
Freud's social theory: Modernist and postmodernist revisions

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Abstract

Acknowledging the power of the id-drives, Freud held on to the authority of reason as the ego's best tool to control instinctual desire. He thereby placed analytic reason at the foundation of his own ambivalent social theory, which, on the one hand, held utopian promise based upon psychoanalytic insight, and, on the other hand, despaired of reason's capacity to control the self-destructive elements of the psyche. Moving beyond the recourse of sublimation, post-Freudians attacked reason's hegemony in quelling disruptive psycho-dynamics and, focusing upon the social domain, they sought strategies to counter the oppressive (repressive) social restrictions and conformist impositions impeding individual freedom that result from thwarted desire. Postmodern celebration of desire at the expense of reason and sublimation leaves the Enlightenment prospects altogether and moves psychoanalysis into a new terrain, where the very notion of rationality and an autonomous ego upon which much of Freudianism rests has been deconstructed. Thus the debate that begins with Freud's social theories reflects the deeper divisions, which arose with postmodern ethics and discarded Cartesian–Kantian notions of personal identity. Here we consider the moral framework in which Freudian social theory sits and a contrasting understanding of agency that confronts his modernist conception. In that debate, we discern the larger humanist confrontation with postmodernity. Yet, all who engaged Freud shared some version of his utopian ethos, albeit radically restructuring the theory upon which social reform might occur.

Keywords

Sigmund Freud, humanism, modernism, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, social theory, utopianism

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When one has lived for quite a long time in a particular civilization and has often tried to discover what its origins were and along what path it has developed, one sometimes also feels tempted to take a glance at the other direction and to ask what further fate lies before it and what transformations it is destined to undergo. (Freud, 1927: 5)

Freud's engagement in explaining social phenomena and their historical origins ranged widely, extending from the psychology of religion and morality to the sources of social order and disorder; from the psycho-dynamics of cultural development to the relationship between human nature and culture. Directed over the broad social spectrum, from the analysis to the culture in which she or he lived, Freud's meliorism must be measured against his own deep appreciation that discord and aggression were inextricable from human congress. The balance between cautious hope and an abiding skepticism marks the to-and-fro of Freud's complex deliberations on culture, yet, in the end, his therapeutic orientation places him in the role of social reformer.

Freud, social theorist

Freud's social theory originated in a critique of bourgeois sexual repression (Freud, 1898, 1908), but transformed to a more complex formulation after 1920, when he formally introduced the revision of dual instinctual theory as a struggle between Eros and the death instinct (Kaye, 2003). In his mature writings, where social theorizing appears most clearly, he suggested that the complex interplay of the Eros–death instinct required a healthy dialectic for individual and social health. Indeed, finding that equipoise suggested social therapeutic possibilities. The acceptance and integration of the death instinct is then both an ethical and an existential task, which if denied (in Freudian terms) leads not only to a thwarted life, but neurosis (Drassinower, 2003).¹ So beyond the direct elucidation of psychic disease, Freud's theory of culture became an inquiry into the viability of the human species.

The putative clinical success of psychoanalysis convinced Freud that an alternate mode of acculturation was possible based on the insights his theory offered. Thus the Freudian prescription, based on analytic insight, modeled social reform on psychoanalytic success: identify the repression and free it to allow a healthy expression of the erotic, principally through sublimation. The extrapolation to a cautious utopianism maintains that once the (Freudian) psychic dynamics has been exposed, the lessons learned from that endeavor should then guide social reform, which would have a firm, rational (scientific) basis. How better balance and healthy release would be achieved, and how such a massive reformation of obstructive social forces might be accomplished, he did not predict. In this sense, his social theory, for better or worse, is 'iconoclastic' (Jacoby, 2007), and hardly prescriptive in any concrete terms.

