalysis needs to be emphasized: from the standpoint of Freudian theory, an infant is not born human, it is a biological creature that has to undergo a process of *becoming* human by developing an "ego," and it can only do so by entering into relations with other human beings, most immediately and significantly with its parents. As Reich and others pointed out, insight into this process of socialization, into the ways in which children are molded psychologically by their families, helps enormously in understanding the workings of ruling class ideology. One of the striking features of bourgeois ideology is the great lengths it goes to in order to deny the existence of social classes; as the French culture critic Roland Barthes once put it wittily, "the bourgeoisie is defined as the social class which does not want to be named." [11] To maintain this camouflage, the bourgeoisie resorts, particularly through the mass media, to a constant barrage of symbolic identifications, and in many cases the basis of their appeal is their association with the family. The epitome of this is the ideology of nationalism in which the nation is presented as one big family, but similar identifications pervade social life—in the emotional bonds that cement relations within a company or an army, in religious mystification, in the stereotypes of popular culture and the manipulations of advertising, etc. Obviously there have been changes since the time that Freud and Reich wrote about these matters: for instance, in most companies today, old-fashioned "paternalism" has given way to the more modern "team" approach, with workers expected to be "team players," exhibiting loyalty and cooperation in order to help the team "win." But it isn't hard to see that this is just a case of old wine in

new bottles. The original insights of psychoanalysis into these aspects of social and political life are just as relevant as they ever were.

If individual psychology can tell us important things about social life, then this must mean that instincts do play a significant role within history. What is that role? Whyte makes the point that, “Biological needs are constant, and cannot explain history,” and this is certainly right if by history we mean historical *change*. As Whyte states, “it is not man’s physiological needs that are the source of all the variations of human culture, but on the contrary, it is cultural variation that profoundly modifies innate biological needs.” This is true, but is it the whole truth? After all, human culture isn’t just made up of variations—there is continuity as well as discontinuity within it. The history of the human race, for all the enormous social and cultural variation it encompasses, is still the history of a single species: we have not evolved into a qualitatively different kind of creature. Thus, while human needs have changed tremendously over the course of history, the very fact of their being *human* needs means that there must be underlying aspects to them that are unchanging (or, more precisely, relatively unchanging when compared to the pace of socio-historical change).

What are those aspects? Obviously, in the first instance, our biology. We are a part of nature and we need things from nature for our survival. The fact that these needs are constant does not make them inconsequential. This point has to be emphasized since there is a tendency (certainly within academic Marxism) to ignore the natural foundations of human existence. Since humans are social beings and since their relationship with nature is “mediated” by society, the inclination is largely to ignore the role that nature plays in human existence. What happens in history isn’t that basic human needs disappear but rather that they manifest themselves in new and different ways. As Otto Fenichel, one of the leading Freudo-Marxists, noted: “It is true that changed social conditions also change the individual’s needs. But it can be shown psychoanalytically that in the new needs old biologically based needs have found a new and changed expression, and this cannot only be proved but is also of an immense heuristic value: it explains many details of real facts which otherwise would remain unexplained.”[12] Or to put this another way, the evolution of human needs is a vast set of variations on certain fundamental themes because human nature, for all its changeability, is nonetheless not an empty vessel or a blank slate.

Let us see what “heuristic value” this can have. Whyte writes: “It is development of the instruments of production and the social relations that they are a part of that creates new needs that are socially acquired. Obviously, one cannot have the taste for movies in societies where the technology of film does not exist.” True enough, but when we look at the content of the works produced by this new medium in its first century, a notable feature has been the *recurring* nature of the types of stories it has told as well as the moral and emotional conflicts those stories have dramatized. The close-up of a kiss can serve here as a typical cinematic gesture—a new way to look at an old act. And we would be wrong to chalk this up merely to the cultural stagnation of bourgeois society, as debilitating an effect as that has had. The best films, the ones that did the most to resist and overcome that stagnation, didn’t produce some new content out of whole cloth; their stories were most often the conventional stories—about love, adventure, mystery and so on—but invested with remarkable sensitivity and insight, and thereby raised to a level of universal significance. That’s what great art does in any medium—it creates images that deepen our sense of what it means to be human.

