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Bruce Mazlish's Psychohistorical Contributions

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Bruce Mazlish (b. 1923), Professor Emeritus of History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology after a 50-year career at MIT, is a professional historian who has made significant contributions to the fields of intellectual, technological, and global history, as well as psychohistory. He earned his doctoral degree in intellectual history from Columbia University (1955), and taught at the University of Maine (1946–48) and at Columbia (1949–50), as well as directing the American School in Madrid (1953–55), prior to joining MIT for the rest of his career. He was among the post-World War II academic historians to seriously research and publish in the field of psychoanalytic history, including theoretical and methodological issues.

Early on, Mazlish was quite aware of the average historian's rejection and disdain for the application of psychoanalysis to history. In the psychohistorical study of leadership he has discerned two early orientations: an Adlerian/Lasswellian orientation, favored by political scientists, and the Eriksonian orientation, favored by historians. In 1956, inspired by Harold Lasswell and Nathan Leites, the Georges published their psychoanalytic psychobiography *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study*, and two years later Erikson's seminal *Young Man Luther* appeared, without *American Historical Review* even reviewing it.

As a young historian, Mazlish was present on December 29, 1957 in New York, when William L. Langer gave his presidential address to the American Historical Association, calling for the application of psychoanalysis to history. Later, in his *James and John Stuart Mill* (1975/1988), Mazlish says that Langer's address left many eminent scholars muttering, "Old Bill Langer has gone off his rocker" (p. xviii). For Mazlish, Langer's address served as firm ground for further explorations, directed through reading Erikson's Luther work and being invited by Erikson to sit in on his graduate seminar at Harvard. Erikson's sound knowledge on clinical and historical data, and his critical approach to methodological issues, were highly important to Mazlish.

Around 1958, Mazlish went into his own personal analysis, but never entered psychoanalytic training. He concentrated on delving into Freud's philosophy of history and the application of psychoanalytic approaches to historical explanation before he was looking at sociology and sociological history. He edited a landmark work *Psychoanalysis and History* (1963), which included previously published writings, for example, Langer's 1957 address and articles by Philip Rieff, Géza Róheim, and Lucian W. Pye.

However, the work he edited is still more on Freudian psychoanalysis and its possible applications to history than on attempts to delineate an independent discipline of psychohistory. Actually, psychohistory is not even mentioned in that work as a term. In his introduction, Mazlish views psychoanalysis as fundamentally challenging historians to "interpret the documents," to pay critical and analytic attention to the documents and what they really mean (p. 16). Psychoanalysis, for Mazlish, has its roots both in the natural and social sciences. In 1964, Mazlish started a course in "Psychoanalysis and History" at MIT. In *Explorations in Psychohistory* (1974), Robert J. Lifton reminisces about speaking with Erikson about psychology and history in the

mid-1950s, but it was their conversations in late 1964 and early 1965 that began to give shape to the Wellfleet meetings (p. 11). The first Wellfleet meeting, initially called the Group for the Study of Psychohistorical Process, was arranged in August 1966 by Erikson, Lifton, and Kenneth Keniston at Lifton's summer cottage on Cape Cod. During the first four years, Mazlish was an active participant. Lawrence Chisolm and Frank Manuel were the only other historians in the initial group.

The Group for Applied Psychoanalysis (GAP) was another informal association begun in the Boston area in the mid-1960s by literary scholar Norman Holland, psychiatrist Joseph Michaels, and Mazlish. It continued for about 15 years. Lloyd deMause, who took part in the meetings of the GAP in the early 1970s, found them to be "interesting for showing historical emotional trends (though not for child-rearing or [the] causes of these trends)" (E-mail, April 5, 2010). The main focus of the meetings, as recollected by deMause, was not on his preferred subjects of childhood, developmental psychology, and interpersonal psychoanalysis.

Along Erikson's lines, Mazlish published his first theoretical article on psychohistory in September 1968 ("Clio on the Couch," in *Encounter*), presenting some strengths and weaknesses of psychohistory. Mazlish warns psychohistorians against some traps, such as false extrapolations and interpretations of the historical material, psychological reductionism, unverified personality typologies and analyses of past figures, and simplified leaps from the private to the public sphere. At its best, however, psychohistorical inquiry offers tools of analysis of historical motivations and enriches our understanding of historical actors and their contexts.

