Peter Gay's Classic *Freud For Historians*

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Freud For Historians (1985) is an important work by a distinguished historian with some psychoanalytic training. Gay knows that many historians have little use for psychology within their profession, saying that to certain historians psychohistory is "a disfiguring, perhaps incurable epidemic that has invaded their craft" (Citations are from *Freud For Historians* unless otherwise noted, p. 14). Gay shares some of the criticisms, saying its "defects...compromise much of its work," which include "reductionism" and "its cavalier way with evidence" (p. 17). When asked if he is a psychohistorian, Gay responds, "No, I am a historian....I am a historian who uses psychoanalysis" (Paul Elovitz, Bob Lentz, & David Felix, "The Psychoanalytically-Informed Historian: Peter Gay," Clio's Psyche, 4, 2, September, 1997, p. 63). The rejection of the validity of psychohistory leaves the historical field with a dilemma. Gay says historians "attribute motives," study "passions" and analyze "irrationality." The historian is "an amateur psychologist" (p. 6). Unverified psychological assumptions permeate historical writings. For historians to remain ignorant of psychological research does not make sense, as they are relying on psychological ideas.

In throwing out the psychological baby with the psychohistorical bathwater, the historical profession can be criticized for conceptual insufficiency. According to Gay, historians assume that individuals are motivated by self-interest; a rough psychology adopted from a rough economic theory is imported into history as if it meets empirical standards. Gay shows the empirical and theoretical inadequacy of such purported motivations, even within the economic sphere.

He wants to show his colleagues the Freudian persuasion is not the wild and unverifiable caricature that other historians have created. He writes: "Psychoanalysis...is not a miracle drug or a magic password; it is an informed style of inquiry, supplying answers not one had thought were available" and "suggesting questions no one had thought to ask" (p. 32-33). While psychoanalysis opens up new areas and provides novel solutions, in itself it is a complex specialty, that does not conform to certain conceptions of science. "The Freudian corpus," Gay admits, is not a "comprehensive theory in which general laws can be derived from empirical propositions, and which a crucial experiment might test conclusively." Instead, Freud's work contains "a family of closely related, often mutually supporting claims ranging from empirical statements to limited generalizations to global theories about the mind." It is "like an imposing, sprawling castle" (p. 48).

To Gay, there are two reasons why this spectrum of claims from the factual to the theoretical should not disqualify Freud from historical inclusion. "All the disciplines to which modern historians resort," Gay writes, including "anthropology, sociology, economics...are mired in controversy; they all compel the historian to choose one school in preference to others" (p. 44-5). These social sciences have achieved more recognition in academia than psychoanalysis. Gay also contends that the "empirical and experimental evidence supporting Freudian propositions is impressive" (p. 45). This includes "experimental evidence" that "has buttressed" the theory of infantile sexuality, unconscious defense mechanisms, fantasy, anxiety, and the Oedipus complex (p. 49-50). It is the accumulation of empirical support for Freudian notions that Gay thinks should convince historians to turn to Freudian psychology.

Gay maintains that Freud's theory of human nature is valuable for historians. "Man, for Freud," Gay writes, "is a

creature of contradictions and concealments....psychoanalysis can bring to the assessment of past experience...a set of discoveries and a method" that can "sound the unplumbed depths of human nature" (p. 76-77). In this age of recurring genocide, total war, and the continued brutality of human to human, comprehending the psychological factors contributing to the barbarity within and without should be an important part of the historical profession. If a psychoanalytic theory of human nature can contribute insight into these dark phenomena, historians should seek it out.

Yet as Gay recognizes, historians are uncomfortable with the idea of human nature. To most historians, a conception of a universal human nature violates "man's experience of the past as diversified, unfolding and unfinished" (p. 87-88). Gay reminds historians that "all humans share some inescapable universal preconditions." These include being born "the most unfinished of animals, pathetically in need of nourishment and protection by others...with few instinctual drives and those plastic and...educable for good or ill" (p. 88). Then Gay moves to Freud: "Among those drives, sexuality and aggression....serve as the fuel for human action. They make history" (p. 89).

How do these two primal drives make history? Gay: "The most telling (and most problematic) instance of human nature in action is probably the Oedipus complex." How so? For one, "the Oedipus complex" is "*the* critical developmental experience...that makes man human" (p. 93). In this cornerstone of Freudian thought, as Gay explains it, the boy passionately desires his mother and sees his father as a rival. The youngster imagines retaliation and backs away from his hunger for his mother, "internalizes his father's anger and prohibitions," thus developing a superego and later seeks non-incestuous romantic and sexual objects. The Oedipus complex is a school of love and hate. It both generates "neurosis," and helps the child channel powerful emotions

into socially acceptable channels. But its impact extends beyond childhood by leaving "its traces in ambition and resignation" (p. 93-95). The Oedipus complex, Gay says, "has left its deposits...in politics and religion, education and literature, even in the market place....familial metaphors" are used "to characterize the nature of government authority, the relations of God to man, the responsibility of factory owner for 'their' employees, and a host of other entanglements of power, love, and cruelty." These deposits have not just been left in the modern West. "The Oedipal triangle has made its appearance in all recorded cultures, even the Trobriand Islands." It "appears to be the lot of humans everywhere" (p. 98-99).

In attempting to connect the work of history to a universal human nature, Gay both revived Freudian concerns and preceded recent efforts in both biology and anthropology to revive the study of what is common to the human species. Melvin Konner, a non-Freudian anthropologist and medical doctor, wrote in 2007 that "human nature" is a "term that must be considered again, after decades of disfavor, as having scientific legitimacy" (Melvin Konner, "Evolutionary Foundations of Cultural Psychology," in Shinobu Kitayama & Dov Cohen, eds., *Handbook of Cultural Psychology*, 2007, p. 78). While the disciplines of anthropology and psychology have sub-fields concerned with human nature, in the last century, there is no significant tradition within the American historical profession seeking historical universals. Gay's efforts in *Freud for Historians* is one step in that direction.

What does Gay see as the domain of psychoanalytically informed history? He does not explicitly answer that question. Particularly in his last chapter, he does mention a number of historical works that he finds psychologically significant including the George's *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House,* Erikson's *Young Man Luther,* Edmund Morgan's *The Puritan Family,* Dodds' *The Greeks and the Irrational,*

John Demos' *Entertaining Satan,* Maynard Solomon's *Beethoven* and Frederick Crews' *The Sins of the Fathers.* Four of these texts are studies of individuals, one is family history, one intellectual history, and Demos' book on Salem and the witch trials is social history. Gay's examples of psychoanalytically influenced history then includes much that is biographical, cultural, and intellectual, and little that is purely political separate from biography.

Gay does not address how Freudian influenced historians adjudicate between psychological/psychoanalytic methods for determining what is factual and historical criteria for verifying information. Much of the suspicion of conventional historians towards psychohistory is their belief that psychological data does not meet historical standards. When two disciplines intermix, there is often tension between the perspectives prominent in each field. Also, Gay has pointed out that social science disciplines are mired in internal controversy. He does not spend much time explicating Freud's theoretical divisions or the controversies between divergent psychoanalytic perspectives. Gay's beautifully written book for historians illuminates many issues and leaves others under-addressed.

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