Reflecting from the Periphery: Peter Petschauer

Sally Atkins
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Peter W. Petschauer was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1939. He grew up in Afers/Eores in northern Italy (South Tyrol) during World War II, attended gymnasium *there and in Holland, and immigrated to the United States in 1957. He received his doctoral degree in European and Russian history from New York University in 1969. From 1968 to the present he has taught at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, where he is currently Professor of History, specializing in Russian and Children's History. He was I.G. Greer Distinguished Professor of History, 1987 to 1989, and Chair of the University of North Carolina Faculty Assembly, 1995 to 1997.*

Petschauer's publications include The Education of Women in Eighteenth-Century Germany: Bending the Ivy *(Lewisburg, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989);* The Language of History: A Topical Approach to World Civilization *(Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1990); and* Human Space: Finding Our Place in a Threatening World *(Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997). He has published over 50 articles and chapters of books and presented over 100 papers. He is currently writing, with Howard Stein and Thomas Howell,* The Next Civil War. *He is Contributing Editor,* The Journal of Psychohistory; *Board Member, the Psychohistory Forum; and on the Editorial Board of* **Clio's Psyche**. *Sally Atkins ("SA") interviewed Professor Petschauer ("PP") in August, 1997.*

SA: Peter, how do you define psychohistory?

PP: It brings together different disciplines, principally history and psychology. It may attract a kind of historian who is more proactive than others in the field. And it may attract psychologists who would like to be more reflective than proactive.

SA: What brought you to psychohistory?

PP: Two or three different things. First, the field itself intrigues me. Then there are the personalities in the field. Third is the combination of the field and the personalities. The personalities intrigued me more than anything else. The individual I came across first was David Beisel. He had written an article about German motherhood, and I strongly disagreed with one aspect of what he had to say. Impetuous as I was in earlier years, I wrote him a letter, challenging him. Much to my surprise, he wrote me a very charming response. The other person I came across very early on in my acquaintance with psychohistory was Lloyd deMause. In his 1982 book, *Foundations of Psychohistory*, he had proposed a new way of looking at the history of childhood. I was very excited by what he had to say but here, too, were some points with which I disagreed. I wrote a response and, again, I received a wonderfully open and charming response, saying in effect that he appreciated what I said and would publish it in *The Journal of Psychohistory*.

SA: So, you just entered the dialogue.

PP: Yes, and in time with other colleagues like Paul Elovitz and other individuals in the New

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York City area, and also some as far away as Howard Stein in Oklahoma and Heinrich Reiss in Germany. Through getting to know these colleagues and attending meetings of the International Psychohistorical Association (IPA) and the Psychohistory Forum I gradually came closer to these groups. One of the early high points came in 1988 when my wife Joni and I coordinated the meeting of the IPA in Washington, DC. When I joined psychohistory, the field was searching for a definition, and I suppose it remains in the process of defining and reinventing itself.

Three pillars initially made up the field of psychohistory. The first is the study of biography, or a new way of searching for a more accurate and comprehensive interpretation of individual lives, past and present. This search goes back at least as far as Sigmund Freud. Next is the history of childhood. Even before deMause, others like Philippe Ariès had begun to define this subfield, but Lloyd gave it the impetus to became an integral part of psychohistory. More recently, again under the initial leadership of deMause, group-fantasy analysis was added. Individuals like Freud and Erik Erikson, of course, exerted a tremendous influence on psychohistory because of the way they approached history and combined it with psychology, edging beyond just setting the two fields next to each other by integrating them.

Today, psychohistory bears characteristics of its relatively recent roots. It is a field of research, but it is also a field of very dynamic and creative individuals who are engaged in research and publishing in different venues. Ours is not a field of great institutes and governmental or private largesse. Rather, it is a field of a number of key individuals who have assembled organizations around themselves for the purpose of "doing" and publishing psychohistory: deMause, the IPA, and the *Journal*; Paul Elovitz, the Psychohistory Forum, and **Clio's Psyche**; and Vamik Volkan, the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction, and *Mind and Human Interaction*.

