

*Introduction*

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THE AMBIGUOUS LEGACY  
OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Freud always stresses what great forces [are] in the mind, what strong prejudices work against the idea of psycho-analysis. But he never says what an enormous charm that idea has for people, just as it has for Freud himself.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

One century after its founding, psychoanalysis presents us with a paradox. Almost instantly recognized as a great force for human emancipation, it played a central role in the modernism of the 1920s, the English and American welfare states of the 1940s and 50s, the radical upheavals of the 1960s, and the feminist and gay-liberation movements of the 1970s. Yet it simultaneously became a fount of antipolitical, antifeminist, and homophobic prejudice, a degraded profession, a pseudoscience whose survival is now very much in doubt. This book is an exploration of this paradox; it aims to identify and affirm the emancipatory dimension of analytic thought without denying the validity of the criticisms or the need to rethink its legacy.

The explanation offered here is social and historical. Psychoanalysis permanently transformed the ways in which ordinary men and women throughout the world understand themselves and one another. Yet in spite of uncounted studies, not to mention special pleadings and tendentious attacks, we have still not historicized psychoanalysis; we apparently still lack the large social, cultural, and intellectual frame necessary to understand a phenomenon so central to our *own* self-constitution. In order to situate

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psychoanalysis historically, it is not enough to know Freud's biography, or the history of psychiatry, or of Vienna, although these are certainly necessary. Any history will have to explain, above all, the intensity of its appeal and the breadth of its influence. But that very influence has made the task of achieving historical perspective difficult. Perspective requires distance. Lately, especially with the waning of the medical fortunes of psychoanalysis, this distance has begun to appear.

There has been one great attempt to grasp psychoanalysis historically: Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*.<sup>1</sup> Published in 1980, when the influence of analysis was beginning to recede, Schorske's book began by evoking the statue of Athena erected in front of Parliament in mid-nineteenth-century Vienna. For Schorske, the statue symbolized the Enlightenment, with its then-new middle-class ideals of rationality and autonomy and its focus on the courage and inner psychological structure (*Bildung*) that self-government required. From this heroic starting point, Schorske traced the breakdown of the Enlightenment ethos in mass politics, aestheticism, and a preoccupation with the irrational. Arguing that Freud responded to the rise of mass anti-Semitism in the 1890s by abandoning his earlier legal and political ambitions, Schorske concluded that psychoanalysis was a "counterpolitical" phenomenon: it reflected the fin de siècle withdrawal from reason and public life. While Schorske left open the implications of his interpretation, Philip Rieff, Christopher Lasch, representatives of the Frankfurt School, and others made related arguments about twentieth-century "psychological society," claiming that partly under the influence of psychoanalysis the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy had declined into a psychologicistic "culture of narcissism."

Schorske's interpretation remains both indispensable and inadequate. On the one hand, Schorske rightly understood the extent to which psychoanalysis arose out of the late-nineteenth-century transformation of the bourgeois class, particularly (although he did not say this) out of the experiences of its younger members and its women. The decline of the family enterprise, the loosening of the structures of the bourgeois family, and a new emphasis on consumption as opposed to discipline, accumulation, and self-control created the climate for this new way of thinking. But Schorske failed to capture the dual character of psychoanalysis. By reducing Freudianism to a counterpolitical withdrawal from reason and public life, he failed to grasp the emancipatory aspects of its exploration of the human psyche, especially those of special relevance to marginal and exploited classes and to women.

Today, in contrast, it has become possible to see psychoanalysis whole, acknowledging both its repressive and its liberatory aspects. The key is to see it as the *first great theory and practice of "personal life."* By personal life, I mean the experience of having an identity distinct from one's place in the family, in society, and in the social division of labor. In one sense, the possibility of having a personal life is a universal aspect of being human, but that is not the sense I have in mind. Rather, I mean a historically specific experience of singularity and interiority, one that was sociologically grounded in modern processes of industrialization and urbanization, and in the history of the family.