Breton once pointed out in talking about Rimbaud that the great themes of art were “the round of the seasons, nature, women, love, dreams, life, and death,”[13] and though this is far from a complete list, it is enough to indicate that there are not an endless variety of such themes but rather a comparative handful, and all of them universal aspects of the human condition. Of course this isn’t to say that art simply repeats itself

endlessly: to take an obvious example, love is very different today than it was in earlier historical eras and consequently we wouldn’t write a love poem in the same way as a classical bard or a medieval troubadour. But those differences are not so great as to make such earlier poetry completely alien to us; on the contrary, not only can we understand what those poets were writing (or singing) about, but we can also derive pleasure from their work as well as insight into our own lives. Art provides important and eloquent testimony as to the common ground (i.e., common experiences and feelings) that exists between us and our ancestors.[14]

Biology only takes us so far in understanding the continuity of human existence. Unless we get at what is distinctively human about our needs and our instincts, then we are missing the most crucial thing about them. Embedded in human nature is the long struggle of our species to raise itself from an animal to a human state. It was labor that made us human, as Engels showed in his brilliant essay on the subject: by changing external nature, we profoundly altered our internal nature, bringing about, among other things, the development of language and of conscious thought.[15] But clearly our instincts weren’t immune from this process: they too were humanized. And this takes on added significance because of the psychoanalytic insight that each child has to go through its own process of humanization in the course of growing up. For that to be possible, the child needs not only to interact with other human beings but also to have instincts that are *open* to such interactions.

But not all instincts are the same in this respect. There isn’t much about hunger (or thirst, the need for warmth, etc.—i.e., the instincts related to the basic necessities of life) that is distinctively human: like other animals, the only way we can satisfy our hunger is by eating. (How we go about getting food or other necessities is, of course, another matter entirely.) We have to look beyond these instincts for the impact of humanization, but all too often we don’t. Fenichel once observed that “when the Marxist speaks of ‘biological needs’ he is thinking mostly of hunger,” and despite the fact that the “Marxists” he was familiar with in Germany in the thirties were primarily Stalinists and Social Democrats, his point still has some justification with regard to genuine Marxism. The reason for this, Fenichel believed, was that Marxists lacked “psychological training” and that therefore they were “inclined to look on hunger as the only material basis and to view all other [instinctive] drives as ‘superstructure.’”[16] This is, as he noted, “a serious error” because sexuality doesn’t fit into this scheme of things at all and, without it, we overlook the very instinct where humanization has had its major impact.

In most species, sex serves reproduction, and the link between the two is as direct as the link between hunger and eating: sexual behavior is rigidly regulated by hormones and its sole purpose is procreation. But human sexuality presents a completely different picture: we have sex for pleasure, not for reproduction. The distinctive character of human sexuality is evident in the suppression of estrus—i.e., we don’t go into “heat” like other animals but are sexually receptive all the time. (That receptivity is enhanced by another unique feature of our sexuality—the fact that adult females have permanent breasts, unlike other female mammals who develop teats only when nursing infants.) What this amounts to is an adaptation of human sexuality to serve another vitally important human need—social bonding. We have gone on reproducing, of course, but the link between sex and reproduction has become much more oblique and roundabout (though obviously no less successful for that). The fact that for most of the existence of the human race, people had no idea that sex had anything to do with procreation, and the great lengths they went to, once they did know, in order to avoid pregnancy as the outcome of sexual intercourse—all this makes it evident that as a *human need*, sexuality isn’t a compulsion to make babies, but rather a drive for the fulfillment of sexual desire.

