

Historical Analysis

Ellen Willis

SECRETS OF THE SOUL: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

by *Eli Zaretsky*
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THAT PSYCHOANALYSIS has lost its once formidable authority is clear; the question remains whether its insights have been surpassed or merely repressed. Certainly the ways of thinking that Freud once deconstructed—religious absolutism on the one hand, naive rationalism on the other—now reign more powerfully than ever. Fundamentalist movements are surging all over the world, while mechanistic technoscience rides an equally messianic logic toward ecological Armageddon. Free-market triumphalists gleefully flaunt their power, deciding the fate of nations with investments and loans made or withheld, rendering political democracy impotent or irrelevant, and this state of affairs is said by economists to reflect “rational choice.”

In America, the destruction of the World Trade Center by militant fundamentalists instantly turned an unelected minority president into a hugely popular Strong Leader; as a result, we are pursuing a war whose central feature is the government’s consistent, disastrous denial of reality. The president and his party have made no secret of their commitment to redistribute wealth upward, increase corporate power, and crush labor, yet they retain the loyalty of much if not most of the working class. Corporate scandals and abrogated union contracts deprive millions of people of rightfully earned retirement income; medical insurance becomes a privilege even as health maintenance organizations degrade standards of care: where are the crowds in the streets? The pas-

sion that once infused left social movements now seems the exclusive property of those dedicated to cultural and economic counter-revolution. Although the tens of millions of people whose views on labor, race, feminism, gay rights, and the environment are left of center far outnumber the organized Christian right, they feel helpless to assert themselves politically. Instead they have repeatedly pinned their hopes on a center-right Democratic Party that, in a cut-rate version of the Republican appeal to Middle America, promises to protect them from radical lunatics—a promise that in November 2004 it once again failed to keep.

What forces propel the march of the right, the paralysis of the left, the identification of ordinary people with the rich and powerful, rampant sexual anxiety, al-Qaeda’s apocalyptic violence, Donald Rumsfeld’s delusions of omnipotence, the torture at Abu Ghraib? By themselves, conventional categories of class interest and geopolitics do little to enlighten us. It’s the psychoanalytic vocabulary of unconscious conflict and ambivalence; of sexual desire, guilt, and rage; of sadism and masochism that supplies the missing link in the discussion. The purging of that vocabulary from the mainstream of public discourse not only hobbles our ability to understand our situation but is, or so I’m convinced, a symptom of that situation, which thrives on the refusal to understand.

“Psychoanalysis: Is it Science or is it Toast?” reads the headline above Daphne Merkin’s *New York Times Book Review* piece on *Secrets of the Soul*, Eli Zaretsky’s capacious effort to put Freud’s movement in historical and cultural perspective. The question has the flavor of “When did you stop beating your wife?”, because the psychoanalytic method is not amenable to controlled experiments and so is excluded by definition from the positivist conception of science that now prevails. The flippancy of the title captures the jocular uneasi-

ness that afflicts the press when it contemplates the fact that Freud, buried so many times, refuses to die. And yet this silly question has serious implications for what it means to write about psychoanalysis in our time: it points to both the difficulty and the limitations of Zaretsky's project.

Secrets of the Soul does not focus on the truth claims of psychoanalysis but on its social meanings and its influence, for good or ill. Its central idea is that psychoanalysis came into being as the theory and practice of "personal life"—that is, "the experience of having an identity distinct from one's place in the family, in society, and in the social division of labor." In Zaretsky's account, the self-conscious embrace of individual identity became a major social force with the advent of the "second industrial revolution," which transformed American capitalism into an instrument of mass consumption, stimulating fantasies of personal gratification, weakening familial authority, and promoting greater freedom for women and youth. Sigmund Freud's conception of a personal unconscious, of a distinction between public and private, social and individual meaning, resonated profoundly with these changes.