In the 1970s, Mazlish was intensively engaged in writing psychobiographies, the first on Nixon in 1972. There, Mazlish addresses a "problem history," instead of a

life history, approaching themes or patterns that are discernible throughout Nixon's life. This work was followed by the psychobiography of the Mill father and son (1975), Jimmy Carter (with Edwin Diamond; 1976), and Kissinger (1976). Mazlish also faced heavy criticism, particularly from his former teacher Jacques Barzun and his Wellfleet colleague Robert Coles, whose attack (*NY Review of Books*, February 22, 1973) on Mazlish's Nixon book was vehemently dismissed by Mazlish ("An Exchange on Psychohistory," *NY Review of Books*, May 3, 1973), while he defended his right to use the "problem" approach, and not the life history approach that Coles supported.

Psychohistory was also being attacked by the American Psychiatric Association, which set a special six-psychiatrist task force in 1976. Its report declared that psychohistories of living persons carried grave risks of invasion of privacy. Only psychological profiles compiled by intelligence agencies in the service of the national interest and those approved by the subject were deemed acceptable. Mazlish was a consultant to the task force and generally sympathetic to its aims, but he did not approve of the idea that psychohistory is based on the doctor-patient model. He maintained that psychohistory is first and foremost history and psychobiographies of living political leaders are as much in the national interest as the CIA's psychological profiles, which raised issues of ethics as in the release of Daniel Ellsberg's stolen psychiatric diagnosis for political purposes by the White House plumbers.

Mazlish was among those launching *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* in 1970 and when deMause started, in 1973, *The History of Childhood Quarterly: The Journal of Psychohistory*, Mazlish, John Demos, and Peter Loewenberg appeared in its list of contributing editors. This cooperation lasted for only a few years, until deMausean psychohistory and the history of childhood faced intense resistance from

most academic historians (and many psychological historians) and publishers. For example, Mazlish could never grasp deMause's psychogenic theory of history, and for Lifton, deMausean psychohistory was too "wild." Lloyd deMause mentions that he values Mazlish's work "a lot," since "he was about the only person doing real psychoanalytic psychohistory back then" (E-mail communication, April 5, 2010).

In the early 1990s, Mazlish collected his psychohistorical essays in *The Leader, the Led, and the Psyche* (1990), where he insisted that psychohistory "is not a science; it is still a form of history" (p. 3). He also characterizes his position: "I do not think of myself as primarily a psychohistorian but as a historian who uses psychoanalytic psychology in some of my work" (p. 287). His work has consisted of intellectual history, philosophy of history, history of science and technology, and later New Global History. From the beginning of the 1990s, Mazlish turned away from active psychohistorical studies. However, his experience within psychohistory has made it impossible for him to study intellectual history without the insights of psychohistory, since it "would be like going back to mono after hearing music on stereo" (Mazlish, 1975/1988, p. xix). In his December 1996 interview with Clio's Psyche, Mazlish defined psychohistory as "the application of psychoanalytic concepts and theories to historical data and the re-examination of the psychoanalytic concepts and data in the light of historical methods."

The problems and crises of psychohistory in analyzing groups, parties, collectives, states, institutions and ideologies on the basis of psychoanalytic individual analysis have made Mazlish argue that psychohistory, working in terms of Freudian-style individual psychology, "has little cumulative power and thus a mainly limited future" ("The Past and Future of Psychohistory," *The Annual of Psychoanalysis*, 2003, p. 256). Searching for an alternative, the new "next assignment," Mazlish has proposed the "construction of a theoreti-

cally strong and integrated psychohistorical social psychology and its implementation in detailed, diverse studies" (p. 261). In a conversation ("From Psychohistory to New Global History: A Conversation with Bruce Mazlish," *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society*, July/August 2004) Mazlish has retrospectively reflected on his career, "One of my prime concerns has been the evolution of the human species. And how we go about looking at this—the question of what lenses we use to look at the past—has run through all my work. One of the lenses is psychological. Historians deal with human motivation. How can you not try to use the most insightful tools of psychology to get at this?"

Mazlish's psychohistorical contributions will motivate new researchers to develop their lenses to look at the past, and to enrich the field with their insights.

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A Critical Review of Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*

Tom Ferraro—Psychoanalytic Practice

In 1979 Christopher Lasch (1932-1994) published *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. He warned that our culture was de-