While I do not see psychohistory threatened in any way, one of its weaknesses is that these individuals are growing older and the field must find ways to replace their dynamic scholarship and organizational leadership. As my generation and those a little older retire or leave the field for various reasons, the research focuses will change as well. The field will continue with biography and history of childhood, and probably with ethnic history, but other directions may be different. We may discover that a new combination of disciplines will give us better access to the past and present than psychohistory. Interestingly and wonderfully, today we have quite a number of individuals in the field who are not necessarily trained historians or psychologists. They come from business, medicine, biology, sociology, and political science. So, while the key contributions probably are still made by historians and psychologists, a number of different fields are contributing to psychohistory.

SA: From a psychologist's perspective, it sounds as if psychohistory incorporates more of the aspects of personal history. Is that accurate history?

PP: It's accurate. It includes everything from childhood to biography to group-fantasy, figuring out how the mature individuals who emerged from a particular childhood operate or work in the society in which they find themselves. If child upbringing during a certain period in history was particularly violent, then we might expect the individuals who survived into adulthood in that society to be violent also, unless in their maturing process, in their own parenting, they realized that this violence was detestable, that is should not be continued. Psychohistorians have found individuals in the past and present who overcame their violent past and later tended in the opposite direction of what was done to them.

SA: So, we have examples of how the societal context and the personal history of people shape and alter their approach to life and work.

PP: Yes. My book on human space is my latest expression about how to look at the way we live and exert ourselves in the world. I talk not just about childhood or adulthood experiences, but endeavor to explore the different ways in which we understand and shape our environment and our bodies, and what we and others do to them. In a way, I stay in one of the traditions of psychohistory, which is to be a change agent, but in another way I push in a different direction. Even in that I am following others, including Howard Stein, one of my mentors, who long ago started discussing human beings in their space, including how we perceive space and how we use space. The political consideration about space for me is that we must as a society learn to be less romantic about such issues as freedom of speech because it can easily become one person's penetration into another person's space. We must be guided instead by human spatial needs, that is,

respect the spatial entity that another human being represents. Dealing with our fellow human beings in that way allows us to be open to their needs for clean air, clean water, and privacy.

SA: Of which of your psychohistorical works are you most proud?

PP: I'm most proud of three things. One of them was the article I wrote in response to deMause's *Foundations of Psychohistory* in which I offered some reinterpretations of how childhood history might be seen, some of the nuances that we might work on to improve it. Another piece is a short biography of my father. You might say I've barely shared it with anyone even though it was published (but a long time ago) ["Father, Son and Uncertain Solutions: Conversations and Reflections about National Socialist Germany," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, VII, 3 (Summer, 1984): 189-205]. I tried to figure out this complex man, this father who was an SS officer and a diplomat, a man who also was totally disappointed with the Nazi regime after 1943 but who never joined any of the resistance groups. Not unlike most young people, I was trying to find my father and do so both in a historical context and in reference to the psychological dimensions of his experience during and after the SS regime. The last one is *Human Space*.

SA: What are you working on now?

PP: I am working principally on a book that takes a number of issues that psychohistory has explored and focuses on violence in the United States. The title of the book is tentatively *The Next Civil War*. It'll be a very short book, similar to classics like Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Orwell's *1984* -- a short, precise, almost novel-like statement about how the violence, ethnic and otherwise, that permeates almost every aspect of our society will almost inevitably lead to a violent outburst. I hope to synthesize what psychohistorians and other scientists have been writing in regard to childhood, group-fantasy, ethnic behavior, and many other issues. The historian likes to look at the past, analyze it, and draw conclusions for that past, but not usually penetrate the present or the future. The psychologist likes to analyze the past and then evaluate and write to assist future behavior.

SA: What books were important to your development as a psychohistorian?