The humanization of sexuality has had important consequences. That

sex is for pleasure (and that such pleasure serves to strengthen bonds between people) gives the sexual instinct in humans a high degree of plasticity. We can derive pleasure from parts of the body besides our genitals. We can derive pleasure from our (or others') bodies long before we become capable of procreating, indeed virtually from birth. More decisive still, we can derive pleasure from activities which aren't directly sexual: we have the capacity to redirect (or sublimate, in psychoanalytic parlance) our sexual energy into a broad range of social and cultural activities. And just as important, we have the capacity to repress our desires entirely if their fulfillment is either impossible or too painful. Compare this to hunger for a moment—imagine trying to “sublimate” or “repress” it—and the extraordinary degree to which sexuality has been transformed by humanization becomes apparent. (Repression, it should be added, opens up a new dimension to the discussion of human needs—that of the unconscious: we can have needs whose fulfillment is essential to our well-being and yet we can go through our entire lives without being aware of them, or more precisely without allowing ourselves to be aware of them.)

We miss something fundamental about the human condition if we ignore all of this. It is the key to understanding the child's openness to being shaped by society (and also misshaped by an inhuman society). It provides the basis for a materialist understanding of emotions (which remains a major bastion of idealism) and consequently has important things to tell us about matters as diverse as family relationships, education, the creative process in art, or the appeal of religion and other forms of ideological mystification. Thus, going back to Whyte's initial point, while a materialist conception of instinct cannot explain the changes in human needs, what it can often explain, with great lucidity, is the human content of those needs. That alone would have justified the various efforts over this century to create a theoretical synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis.

I want now to address the claim that Freud had an idealist view of consciousness. First, however, let me say something about Voronsky. It would have been too much of a digression to bring him into the article on Soviet psychoanalysis because doing so would have entailed some critical analysis of his essay on Freud. As important a place as Voronsky has in the history of Bolshevism, particularly for his contributions to a Marxist theory of art, it would be mistaken for us to read his essay as if it were somehow a definitive judgment on psychoanalysis from a Marxist perspective. Other Marxists, Trotsky among them, held different views of the matter. My own reading of the essay is that, in some important respects, it is indicative of the confusion which permeated much of the Soviet discussion about psychoanalysis in the twenties. Sexuality gets barely a mention and the same goes for repression, while the Oedipus complex is dismissed as psycho-pathology, i.e., mental illness. This isn't the place for a detailed assessment, but in my opinion, aside from its intrinsic historical interest, Voronsky's essay isn't a particularly useful guide for us today in evaluating psychoanalysis.

Whyte endorses Voronsky's claim that Freud is an idealist for whom consciousness is entirely dependent on the unconscious. Though Voronsky acknowledged that “Freud mentions the outer world as well,” this is largely incidental to psychoanalysis because “nowhere is the dependence of consciousness on this realm ever examined or analyzed.”[17] In fact, the cognition of reality is so important in Freudian theory that it constitutes one of its fundamental principles of mental functioning, what Freud called the “reality principle.”[18] (To avoid confusion, Freud wasn't reducing reality to a principle but conceptualizing the role that reality plays in mental life.) But the crux of the matter is that cognition wasn't the *only* such principle in Freudian theory—along with the “reality principle,” there was also the “pleasure principle.” The latter is not idealist hedonism (as the Stalinists liked to claim), but a psychological formulation of a basic characteristic of all organic life to seek pleasure

(that is, the satisfaction of needs) and to avoid pain. Or, to look at this in a somewhat different way, the mind is affected by stimulation coming from within the body as well as from the outside world, and any scientific psychology has to be able to account for both aspects of mental life.

Voronsky wrote: “Consciousness is given to us not only in order to ‘symbolize’ our unconscious intentions, but in order that we might be able to cognize objective reality.”[19] Freud wouldn't have disagreed, but he would have probed the issue further: why is it that we are “given” consciousness in the first place? Children aren't born with ready-made minds; indeed, no infant mammal is more helpless—more incapable of dealing with and understanding the reality around it—than the human baby. What governs the mental functioning of the newborn and how does this evolve into consciousness? Freud starts, as any materialist must, with the infant as a biological creature possessed of certain instinctive needs which it wants to satisfy—that is, with a mind (or the rudiments of one) governed by the “pleasure principle.” If all its instinctive needs were constantly and immediately met, then the infant's mental life would never get beyond this point: the child would never learn to think because it would never *need* to think.

