

Adorno and Freud: “Only the exaggerations are true”

The relation of Freudian psychoanalysis to Marxist critical social theory

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Adorno’s *Habilitationschrift* (dissertation) was on Kant and Freud. It ended with Marx. Why did Adorno think that Marx addressed the problems of both Kantian and Freudian accounts of consciousness?

The distinction between Kant and Freud turns on the psychoanalytic concept of the “unconscious,” the by-definition unknowable portion of mental processes, the unthought thoughts and unfelt feelings that are foreign to Kant’s rational idealism. Kant’s “critical” philosophy was concerned with how we can know what we know, and what this revealed about our subjectivity. Kant’s philosophical “critiques” were investigations into conditions of possibility: specifically, Kant was concerned with the possibility of change in consciousness. By contrast, Freud was concerned with how conscious intention was constituted in struggle with countervailing, “unconscious” tendencies: how the motivation for consciousness becomes opaque to itself. But, like Kant, Freud was not interested in disenchanting but strengthening consciousness.

For both Kant and Freud, the greater possibilities for human freedom are to be found in the conquests of consciousness: to become more self-aware is to achieve greater freedom; this freedom was grounded in possibilities for change. The potential for the qualitative transformation of consciousness, which for both Kant and Freud includes affective relations and hence is not merely about “conceptual” knowledge, underwrites both Kantian philosophy and Freudian psychotherapy.

But both Kantian and Freudian accounts of consciousness became *utopian* for Adorno. Adorno’s Marxist “materialist” critique of the inadequacies of Kant and Freud was concerned with redeeming the *desiderata* of their approaches to consciousness, and not simply “demystifying” them. For Adorno, what Kant and Freud both lacked was a critical theory of *capital*, a capacity for the self-reflection, as such, of the subjectivity of the commodity form. Marx provided this. For Adorno, both Kant and Freud were liable to be abused if the problem of capital was obscured and not taken as the fundamental historical frame for the problem of freedom that both sought to address. What was *critical* about Kantian and Freudian consciousness could become, unwittingly, unintentionally *affirmative* of the status quo, as if we were not *tasked*, but already were rational subjects with well developed egos, as if we were already *free*. This potential self-undermining or self-contradiction of the task of consciousness that Adorno found via Kant and Freud could be explicated adequately only from a Marxian perspective. When Adorno deployed Freudian and Kantian categories for grasping consciousness, he deliberately rendered them aporetic. Adorno considered Kant and Freud as providing descriptive theories which in turn must be subject to critical reflection and specification — within a Marxian socio-historical frame.

For Adorno, the self-opacity of the subject, or, in Freud's terms, the phenomenon of the "unconscious mental process," is the expression of the self-contradiction or non-identity of the "subject," in Hegelian-Marxian terms. Because Kantian consciousness is not a static proposition, because Kant was concerned with an account of the possibility of a self-grounded, "self-legislated" and thus *self-conscious* freedom, Adorno was not arraying Freud against Kant; Adorno was not treating Kant as naïve consciousness, but rather attending to the historical separation of Freud from Kant. Marx came between them. The Freudian theory of the unconscious is, for Adorno, a description of the self-alienated character of the subjectivity of modern capital. Freud can be taken as an alternative to Marx — or Kant — only the degree to which a Marxian approach fails to give adequate expression to historical developments in the self-contradiction of the subjectivity of the commodity form.

One thinker usually neglected in accounts of the development of Frankfurt School Critical Theory is Wilhelm Reich. For Adorno, perhaps the key phrase from Reich (which relates his thought to the more properly recognized Frankfurt School theorist Erich Fromm), is "fear of freedom." This phrase has a deeper connotation than might be at first apparent, in that it refers to a dynamic process and not a static fact of repression. "Repression," in Freud's terms, is *self-repression*; it constitutes the self, and hence is not to be understood as an "introjection" from without. The potential for freedom itself produces the reflex of fear, in an intrinsic motion. The fear of freedom is thus an index of freedom's possibility. Repression implies its opposite, which is the potential transformation of consciousness. The "fear of freedom" is thus grounded in freedom itself.