Zaretsky views "personal life" as a finite historical phenomenon that dramatically expanded during the early years of the twentieth century; confronted successive challenges to its very existence in World War I, bolshevism, and fascism; was co-opted and rationalized by post-World War II welfare states; and was manipulated and trivialized by consumerism. Now, he contends, we are going through a "third industrial revolution"—marked by a "globalized service- and information-based economy"—in which personal life threatens to disappear altogether, its emphasis on autonomy and self-knowledge largely supplanted by group-oriented identity and the demand for recognition. The contradictions of psychoanalysis, as the book charts them in rich and exhaustive detail, are bound up with the vicissitudes of this cultural history. If psychoanalysis has been a potent ingredient of modernism and cultural radicalism, if it dissected the mass psychology of fascism and paved the way for contemporary feminism, it has also sold products, championed social adjustment, pathologized homo-

sexuality and female self-assertion, managed and pacified the clients of the welfare state bureaucracy. And as personal life loses its grip on the imagination, the energy once invested in psychoanalysis migrates to identity politics, post-structuralism, and other postmodern points.

Zaretsky is a partisan of self-reflection, openly worried about its decline; but toward the future of psychoanalysis he displays an agnostic dispassion: its historical role is what's important, not its intrinsic value as a method or body of knowledge. This approach follows logically from his disciplinary framework and his intellectual temperament. Yet it might also be regarded as a strategy, witting or not, for outflanking the reductive and often bullying questions that have set the terms of the Freud debate. It allows him to maintain an above-the-battle stance even as he insists on the vital contribution of psychoanalysis to individual autonomy, democracy, and feminism. The power of psychoanalytic thought as a force for human emancipation—a power that remains palpable despite its myriad betrayals, not least by Freud and his epigones themselves—is alive in these pages. For Zaretsky, one of the earliest New Leftists to recognize the importance of sexual and familial politics, the imperative to be drawn from historicizing psychoanalysis is that its emancipatory potential survive in some form even if the movement itself cannot be salvaged.

BUT TERMS OF debate are stubborn things. The science versus toast theme dominates Merkin's review; though she herself is something of a Freud-symp, the greatest compliment she can bestow on *Secrets of the Soul* is that it is "evenhanded." Meanwhile, Andrew Scull, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, is vastly annoyed that a new book on psychoanalysis should exist at all: "What on earth remains to be said?" He goes on to accuse Zaretsky of making "sweeping assertions" about the cultural impact of psychoanalysis rather than offering a "systematic presentation of evidence." In fact, the evidence for Zaretsky's thesis consists of developments in psychoanalysis and events in cultural history that are, in their broad outlines, common knowledge. What is new is the way he connects all this

information and the underlying patterns he discerns; which is to say that *Secrets of the Soul* is a work of interpretation. But apparently historical interpretation, like the analytic kind, is now to be discarded as unscientific. Besides, Freud was no angel, especially toward his women patients, and, Scull sniffs, “Zaretsky fails to indicate how deeply this sort of behavior permeated analytic circles.” Toast! With jelly on it!

FOR ALL THE philistinism in this genre of commentary, it does suggest a problem with Zaretsky’s Marxist-inflected historicism. Is it possible—at this historical moment—to have a meaningful conversation about psychoanalysis without directly joining the issue of whether its basic propositions are true? One can of course discuss the history of a movement without endorsing or rejecting its ideas. But *Secrets of the Soul* argues that psychoanalysis is not merely of historical interest. As Zaretsky puts it in his epilogue, “Since psychoanalysis is unlikely to play the same role in the twenty-first century that it played in the twentieth, we may have to invent new institutions that encapsulate and build upon its insights if we want to preserve its achievements.” These include such psychoanalytic “understandings” as that “each individual has an inner world that is, in good part, not only unconscious but repressed” and “society and politics are driven not just by conscious interests and perceived necessities but also by unconscious motivations, anxieties, and half-spoken memories.” But it is precisely these understandings that are now under withering attack by the anti-psychoanalytic backlash. How do we preserve them without arguing that they are real?

In a revealing conceit, Zaretsky likens psychoanalysis to religion. Invoking Max Weber’s analysis of Calvinism as the psychological motor of early capitalism, he proposes that psychoanalysis played a comparable role in facilitating the transition from a production-based to a consumption-based economy: “Just as men and women did not embark on the transition from agrarianism to industrial capitalism for merely instrumental or economic reasons, so in the twentieth century they did not become

consumers in order to supply markets. Rather, they separated from traditional familial morality, gave up their obsession with self-control and thrift, and entered into the sexualized ‘dreamworlds’ of mass consumption on behalf of a new orientation to personal life.” Psychoanalysis provided a rationale and a form of permission for this shift.