Freud's swings between an austere realism and modestly hopeful assessments framed later critical interpretations. Some commentators have regarded Freud as deeply pessimistic about the effective control of the instincts, in particular destructive Thanatos, and have highlighted the late circumspective views about the efficacy of psychoanalysis itself.² If he is read as ultimately despairing of psychoanalytic redemption, then humankind is doomed to its basic psychic structural dynamics. This 'melancholic' or 'negative'

state describes ‘an enduring past that misshapes and deforms the present, which, in turn, presents the future with a steadily increasing burden’ (Moss, 2005). Although a despondent Freud vividly appears in his works, others reject this reading and find a hopeful alternative voice. Building on the therapeutic ethos, which, after all, serves Freud’s own purposes, a more hopeful picture also emerges. As Freud himself maintained in all of his social and historical works, the cultural theory he developed extrapolates the metapsychology of individuals to society.³ And if Freud’s cautious optimism of psychoanalytic therapy is similarly extended, at both individual and cultural levels a general perfectionist vision orients his thought. On this view, strategies might be devised the better to integrate erotic and death instincts to form an enriched psychic dialectic. Simply, instead of destructive conflict, Freud sought a means toward achieving improved psychic harmony.

Drawing from a vast set of assumptions and characterizations of culture to promote psychoanalysis as a potentially redemptive both for individuals and for society-at-large, has Freud presented an ‘illusion’, namely, a wish-fulfillment, one that must be regarded as ironic given his attack on other illusions, notably religion? Others have noted the dangers of such utopian thinking on interpreting psychoanalysis proper (Eckstein and Caruth, 1965), or outlining the hidden effects of a utopian orientation on the analyst and himself or herself (Berman, 2000). The debate has not been quelled, for Freud’s late works reflect the complex dialectic of his own machinations about the character of human instincts and the deeper divisions of his thought about the efficacy of his methods.⁴ Acknowledging these self-critical concerns, psychoanalysis nevertheless has been lodged in contemporary socio-political theory and enjoys wide influence. A plausible reason for that position rests on an ethics derived from a particular understanding of the ego’s autonomy, which Freud asserted despite the ever-present intra-psychic conflict that would subvert rational deliberation.

So, despite Richard Rorty’s perplexing dismissive comment that ‘Freud . . . has no contribution to make to social theory’ (1991a: 154), a rich literature has developed around psychoanalytic themes to countermand that judgment. These range over a complex array of issues that begin with individual psychoanalysis and end with extrapolations that would characterize society: the therapeutic promise to balance the pull of a destructive past that burdens the present and limits the future; the reason upon which analytic insight is based; the shared psychological conflicts of individuals and the social group; and combining each of these components, the articulation of a utopian moral aspiration in which progress and perfection might be embraced. Considering how these matters have framed much of 20th-century social theorizing, Freud easily claims identification as a cultural theorist, whose writings spurred much debate.

Later commentators amplified his project, by criticizing certain elements of his basic theory as well as offering various social and educational reforms. Besides Freud’s own major works, which contain both commentary about the social order and views of the nature of social conflict (Freud, 1913, 1927, 1930, 1939; Kaye, 2003), the early work of Otto Fenichel and Wilhelm Reich is representative of those who attempted to utilize psychoanalytic theory to further progressive struggles and criticize the social order (Robinson, 1969; Kupers, 2009). By the mid-20th century, Freudian-inspired social criticism expanded beyond extrapolations of orthodox psychoanalytic theory to include other diverse perspectives, e.g. Marxist (Althusser, 1996), Critical Theory (Horkheimer

and Adorno, 1993) and Nietzschean (e.g. Brown, 1959; Deleuze and Guattari, 1977[1972]). Even in radical reconstructions, psychoanalysis served as the crucible for the respective antidotes to the poison of self-destruction and thereby assumed a ‘utopian’ (or ‘positive’) interpretation of Freud’s work. Considering the vast expanse of this literature, which has dealt with social and individual reform to target repression in all of its socio-political forms, Freud suitably challenges Nietzsche’s own claim to the title, ‘physician of culture’ (Ahern, 1995).