But that kind of total satisfaction of needs is impossible—“To be sensuous is to suffer,” as Marx once put it[20]—and soon the child encounters situations in which its needs aren't being satisfied. Its first reaction is to persist with the “pleasure principle,” which is to say that it tries to overcome its difficulty in a hallucinatory way, by conjuring up in its imagination whatever it desires. (This primitive mental process of the infant has a fascinating parallel in the “magical thinking” evident in the religious rituals and artistic imagery of primitive peoples.) It is only when the child discovers that it can't get satisfaction in this imaginary way that it is forced “to form a conception of the real circumstances in the external world and to endeavor to make a real alteration in them.” The “pleasure principle” now makes way for the “reality principle” and this marks a major change in the whole character of mental life: as Freud explains, “what was presented in the mind [of the infant] was no longer what was agreeable but what was real, even if it happened to be disagreeable.”[21] The emergence of consciousness is a two-sided process: the child learns not only about the world outside itself but also about its own place in the world; not only about how it can satisfy its needs, but also about which needs it isn't able (or allowed) to satisfy. The “pleasure principle” doesn't disappear since satisfaction of needs is still the basic motivation of the child, but it becomes increasingly subordinated to the “reality principle,” so that desires which conflict with reality are either sublimated into more socially acceptable behavior or else undergo repression. As for the primitive, hallucinatory way of getting satisfaction, it establishes itself in a new domain—the world of our dreams.

Clearly, then, in the Freudian view, consciousness is not entirely dependent on the unconscious; on the contrary, conscious thought only emerges with the “reality principle,” and major aspects of Freudian theory—sublimation and repression—are concerned precisely with the mind's dependence on and adaptation to external reality. But Freud did pay great attention to the unconscious, and for good reason since he was the first to discover this hidden region of the mind and the major influence it had on consciousness. The overall Freudian view of the mind is not a departure from materialism but an important development of it because it conceives of the mind not as a blank mirror passively reflecting reality but as the organ of a living being whose cognition of the world around it is motivated by its needs and desires.

“Truth for Freud,” writes Whyte, summarizing Voronsky, “is not the external world but the internal world of instinctual energies.” Actually, truth for Freud was not one or the other but *both*. We can easily recognize as idealism a conception that counterposes the internal world to the external world for the purpose of denying the reality of the latter, but why is it any less idealist to deny the reality of the former? The subjective is

also objective. Though no one would dispute this basic proposition of dialectical materialism, when terms like “subjective” and “subjectivity” are used, they usually carry negative connotations. And rightly so insofar as they signify a blindness to objective conditions or an idealist equating of an idea of a thing with the thing itself. But subjectivity isn't just blindness and error (and even blindness and error have an objective content). When Trotsky talked about inspiration, whether of a writer or a revolutionary, as a process in which “the unconscious rises from its deep well and bends the conscious mind to its will, merging it with itself in some greater synthesis”[22]—this too is subjectivity, but manifesting itself as a supremely creative act rather than as an escape from reality. If we dismiss subjectivity or merely equate it with consciousness, we have no way of understanding this.

An important part of the truth does lie in the internal world, in the unconscious, in dreams and fantasies—i.e., in many of the needs, desires and impulses that have been repressed from consciousness because they cannot be accommodated by reality. Their truth lies in their on-going *resistance* to that reality, which isn't a benevolent or neutral environment but an inhuman one (because it is a reality organized *against* the needs of the great majority of humanity). Marcuse made this point with regard to artistic imagination: “In its refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle, in its refusal to forget what *can be*, lies the critical function of phantasy ... That the propositions of the artistic imagination are untrue in terms of the actual organization of the facts belongs to the essence of their truth.”[23] This applies to more than just artists (or perhaps the point is that we are all, in some measure, possessed of an artistic imagination): in our dreams and fantasies, in the deepest layers of our subjective being, we go on “refusing to forget what can be.” This is a truth that is revolutionary in its implications.