Previously, the family was the primary locus of production and reproduction.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the individual's sense of identity was rooted in his or her place in the family. In the nineteenth century, however, the separation (both physical and emotional) of paid work from the household, which is to say the rise of industrial capitalism, gave rise to new forms of privacy, domesticity, and intimacy. At first these were experienced as the familial counterparts to the impersonal world of the market. Later they became associated with the possibility and goal of a personal life distinct from and even outside of the family. This goal found social expression in such phenomena as the "new" (or independent) woman, the emergence of public homosexual identities, and the turning of young people away from a preoccupation with business and toward sexual experimentation, bohemia, and artistic modernism. In the period that initiated what historians have called the "second industrial revolution," roughly from the 1880s to the 1920s, new urban spaces and media—popular theater, music halls, the kinetoscope—provided reference points from which individuals could imaginatively construct extrafamilial identities. As a result, personal identity became a problem and a project for individuals, as opposed to something given to them by their place in the family or the economy. Psychoanalysis was a theory and practice of this new aspiration for a personal life. Its original historical telos was *defamilialization*, the freeing of individuals from unconscious images of authority originally rooted in the family.

The founding idea of psychoanalysis, the idea of a dynamic or *personal unconscious*, reflected this new experience of personal life. According to that idea, stimuli that came to the individual from the society or culture were not directly registered but were first dissolved and internally reconstituted in such a way as to give them personal, even idiosyncratic, meanings. Thus, there was no direct or necessary connection between one's social condition and one's subjectivity. Equally important, Freud's idea of the unconscious



project as a personal and provisional hermeneutic of self-discovery, one that a psychoanalyst could facilitate but not control. In this way, he gave expression to possibilities of individuality, authenticity, and freedom that had only recently emerged, and opened the way to a new understanding of social life.

The result was two-sided. As Schorske argued, psychoanalysis could, indeed, undermine the emancipatory promise of the Enlightenment insofar as it served to mystify the basis for personal life, and thus to obscure the political, economic, and cultural preconditions necessary for its flourishing. But that tendency was contingent, not necessary. More important, the Enlightenment was not a high point to be emulated but an incomplete project to be developed. The statue of Athena evoked by Schorske symbolized the “Copernican revolution” of eighteenth-century modernity, which put a new principle of subjective freedom at the center of all modern pursuits such as art, morality, politics, and even science (which liberated the human subject at the same time as it objectified nature). But the larger implications of that principle remained to be unfolded in a “second modernity.” Contrary to Schorske’s narrative of decline, the fin de siècle era inaugurated that second modernity, which was associated with mass production, mass democracy, and the rise of women, homosexuals, and racial and national minorities. While the first modernity—the Enlightenment—viewed the subject as the locus of reason in the sense of universal and necessary truths, the second—call it “modernism”—viewed the subject as a concrete person, located in a particular time and place subject to historical contingency and possessing a unique individuality. Whereas philosophy was the hallmark of the first modernity, psychoanalysis, along with modernist art and literature, was the hallmark of the second.

Seen this way, the classical liberalism that Schorske extolled was based on three historically limited ideas. First, mid-nineteenth-century liberals equated autonomy with self-control. Second, despite feminist subcurrents, most believed that women’s character and psychology differed fundamentally from men’s. Third, liberals believed that even modern, democratic society required natural or social hierarchy to function. All three of these beliefs were challenged in the fin de siècle era. The emphasis on self-control was challenged by ideologies of “release” and “relaxation” that developed along with mass consumption. The belief in en bloc gender difference was challenged by the entry of women into public life and by a new openness concerning sexuality. Hierarchy was challenged by mass democracy, trade unionism, and socialism. These developments deepened and radicalized the ideals of the Enlightenment; they were not merely negations of it. As the

first great theory and practice of modern personal life, psychoanalysis shared their potential for extending and deepening the emancipatory promise of modernity. As we shall see, it became caught up in the changed meanings of autonomy, women's equality, and democracy.