Reich derived the “fear of freedom” directly from Freud. Importantly, for Freud psychopathology exists on a spectrum in which the pathological and the healthy differ not in kind but degree. Freud does not identify the healthy with the normal, but treats both as species of the pathological. The normal is simply the typical, commonplace pathology. For Freud, “neurosis” was the unrealistic way of coping with the new and the different, a failure of the ego’s “reality principle.” The characteristic thought-figure here is “neurotic repetition.” Neurosis is, for Freud, fundamentally, about repetition. To free oneself from neurosis is to free oneself from unhealthy repetition. Nonetheless, however, psychical character is, for Freud, itself a function of repetition. For Freud, the point of therapy is not to eliminate the individual experience that gives rise to one’s character, but rather to allow the past experience to recur in the present in a less pathological way. This is why, for Freud, to “cure” a neurosis is not to “eliminate” but *transform* it. The point is not to unravel a person’s psychical character, but for it to play out better under changed conditions. For it is simply inappropriate and impractical for a grown person to engage adult situations “regressively,” that is, according to a pattern deeply fixed in childhood. While that childhood pattern cannot be extirpated, it can be transformed, so as to be better able to deal with the new situations that are not the repetition of childhood traumas and hence prove intractable to past forms of mastery. At the same time, such forms of mastery from childhood need to be satisfied and not denied. There is no more authoritarian character than the child. What are otherwise “authoritarian” characteristics of the psyche allow precisely these needs to be satisfied. “Guilt,” that most characteristic Freudian category, is a form of libidinal satisfaction, hence its power.

Perhaps the most paradoxical thought Reich offered, writing in the aftermath of the 1933 Nazi seizure of power, was the need for a Marxian approach to attend to the “*progressive* character of fascism.” “Progressive” in what sense? Reich thought that Marxism had failed to properly “heed the unconscious impulses” that were otherwise expressed by fascism. Fascism had expressed the emergence of the qualitatively new, if however paradoxically, in the form of an apparently retrograde politics. Reich was keen to point out that fascism was not really a throwback to some earlier epoch but rather the appearance of the new, if in pathological and obscured form. Walter Benjamin’s notion of “progressive barbarism” similarly addressed this paradox, for “barbarism” is not savagery but decadence.

Reich thought that learning from Freud was necessary in the face of the phenomenon of fascism, which he regarded as expressing the failure of Marxism. This was due to Freud’s attention to the problem of expanding and strengthening the capacity of the conscious ego to experience the new, and not “regress” through the neurotic attempt to master the present by repeating the past. Freud attended to the problem of achieving true, present, rather than false, past mastery. This, Freud thought, could be achieved through the faculty of “reality-testing,” the self-modification of behavior that characterized a healthy ego, able to cope with new situations. Because for Freud this took place always in the context and as a function of a predominantly “unconscious” mental process, of which the ego was merely the outmost part, and in which was lodged the affects and thoughts of the past, this involved a theory of the transformation of consciousness. Because, according to Freud, the unconscious did not “know time,” transformation was the realm of the ego-psychology of consciousness.

For Reich, as well as for Benjamin and Adorno, from the perspective of Marxism, the Freudian account of past and present provided a rich description of the problem of the political task of social emancipation, in its *subjective* dimension. Fascism had resulted from Marxism's failure to meet the demands of individuals outpaced by history. Reich's great critique of "Marxist" rationalism was that it could not account for why, for the most part, starving people do not steal to survive and the oppressed do not revolt.

By contrast, in the Freudian account of emancipation from neurosis, there was both a continuity with and change from prior experience in the capacity for the experience of the new and different. This was the ego's freedom. One suffered from neurosis the degree to which one shielded oneself stubbornly against the new. This is why Freud characterized melancholia, or the inability to grieve, as a narcissistic disorder: it represented the false mastery of a pre-ego psychology in which consciousness had not adequately distinguished itself from its environment; the self was not adequately bounded, but instead engaged in a pathological projective identification with the object of loss. The melancholic suffered not from loss of the object, but rather from a sense of loss of self, or, a lack of sense of self. The pathological loss was due to a pathological affective investment in the object to begin with, which was not a realistic object, not a proper object of libidinal investment at all. The melancholic suffered from an unrealistic sense of both self and other.

In the setting of social change, such narcissism was wounded in recoil from the experience of the new. It thus undermined itself, for it regressed below the capacities for consciousness. The challenge of the new that could be met in freedom becomes instead the pathologically repressed, the insistence on what Adorno called the "ever-same."

There is an illusion involved, both of the emergently new in the present, and in the image of the past.¹ But such “illusion” is not only pathological, but constitutive: it comprises the “necessary form of appearance,” the thought and felt reality of past and present in consciousness. This is the double-movement, of the pathologically new, and of an old, past pathology, within which the ego struggles for its very existence, in the process of undergoing change within and without, that Adorno took to be a powerful description of the modern subject of capital. The “liquidation of the individual” was in its dwindling present, evaporated between past and future. The modern subject was “non-identical” with itself. Reich had provided a rather prosaic account of how accelerating social transformations in capital guaranteed that characteristic patterns of childhood life would prove inappropriate to adult realities, and that parental authority would be thus undermined. Culture could no longer serve its ancient function.

