Binion Revises Freud

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In the late 1960s I was teaching European cultural history at Wesleyan University, where I chaired a committee that chose speakers on politics, history, social thought, and economics. In my graduate school days at Columbia, Binion had been both teacher and friend and, though I had some doubts about the validity of psychohistory, I greatly admired his work. Accordingly, I invited him to lecture. He delivered "Leopold III and Belgian Neutrality," which was the first time I encountered his theory of traumatic reliving.

Though the paper was well received and subsequently published in a Wesleyan journal, *History and Theory* (VIII, 1968, 213-259,)—I remained skeptical. Binion and I had different views of historiography. He applied Occam's razor to history, opting for a historiography that was specifically causal and psychoanalytic, while I argued that the best historical analysis provided rich accounts of the context in which events took place. Historians ask questions and tell broad-based stories in response. Could the accident in which Queen Astrid was killed have determined Leopold's position for neutrality in 1940? This seemed to me a slim thread on which to hang an event with such large consequences.

Yet, this question aside, I thought then—and think now—that Binion has something momentous to say about psychoanalytic theory. First, without discussing specifics, my own adult experience bears out his argument that the theory of infantile origins is not essential to understand symptomatic repetition and, further, focus on infantile origins may in fact preclude cure or, its equivalent, the termination of "interminable" analysis. Second, there is much in the current advance of the science of neurology to make us question the theory of infantile origins. Neurologists now believe that full

development of the brain doesn't happen until the legal age of maturity, at 21. To be sure, Freud's realm is the unconscious and neither memory nor injured emotions are dependent on mature cognitive powers. Yet human decisions and judgments certainly relate to cognition, which would just as easily support the idea that adult experiences, or at least experiences other than those relating to our family in childhood, affect and may even lead to the decisions that shape our lives.

Third, though I was taught to hold Freud in awe—how could I not with Lionel Trilling as teacher and mentor—many aspects of his work bothered me. To start, I never bought into infantile origins, precisely because I'm an historian. Consider this rudimentary question: why did Louis XIV build Versailles? Though I would argue that many factors were involved, if I had to pick a "cause" I'd choose a traumatic event: the two Parisian Frondes in which the young king might have been dethroned or killed if either the princes or the Paris "parlement" had succeeded at revolt. We know little about the connection between this trauma and how the "roi soleil" may have relived it. Was it at the root of his attempt to exert hegemony over Europe? Did he see the English and the Dutch in the light of the two Frondes? Was his reaction to trauma overcompensation, inasmuch as Versailles' splendor and distance from Paris reduced his aristocratic enemies to courtiers and removed the monarchy far away from the Parisian courts and crowds? My point is that Binion's thesis in *Traumatic Reliving* will help historians to see questions in this manner and enable them to discern compulsive repetitive behavior that they may now ignore.

Further, Freud's meta-historical works, *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, made me question his sanity. These books are simply preposterous. One doesn't have to be an expert on Freud to see easily that he is projecting his infantile origins theory and the Oedipus complex back

into the whole of history and making all of civilized human existence dependent on some brutal aspect of familial relationships, on fathers and sons and their mythical struggles.

Binion probably won't agree with me, but my own suspicion is that Freud's entire infantile-based psychoanalytic theory is an elaborate way, as Carl Schorske has argued (in *Fin-de Siecle Vienna*), of replacing politics with psychology. A Jewish doctor in late 19th-century Vienna would find it easier to outrage the medical community by talking about infantile sexuality than to challenge the state (the government of the Hapsburg Empire) by talking about illegitimate, paternalistic, and racist political authority. If Schorske is right, there is a trauma which, because it had to be buried, gave rise to psychoanalysis as we know it: the trauma of Freud seeing his father abused and humiliated by an Austrian officer who hated Jews.

This is all the more reason to applaud what Binion has done here, and his forthcoming book on traumatic reliving is much more than a simple commentary on Freud. To argue that adult experience rather than infantile experience is essential to understanding the human psyche puts us back on a ground where psychology and history can be of some real use to each other. I might agree or disagree as to whether a specific trauma of adult experience is then repeated so as to shape an entire life or a decisive historical event. But at least we are back here on terrain that speaks directly to what we observe and what accords with our common sense.

Here is a telling, if anecdotal, example. About 15 years ago a mutual friend introduced me to Daniel Ellsberg. I have never met a man so obsessed by one event. Conversation that evening on almost any topic drew us back to his experience during the Nixon administration and his revelations about the Pentagon Papers. One might say that his trauma was self-imposed but it was trauma nonetheless. His neu-

rotic repetition compulsion was to put this one moment in his life at the center of his existence and of all those who came in contact with him. I know, of course, that obsession and compulsive repetition are not the same thing, but clearly adult experiences trump childhood familial struggles when one tries to understand what happened in history.

My only caveat about Binion's book—and it is a caveat rather than a criticism—is that without notes and perhaps further argument, I'm not certain whether his evidence for Freud's reading back infantile origins into many of his cases is indisputably proven. He provides an elegant demonstration of the point, but so that others understand fully the book's significance, one wants no shadow of doubt. I trust that at least part of the remainder of the book will elaborate the theoretical argument. This is necessary so as to provide strong support for the historical essays that apply the theory. Binion has put the cart before the horse, but this is only natural with a historian who needs to examine the facts before proposing the theory.

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