PP: I came across Erik Erikson fairly early. Everything he wrote made immense sense to me even if I took no university course in which he was being read. I also read Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Later I read it in German; he wrote beautiful German. Of the recent psychohistorians, probably the work that had the most impact on me was Lloyd deMause's *History of Childhood*. Since then, probably the work of Stein, Elovitz, Rudolph Binion, Elizabeth Marvick, and Volkan has influenced me the most. Not only because of their writings, but also because of their personalities -- their personalities and their conversation intrigued me and directed me to a particular approach.

SA: What training should a person entering the field today pursue?

PP: The first thing that a psychohistorian must have is empathy for the individual subjects and for the society that s/he is studying. The other essential is formal, serious, rigorous study or training, whether it is in history, psychology, economics, political science, business, or law. But this serious training must include psychology.

SA: Please tell us about your teaching of psychohistory.

PP: Psychohistory is part of everything I teach. I have offered the courses History of Childhood and Human Space. I've also been invited into other instructors' courses and talked about the history of childhood and other aspects of psychohistory. Articles and books I've published, even with my Russian colleagues Anatoly Isaenko and Max Bliev, always are permeated by this perspective. Books and articles I assign in, say, 18th-Century Studies sometimes include a psychohistorical dimension.

SA: What do we as psychohistorians need to do to strengthen our work?

PP: Probably the best thing we can do for ourselves is to be constantly alert to the frailty of any field and the opportunities created by change. Many of the established fields like history or psychology are fairly formalistic, with fairly clear borders about the sorts of areas that can and cannot be investigated. They have become rigid in the way promotion and tenure procedures recreate the field generation after generation. Thus, new avenues are difficult and outreach to other disciplines is sometimes perceived as treacherous. Interestingly, too, subgroups are formed which battle with other groups in the field. Psychohistory has the advantage of not being as rigid as a field. New areas and avenues are explored regularly.

But, we, too, have certain issues with which we remain.

So, we can strengthen our field by retaining our flexibility. Another way is to refrain from becoming too much of an academic discipline. Still another is to write and write and write, to do writing that is disciplined and rigorous yet innovative and intriguing. Then it will be easier for us to attract the intrigued and excited, and the academically disenfranchised, individuals. We must also continue to train good people both in the university setting and outside of it, and to encourage the very best people with whom we come in contact to be, at the very least, open to the field.

SA: Can you name five or so individuals, in order, who have made the greatest contribution to psychohistory?

PP: Freud, Erikson, deMause, Stein, Volkan, Marvick, and Elovitz.

SA: What is the importance of childhood to psychohistory?

PP: It is very important because of the way it has helped us reinterpret and better understand behaviors in certain periods of history. In a university setting, students are interested in the history of childhood because, obviously, they have barely come out of childhood. It also intrigues them that psychohistorians say that spanking in our elementary and high schools is the last reverberation of the cruel and terrible punishments that were meted out to children throughout history. Childhood also helps us to better understand certain ethnic issues.

SA: Some Psyhohistory Forum researchers have been struggling with the issue of identification with a particular parent and how that relates to achievement later in life.

PP: Psychology and psychohistory have made a great issue about parental relationships. The assumption there is that individuals grow up in nuclear families and have two parents after whom they can model themselves. This stance is not a good assumption either for my own or the present generation. I grew up, in deMause's terms, "farmed out," in a rural household of four women and a principal male servant in Afers in Northern Italy. Although later in life I interacted regularly with my parents, considering my father to have been my friend, and with my natural relatives, my role models were "strangers" rather than my parents. I did have a very solid relationship with my father; he was a decent man. By contrast, I had a very troubled relationship with my mother. But I formed my attitudes regarding career and research interests only in small part in discussions with or reactions to my father, or mother. I formed them more from my experiences on the farm in Italy; in monasteries in Italy, Germany and Holland; and at universities in the U.S. and with the people in them. Although I am a stickler for timeliness like my father and took many of my anti-Nazi attitudes from him, I never looked back and asked if I was living up to him or continuing the perspectives that he held. Rather, I think, my growing up in a female household and choosing several significant female role models had a genuine impact on who I am and the fields I have chosen. I include among these choices my dissertation about a woman (Catherine the Great), a field like psychohistory, and directing myself towards the marginal in traditional history. I don't see any achievements particularly associated with my parents; I see any achievements more associated with the household in which I grew up in Italy during World War II. I shaped my attitudes towards success, morality, ethics, childhood, ethnicity, and human space in that household. It is a unique situation. I would have been extremely happy if my father had had a chance to be with me at some moments of my life. But, I'm equally happy that I can go back to Italy to the family who brought me up and be accepted there for what I am, accomplishments or not. One set of my principal interactions remains with the descendants of the women of the Egarter farm.