The parallel makes sense, up to a point. Certainly psychoanalysis as a practice is a discipline through which one can pursue a kind of secular redemption. And as Zaretsky observes, the trajectory of religion, in the Weberian formulation, from a sect organized around a charismatic figure through stages of “idealization, rebellion, dissemination, institutionalization, and routinization” is mirrored in the history of the psychoanalytic movement, which begins with the subversive fervor of Freud’s early circle, fragments into competing sects, and eventually assimilates to and serves the prevailing order. In effect, Zaretsky the historical materialist defines psychoanalysis as the ideological superstructure erected on the material base of the second industrial revolution; seen in this light, whether there is actually such a thing as repression matters no more than whether there is such a thing as God. But psychoanalysis is not only a spiritual quest, nor—though it’s been as subject as any other influential body of thought to human beings’ unfortunate tendency to confuse their theories with gospel—is it dogma meant to be accepted on faith. On the contrary, it offers a critique of all faith, including its own quasi-religious appeal. And unlike religion, it ultimately stands or falls on how well it does what it purports to do: explain human motivation and behavior, uncover objective knowledge of the subjective life.

While the implicit assumption of *Secrets of the Soul* is that history shapes psychology, the grounding insight of psychoanalysis is that the psyche is produced by the clash of history—individual and social—with the primal biological energy of the sexual drive. From this perspective, to say that historical conditions made personal life possible, and with it the self-consciousness that allowed psychoanalysis to emerge, is to tell half the story: one also has to consider that the erotic impulse, ever pressing

for satisfaction, had something to do with making the history that encouraged its expression. Similarly, if psychoanalytic claims are valid, the unconscious will continue to exert its influence on the individual and society whether we embrace or repudiate (repress?) the understanding that this is so. It would seem then that if the basic concepts of psychoanalysis are indeed worth preserving, it is important not only to situate psychoanalysis historically, but to view history psychoanalytically.

Zaretsky makes a cogent case that the cultural freedoms of modernity owe an enormous

debt to Sigmund Freud. I see an equally strong connection between fear of those freedoms and the passion to obliterate Freud's legacy. It's not simply that history has moved on to a different phase; it's also that the conflicted psyche is pushing back. This is the specter that haunts us as the reaction gathers strength. ●

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Working Hard or Hardly Working?

Jim McNeill

IN 1926, one of the leanest years the labor movement has known, a group of dissident miners challenged the rule of United Mine Workers president John L. Lewis. That may seem odd to us today, for we remember Lewis as the defiant founder of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the great labor insurgent who inspired millions of workers to build America's industrial unions in the 1930s. But during the 1920s, many miners saw Lewis as a hidebound labor boss, a cowering autocrat who responded to industry's assault on their union not by fighting back but by falling back into a defensive crouch. To them, Lewis seemed more intent on stifling rank-and-file militants than battling despotic coal companies.

During the 1926 campaign for Mine Workers president, Lewis bullied key dissidents into withdrawing their support for John Brophy, his fiercely democratic opponent, and several members of Brophy's slate who wouldn't drop off the ticket were arbitrarily thrown off by union election officers. Officially, Lewis won the election in a landslide, but there was massive ballot fraud during the vote. When Bro-

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

HARD WORK: REMAKING THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

by Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss
University of California Press, 2004 244 pp
cloth \$50 paper \$19.95

THE NEXT UPSURGE: LABOR AND THE NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

by Dan Clawson
Cornell University Press, 2003 235 pp
cloth \$42.50 paper \$18.95

REORGANIZING THE RUST BELT: AN INSIDE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

by Steven Henry Lopez
University of California Press, 2004 292 pp
cloth \$55 paper \$21.95

REBUILDING LABOR: ORGANIZING AND ORGANIZERS IN THE NEW UNION MOVEMENT

Edited by Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss
Cornell University Press, 2004 309 pp
cloth \$49.95 paper \$19.95