(It would be too much of a digression here to take up the points Whyte makes about art and psychoanalysis, though the issue is an important one that deserves a discussion of its own. All I will say here is that, again, Whyte seems to have read Freud selectively and that the relevance of psychoanalysis to art goes far beyond a disclosure of the intentions or motivations of the artist. “Freudian criticism” has a pretty dreadful reputation, having been plagued by a crude reductionism, and Voronsky's hostility to it was understandable. But “Marxist criticism” has had more than its share of crude reductionism as well. There is always a temptation to turn great ideas into magic formulas, but the ideas aren't any less great for that.)

What does it mean to be human? It seems to me that this is what is fundamentally at issue in considering the relationship of Marxism and psychoanalysis. The great merit of the latter is that it offers us a deeper understanding of human nature. It is not a substitute for Marxism, and indeed outside of the framework of the Marxist world outlook, psychoanalysis can easily become a path to idealism and mystification. In that sense, it has a similar type of relationship to Marxism as Darwinism does—a great contribution to materialism which, inevitably in bourgeois society, tends to get perverted by ideological reaction. Just as Darwinism needed to be rescued from the Social Darwinists, so Freudianism needed to be rescued from a good many of the Freudians. As I noted earlier, important efforts to do so were made by a number of Marxist intellectuals in this passing century. Their work deserves to be revived and developed as part of the overall struggle for a renewal of Marxist culture in the working class.

To invoke a term like “human nature,” however, almost seems to require an immediate justification. After all, claims about man “in general” abound in bourgeois ideology and most often their point is to rationalize the swinishness of life in this society (e.g., it's “human nature” to be greedy, acquisitive, selfish, etc.). This doesn't invalidate human nature as such; it simply shows that the ruling class tries to make use of it

for its own purposes. Marx, of course, famously rejected Feuerbach's abstract notion of “man” and defined the “human essence” as “the ensemble of the social relations.”[24] But as brilliant as this insight was, Marx certainly didn't consider it the final word on the subject. In *Capital*, he argued against Jeremy Bentham's narrow utilitarian view of human nature, stating that “he that would criticise all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch.”[25] And the great interest that he and Engels took in the anthropological findings of Bachofen and Morgan clearly indicates their desire to arrive at a much more concrete understanding of “human nature in general.” Their objection, it seems evident, was not to human nature as such but to the abstract and speculative notion of it put forward by Feuerbach.

I want to bring in here a quote from George Novack, for many years a leading intellectual within the American Socialist Workers Party. In a book of his called *Humanism and Socialism*, he devoted a few pages to the question of human nature, and what he had to say typifies, it seems to me, the problem of an approach to this subject that is uninformed by the insights of psychoanalysis. Novack rightly attacked the bourgeois liberal view that sees human nature as “a continuous tug of war between the good and the bad.” Arguing that human nature is the product of society, not the other way around, Novack went on to say: “The qualities of human beings are endlessly changeable, just as their potential capacities are boundless. Human nature is far more changeable than glass, which can flow like a stream, be drawn into threads, or become rigidly frozen. Human nature, hardened into one mold, can be shattered, remelted, and recast into very different, almost unrecognizable, forms.”[26]

There is, to begin with, something singularly inappropriate about this metaphor: glass isn't just malleable, it is also transparent, which is anything but true of human nature. But this isn't just a stylistic problem: what is transparent is actually Novack's conception of human nature. Beyond the fact that it is changeable (which it certainly is), he really had nothing else to say about it. (In fairness, Novack had a good deal to say, following Engels, about the process of humanization, but he never considered the impact this had on human nature beyond insisting on its changeability.) The problem is that this position is open to an important objection: after all, if human nature is so incredibly malleable, if it can be “shattered, remelted, recast” into all kinds of “almost unrecognizable forms,” then what is to prevent the enemies of the revolution from fitting human nature into a mold that serves their interests? Inadvertently, what Novack conceived of here was not a human being but a cipher, quite literally a piece of glass that could be filled with all manner of content, including the most reactionary.