¹ See Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006), 83:

[Siegfried] Kracauer . . . pointed out [in his review of Adorno’s *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*] that . . . [Adorno’s] methodology derived from the concept of truth developed by Benjamin in his studies of Goethe and the Baroque drama: “In the view of these studies [i.e., Benjamin’s] the truth-content of a work reveals itself only in its collapse. . . . The work’s claim to totality, its systematic structure, as well as its superficial intentions share the fate of everything transient, but as they pass away with time the work brings characteristics and configurations to the fore that are actually images of truth.” This process could be exemplified by a recurrent dream: throughout its recurrences its images age, if imperceptibly; its historical truth takes shape as its thematic content dissolves. It is the truth-content that gives the dream, the philosophical work, or the novel its resilience. This idea of historical truth is one of the most provocative rebuttals to historicism ever conceived: works are not studied in the interest of returning them to their own time and period, documents of “how it really was,” but rather according to the truth they release in their own process of disintegration.

Freud's account of the "unconscious mental process" was one salient way of grasping this constitutive non-identity of the subject. Freud's ego and id, the "I" and "it" dimensions of consciousness, described how the psychical self was importantly not at one with itself. For Adorno, this was a description not only of the subject's constraint but its potential, the dynamic character of subjectivity, reproductive of both a problem and a task.

In his 1955 essay "Sociology and Psychology," Adorno addressed the necessary and indeed constitutive antinomy of the "individual" and "society" under capital. According to Adorno, there was a productive tension and not a flat contradiction between approaches that elaborated society from the individual psyche and those that derived the individual from the social process. But both were at once true and untrue in their partiality. Adorno's point was that it was inevitable that social problems be approached in such one-sided ways. Two complementary approaches were thus derived by Adorno, critical psychology and critical sociology, or, at a different level, critical individualism and critical authoritarianism. Under capital, both the psychical and social guises of the individual were both functionally effective and spurious, delusional realities. It was not a matter of properly merging two aspects of the individual but recognizing what Adorno elsewhere called the "two torn halves of an integral freedom to which however they do not add up." It was true that there were both social potentials not reducible to individuals and individual potentials not straightforwardly explicable from accounts of society.

The antagonism of the particular and the general had a social basis, but for Adorno this social basis was itself contradictory. Hence, for Adorno there was indeed a social basis for the contradiction of individual and society rather than a psychical basis,

but this social basis found a ground for its reproduction in the self-contradiction of the psychological individual. A self-contradictory form of society gave rise to but was itself reproduced through self-contradictory individuals.

The key for Adorno was to avoid collapsing what should be critical-theoretical into apologetic or affirmative-descriptive categories for grasping the individual and society. Neither a social dialectic nor a split psyche were to be ontologized or naturalized, but both required historical specification, as dual aspects of a problem to be overcome. That problem was what Marx called “capital.” For Adorno, it was important that both dialectical and psychoanalytic accounts of consciousness had only emerged in modernity. From this historical reality could be speculated that an emancipated society would be neither dialectical nor would it consist of psychological individuals, for both were symptomatic of capital. Nevertheless, any potential for freedom needed to be found there, in the socially general and individual symptoms of capital, described by both disciplines of sociology and psychology.

Hence, the problem for Adorno was not a question of methodology but critical reflexivity: how social history presented itself through individual psychology; not methodological individualism but critical reflection on the individuation of a social problem. The “primacy” of the social, or of the “object,” was, for Adorno, not a methodological move or preferred mode of analysis, let alone a philosophical ontology, but meant to provoke critical recognition of the problem one sought to address.

In his speech to the 1968 conference of the German Society for Sociology, titled “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?,” Adorno described how the contradiction of capital was expressed in “free-floating anxiety.” Such “free-floating anxiety” was

expressive of the undermining of what Freud considered the ego-psychology of the subject of therapy. Paranoia spoke to pre-Oedipal, pre-individuated problems, to what Adorno called the “liquidation of the individual.” This was caused by and fed into the further perpetuation of authoritarian social conditions.