One of my first psychohistorical writings dealt with Catherine the Great. In her household, she very much reacted off her father's accomplishments and tried to attain similar accomplishments and push them further. Although she grew up in a large household in the 18th century, she thought in terms of a nuclear family in which the relationship between daughter and father and between daughter and mother were the principal relationships, and she shaped many of her patterns of behavior and her successes and failures on how her father and her mother might react. But with her, too, over time, other individuals emerged who played a role similar to her parents, almost as if they were substitutes for them. Thus the Empress Elizabeth, who reigned in the middle of the century in Russia, became like a father substitute for her. Then there were the models she chose from the past, like Ivan the Terrible, Henry IV of France, and Peter the Great. So, it is that in this nucleated setting she conversed, one might

say, throughout her life with her parents, but with other individuals having a tremendous impact on her as well.

SA: Do you think psychohistorians are more father-identified than are others?

PP: In order to be able to answer that question, we would have to know how all psychohistorians feel about their fathers, and there is additionally in this question the presumption that fathers inspire their children to succeed. It may be mothers, it may be sisters, it may be brothers, it may another member of the household, or it may be a "stranger" role model. This is a male-centered question.

SA: It is, isn't it? And, a male-centered question in a patriarchal culture.

PP: And psychohistory prides itself not to aspire in a patriarchal direction.

SA: How do you feel about the impact of parental loss on achievement?

PP: Parental loss can be taken in at least two ways. One of them is the actual loss of a parent through death. The other one is the loss of a parent through a long-term separation. I have experienced both. By emigrating, I became separated from my parents and through their deaths I experienced the final separation. Both losses are difficult to take, but so was the separation from my household family in Afers; I was often more homesick for them than my parents. I have to say that my father's encouragement in many letters probably saved me from taking a less positive path in the U.S., but all the decisions about school emerged from discussions with role models, friends, and extended family in New York City.

I doubt also that the death of my parents had an impact on my success. My father's death 20 years ago made me realize the finality of life, but that realization or his total absence from my life has not driven me to do more or less than before that finality stared me in the face. The sort of physical separation I alluded to is probably different from the one we usually associate with parental loss. Regarding Catherine the Great, she lost her parents when she was asked to go to Russia. Her *Memoirs* show that the voice of the parents continued in her head, the superego, as if they were near her for many years. Their death seems not to have had as much impact as that initial separation. It is the separation that may in some ways have refined in her head, and in mine, the images of the parents.

SA: When were you separated from your father -- when did you go to Italy?

PP: Sally, you're asking an interesting question. Until this moment I never perceived my being in Italy as separating me from my father. I was a child. I was three or four years old. But I had images of him in my head and when I met him again at age 13 or so, it was as if we had hardly been apart from each other. We had similar hand movements. We had similar speech patterns.

SA: Did you actually see him at all during those ten years?

PP: Only in photos and through stories.

SA: But you were with your mother?

PP: Not really. I spent most of my childhood on a farm and in monasteries, away from her. All the same, my real separation from my father and mother, in a sense, occurred when I came to the United States; that is, when we were not on the same continent. I was 17.

SA: How old were you when they died?