We need to fill in the “blank” of human nature. Understood materialistically, it is not a limit on social progress, but an indictment of the inhuman nature of bourgeois society. One of the roots of modern socialism, it needs to be recalled, is just such an indictment—drawn up by the great utopian socialist Charles Fourier, based on his theory of the human passions. Reading Fourier today, one can't help being struck by the magnificence of the picture of human nature that he drew. It wasn't its variety or changeability that he emphasized (he believed in 12 passions that were universal and unchanging, though they could be combined in many different ways) but rather its grandness. Everything about Fourier's image of man was huge—his ambitions, his pleasures, his energy—and the great crime of bourgeois civilization was the straitjacket it imposed on these passions. As Marx once said in what amounts to a marvelous tribute: “Fourier opposes a Gargantuan view of man to the unassuming mediocrity of the men of the Restoration period.”[27] Today, we also live in an era of stifling (though not so unassuming) mediocrity—small thoughts, small hopes, small souls—an era where “micro” is the operative adjective. And we too need to oppose to it “a Gargantuan view of man”—a

view that refuses to accept the “sensible” constraints of a repressive world, a view that “refuses to forget what can be.” But our view of man has to be on a higher level than Fourier’s—not utopian speculation but a scientific conception of human nature that only a synthesis of the ideas of Marx and Freud can provide.

Frank Brenner

Notes:

1. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in *The Pelican Freud Library* (London: 1984), vol. 11, p. 295.
2. Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: 1989), p. 402.
3. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (1924) (Ann Arbor: 1975), p. 255.
4. Sigmund Freud, *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* (1915) in *The Pelican Freud Library* (London: 1984), vol. 11, p. 118.
5. Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (1959) (Chicago: 1979), p. 215.
6. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) in *The Pelican Freud Library* (London: 1985), vol. 12, pp. 293-4.
7. Gad Horowitz, *Repression: Basic and surplus repression in psychoanalytic theory* (Toronto: 1977), p. 196.
8. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) in *The Pelican Freud Library* (London: 1985), vol. 12, p. 192.
9. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (1916-17)* in *The Pelican Freud Library* (London: 1973), Vol. 1, pp. 353-4.
10. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (1955) (New York: 1962), p. 228.
11. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957) (London: 1973), p. 138.
12. Otto Fenichel, “Psychoanalytic Remarks on Fromm’s Book *Escape from Freedom*” (1944) in *The Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel*, Second Series (New York: 1954), p. 265.
13. André Breton, “Political Position of Today’s Art” (1935) in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: 1972), p. 220.
14. This point is one of the central arguments in Trotsky’s polemic “Class and Art” (1924) against the supporters of proletarian culture. See *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art* (New York: 1970), pp. 66-70.
15. Frederick Engels, “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man” in *Dialectics of Nature* (1872-82) (New York: 1940), pp. 279-296.
16. Otto Fenichel, “Psychoanalysis as the Nucleus of a Future Dialectical-Materialistic Psychology” (1935) in *American Imago*, v. 24, 1967, p. 306.
17. A. K. Voronsky, “Freudianism and Art” (1925) in *Art as the Cognition of Life* (Oak Park, Mich.: 1998), p. 176.
18. Sigmund Freud, “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (1911) in *The Pelican Freud Library*, v. 11 (London: 1984), pp. 29-44.
19. “Freudianism and Art”, p. 184.
20. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: 1977), p. 146.
21. “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning”, pp. 36-7.
22. Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (1929) (New York: 1970), p. 335.
23. *Eros and Civilization*, p. 135.
24. Karl Marx, the sixth of the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) in F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1888) (Moscow: 1946), p. 64.
25. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (1867) (Moscow: 1954), p. 571, n. 2.
26. George Novack, *Humanism and Socialism* (New York: 1973), p. 127.
27. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845) (Moscow: 1976), p. 540.

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