In general, then, psychoanalysis hovered between twin possibilities: mystification, on the one hand, and deepening the meaning of modernity, on the other. What determined the balance was the role psychoanalysis came to play in relation to larger historical forces. To put the matter in a nutshell: psychoanalysis served as the "Calvinism" of the second industrial revolution. It played a role analogous to that played by Calvinism in relation to early capitalism and by Methodism in relation to industrialization. Let me explain.

According to Max Weber, early Calvinism helped spark in its followers the personal transformations that made capitalism possible. Whereas Christianity began with Jesus urging his followers to leave their families for an authentic spiritual community, the Protestant "saints" of the seventeenth century redefined the family as a locus of charismatic meaning, sanctifying its everyday economic activities and giving them an ethical character, that of a "calling" or *Beruf*. Several centuries later, Methodism served related ends; embraced by the English and American industrial working classes, it became a vehicle of personal transformation, promoting abstinence, time discipline, and thrift. It thereby enabled the first industrial revolution. In both cases, a religious movement supplied the inner motivations for a socioeconomic transformation that could not have won committed followers on its own terms.<sup>8</sup> Psychoanalysis played a similar role for the *second* industrial revolution.

The first industrial revolution began in England and created the factory system. The second began in the United States and created the vertically integrated corporation, a corporation that organized not only raw materials and production but also advertising, marketing, and consumption. The first revolution extracted a surplus from manual labor; the second relied on higher education, science, and mental labor. In the first, work and life largely overlapped: factories were small and close to home, and agriculture was still the dominant way of life. In the second, work and life were sharply separated, as leisure and consumption took on a life of their own. During the first industrial revolution, individuals still tended to identify their fate with that of a community; the second, in contrast, was marked by the sense of a singular personal life and by revolutionary changes in the nature of the family.<sup>9</sup> The organization of this book mirrors the trajectory of the second industrial revolution: part one (1890–1914) evokes its origins, part two



Similarly, psychoanalysis helped recast the second great Enlightenment promise: the emancipation of women. To eighteenth-century feminists, emancipation meant equal rights, which they defended on the grounds that men and women shared a common nature as rational beings. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, most women's advocates stressed gender difference, invoking distinctive female virtues to support claims for social reform. By foregrounding individuality in the sphere of sexual love, the *fin de siècle* aspiration to a personal life exceeded both of those approaches. Psychoanalysis deepened and gave content to that aspiration. It dispelled the nineteenth-century idea of *en bloc* gender difference, redefined gender as sexual object-choice, and eventually helped uncover the psychological depths of human dependence, especially in regard to women's mothering. In this respect, as with autonomy, its legacy is ambivalent. Analysis advanced cultural understandings of female sexuality and homosexuality even as it became at times a vicious and effective enemy of feminists and homosexuals.

Finally, as an expression of personal life, psychoanalysis complicated and radicalized the third great promise of modernity: democracy. Traditional authority was paternal, centripetal, hierarchical, and family-centered. In its place, liberals sought to establish limited, accountable political authority by distinguishing between public and private spheres. Nineteenth-century liberals sharpened this distinction by extending it to the division between the family and the economy. The second industrial revolution, however, complicated the public/private division. With women's entry into public life and the rise of a sexualized mass culture, hitherto private matters began to become public. At the same time, familial authority, supposedly banished from the public sphere, persisted in the psychic worlds of individuals. These complications potentially deepened the idea of democracy, in part by suggesting the possibility of new, more reflective relations to authority. Psychoanalysis fostered the investigation of these relations. Its central object was "transference," which Freud conceived as the personal relation to authority, ultimately shaped by the infant's experience with its parents. The analysis of transference was at the center of every individual analysis. In the broader culture, too, Freudian thought helped lay bare the interplay between public and private by foregrounding the hidden transferences that cemented social movements and social groups. At the same time, as democratic society and the welfare state exerted new forms of constraint and control, psychoanalysis supplied much of their theory.

The same ironies played themselves out differently in different contexts. In its central European birthplace, Freudian thought challenged an older,





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