PP: My father died in 1977 when I was in my late 30s. My mother died during the time that this interview was completed and I am now in my late 50s. The separation from my father through his death impacted two areas of my life: I became firmer in my beliefs about having to guard against the excesses of authority and I created an excellent relationship with my stepmother. My mother died much later in my life and after a long bout with senile dementia. Her death enabled me to realize some of the reasons we experienced difficulties in our relationship, and now I am trying to resolve how I will live with these realizations. I doubt that the death of either parent had a dramatic impact on my life, at least not that of my father. I accomplished the kinds of goals that he would have wanted me to accomplish before his death and it had little impact on my accomplishing them; all that had already been set a long time before. My mother had many ambivalences toward me, for example, she liked my younger brother better than me, she thought that I represented the same negative sorts of things as my father from whom she got divorced in the late 1940s, and felt that I would never amount to much. Her death simply allowed me to understand her better.

PP: In modern society, the final separation between parents and children takes place relatively late in life. That is, the death of parents tend to takes place when we are in our 30s, 40s, or 50s.

We have already set ourselves in a life pattern that is not likely changed by the death of a parent. It can bring tremendous sadness and loss, but it will not change our behavior.

SA: How do you explain the growth and psychology of fundamentalism?

PP: I suspect that this question would like to address why psychohistorians have become interested in fundamentalism. The religious past, or the combination of the religious and ethnic pasts, can be examined independently or be brought together with modern expressions from that past. We can analyze the way people have been brought up, we can discover the way they behave in groups, as adherents, as ethnics. All of us in psychohistory have a religious or ethnic affiliation which we deal with fairly constantly while we're working on our past through our analysis and writing. Psychohistory's interest in fundamentalism may thus ultimately have to do with the individuals who are engaged in psychohistory. Some of the principals in psychohistory are Jews living in the New York City area who had family members killed in the Holocaust and who have others living in Israel. So, extremism of various sorts, whether extreme nationalism, fundamentalism, or terrorism, are human expressions that ask to be discussed and understood by this group of individuals. Many others of us grew up or are living in areas that are prone to fundamentalist and/or terrorist expressions and so it is in the very nature of the field to study them. Fundamentalism is intriguing because it might help us explain our religious and ethnic backgrounds or those of our "ethnic enemies."

SA: How do you understand the psychology of terrorism?

PP: Terrorism is, like fundamentalism, an extreme form of human expression. Terrorism can take many forms. Certain groups, particularly minority or excluded ethnic groups, are attracted to it; they begin to feel that the society in which they live, especially when an ethnic group other than their own is in control, can only be changed by violent means. Terrorism can also take on the form of very specific terrorist acts, like a person, or a group of people, terrorizing a neighborhood; someone breaking into a home or an office and "desanctifying" that space; or some man raping a woman. Another issue that attracts our interest is the issue of the resurgence of terrorism. That is, once members of a society have begun to use terrorism, it is almost impossible to move beyond it. Terrorism then becomes part of society's behavior. So, it is very difficult for some societies not to be violent because it has become "inbred," because children are brought up into it and become used to seeing violence as the best form of resolving societal problems. People who commit terrorist acts can see themselves as avenging a past misdeed, as freedom fighters, and as being in a state of war with members of an opposing group. So, psychohistorians are interested in how children are educated and trained to become violent at home and in school and then use terrorism as a means of resolving problems outside and inside these settings. There are several individuals in our group, like Volkan, who have spent the last 10 or 15 years trying to diffuse ethnic tensions in areas of the world like the Baltic, the Middle East, and Cyprus. What they have learned about ethnic groups and child violence and why violence becomes such a preferred tool helps people of different ethnic backgrounds in these areas to meet and to converse. To me, that's where psychohistory, psychology, and history can meet in order to accomplish a present day good, that is, reduce violence.

SA: How can we recruit new people to the field?

PP: The best way to recruit new people to the field is by writing good books and articles, and teaching great classes -- to invite new people into the dialogue.

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Death to the Winner: A "Kennedyesque" Enactment

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On New Year's Eve on Aspen mountain, in the late afternoon after most skiers had taken their last run, about 30 skiers -- including Michael Kennedy, son of the late Robert Kennedy, along with several of his siblings and their children -- embarked on a singular game that had become a seasonal ritual. Michael displayed a snow-filled,