For Adorno, since Freud’s time, especially as regards the neo-Freudian revisionists of psychoanalysis, as well as post- and non-Freudian approaches, therapy had itself become repressive in ways scarcely anticipated by Freud. Such “therapy” sought to repress the social-historical symptom of the impossibility of therapy. Freud had commented on the intractability of narcissistic disorders, but these, such as melancholia, had come to replace the typical Freudian neuroses of the 19th century such as hysteria. The paranoiac-delusional reality of the authoritarian personality had its ground of truth, a basis in society. The “fear of freedom” was expressed in the individual’s retreat from ego-psychology, a narcissistic recoil from an intractable social reality. Perhaps this could be recognized as such. This, for Adorno, was the emancipatory potential of narcissism.

In his essay “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” Adorno characterized the appeal of fascist demagoguery precisely in it being recognized by its consumers as the lie that one chooses to believe, the authority one spites while participating in it, by submitting to it in bad faith. This was its invidious power, the pleasure of doing wrong, but also its potential overcoming. There was a cultivated antisocial psychology, not reducible to the sociopathic, which posed the question of society, if at a different level than in Freud’s time. It was no longer situated in the “family romance” of the Oedipal drama but in society writ large. But this demanded recognition beyond what was available in the psychotherapeutic relationship, because it

spoke not to the interaction of egos but projective identification among what Freud could only consider wounded narcissists. For Adorno, we are a paranoid society with reason.

There had always been a fine line between therapy, providing for an individual's betterment through strengthening the ego's "reality principle," and adaptation to a bad social reality. For Adorno, the practice of therapy had come to tip the balance to adaptation — repression. The critical edge of Freudian psychoanalysis was lost in its unproblematic adoption by society — in its very "success." Freudian psychoanalysis was admitted and domesticated, but only the degree to which it had become outmoded. Like so much of modernism, it became part of kitsch culture. This gave it a repressive function. But it retained, however obscurely, a "utopian" dimension: the idea of being an ego at all. Not the self constituted in interpellation by authority, but being for-itself.

After Freud, therapy produced, not problematic individuals of potential freedom, but authoritarian pseudo-individuals of mere survival. For Freud it was the preservation of the individual's potential for self-overcoming and not mere self-reiteration that characterized the ego. For Adorno, however, the obsolescence of Freudian ego-psychology posed the question and problem of what Adorno called "self-preservation." For Adorno, this was seen in individuals' "unworthiness of love."

If psychoanalytic therapy had always been above all pragmatic, had always concerned itself with the transformation of neurotic symptoms in the direction of better abilities to cope with reality, then there was always a danger of replacing neuroses with those that merely better suited society. But if, as Freud put it early on (in "The Psychotherapy of Hysteria," in *Studies on Hysteria*), as a result of psychotherapy, the individual finds herself pressing demands that society finds difficulty meeting, then that

remained society's problem. It was a problem *for* the individual, but not simply *of* or "with" the individual. Freud understood his task as helping a neurotic to better equip herself for dealing with reality, including, first and foremost, *social* realities — that is, other individuals. Freud recognized the *challenge* of psychoanalysis. It was not for Freud to deny the benefits of therapy even if these presented new problems. Freud conceived psychological development as an open-ended process — of consciousness in freedom.

The problem for Adorno was how to present the problem of society as such. Capital was the endemic form of psychology and not only sociology. What was the *psychological* basis for emancipatory transformation? For the problem was not how the individual was to survive society, but rather how society would survive the unmet demands presented by its individuals — and how society could transfigure and redeem the suffering, including psychologically, of individual human beings. These human beings instantiated the very substance of that society, they were the individuals who provided the ground for social transformation.

An emancipated society would no longer be "sociological" as it is under capital, but would be truly social for the first time; its emancipated individuals would no longer be "psychological," but would be truly "individual" for the first time. They would no longer be merely derivative from their experience, stunted and recoiled in their narcissism. In this sense, the true, diverse individuation, what Adorno called "multiplicity," towards which Freudian psychoanalytic therapy pointed, could be realized, freed from the compulsions of neurotic repetition, including those of prevailing patterns of culture. At the same time, the pathological necessity of individual

emancipation from society would be overcome. Repetition could be non-pathological, non-repressive, but elaborated in freedom. The self-contradiction of consciousness found in the Freudian problematic of ego-psychology, with its “unconscious mental process” from which it remained alienated, would be overcome, allowing for the first time the Kantian rationalism of the adequately self-aware and self-legislating subject of freedom, in an open-ended development and transformation of human reason, not as a cunning social dialectic, but in and through individual human beings, who could be themselves for the very first time. §