The ethics of Freud’s utopianism

Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, considered in the context of a Kantian framework, embraces two apparently conflicting metaphysical positions (Tauber, 2009a, 2010). One derived from Freud’s scientific training, namely, the causation witnessed in the natural world, coupled to his naturalism, made him a determinist. The other originates with his humanism, which endows humans with a consciousness that employs reason to navigate the world – psychologically, socially and biologically. Given the centrality of deterministic unconscious forces in psychoanalytic theory, wherever in his writings Freud discusses free will, he admonishes readers who assert their belief in such freedom as harboring a deep illusion. However, the very promise of psychoanalysis builds upon the ability of reason, albeit with emotional recognition and reconciliation, to reveal the secrets of unconscious drives and thereby better live with them. To the extent that the ego as a monitoring system *feels* ‘free’, it does so as a consequence of its epistemological location and function as an observer of deeper mental functions. In some sense, this so-called ‘freedom’ is required to fulfill its judgmental role. And Freud himself, despite his deterministic conclusions, remained committed to the Enlightenment ideals of reason’s power, the perfection of humankind, and, from the vantage of a physician, the therapeutic promise of analysis. Simply, a central paradox organizes psychoanalysis – humans are determined, yet free.⁵

If one asks *why* the psychoanalytic pursuit occurs in the first place, follow the ancient’s own dictum of the ‘philosopher’s desire’ to know the real and to glimpse the truth. That imperative is captured in the psychoanalytic credo, ‘*Woe Es war, soll Ich werden*’ (‘New Introductory Lectures’, 1933), which the *Standard Edition*’s English translation renders, ‘Where id was, there ego shall be’ (Freud, 1933: 80). A more accurate translation (by Jacques Lacan) ‘where it [Id] was, I *must* become’ moves psychoanalysis from an epistemological endeavor to a moral one: *Soll* means ‘duty’ or ‘obligation’, and Freud thereby invoked an ethical imperative to support and justify psychoanalysis. Holding to humanist ideals, in which psychoanalysis becomes a treatise of personal growth, the theory points towards social reform.

The contest over Freudianism, which pits the modernist against various postmodern or post-humanist theories (Hayles, 1999; Lanier, 2010; Wolfe, 2010), comprises a chapter of a much larger story about human agency (moral-political identity) and subjectivity. Freud, the modernist, recognized the precarious place of reason in the psyche’s economy, and he understood with profound insight how reason’s own subjection to emotion severely compromised claims of autonomy and sacrosanct logic. However, he balanced uncertainty against what he thought the most effective cognitive tool humans possess,

namely, reason. In restating the conundrum of human fate in terms of a new appreciation of intra-psychic dynamics, Freud portrayed humans as capable of struggling against their Oedipal fate – not necessarily the primal family drama, but rather the mythic struggle against the determinism of personal destiny. So having recognized the power of the unreasoned unconscious and the weakness of the ego to direct the forces of the id, he refashioned a humanist program for a psychoanalytically informed world by asserting the standing of reasoned analysis as a *moral* imperative. On this view, a choice between Freud's thesis of 'insight leading to mastery' and a more passive (or 'lighter') position demarcates the ethical vision of our times.

The possibilities of psychological perfection, namely the idea that psychoanalysis embraces a therapeutic ethos, despite all the disclaimers regarding therapeutic efficacy, oriented Freud's own efforts and have remained at the ethical foundations of psychoanalysis. How Freud constructed his version of Stoic ethics on a Kantian base of personal autonomy, has been detailed elsewhere (Tauber, 2009a, 2010), but given the persistent puzzle as to why Freud's theory *in particular* serves as suitable forum for so much of contemporary social theory remains a beguiling question. Indeed, the very posing of the problem defines in some rough way the possibilities open to such an inquiry: bypassing the scientific basis of psychoanalytic therapy, those oriented by Freud must still refer to libidinal life and the call of desire, not as a target of control, but rather as an opportunity for fulfillment. Here, we review a continuum of representative critiques and adaptations of Freud's social theory, beginning with a modernist understanding of agency and stretching to postmodern reformulations, which in aggregate compose a requiem for the psychoanalytic ego. That story shows the broad impact of psychoanalysis, not as a therapy for unhappy neurotics, but as the master critique of a dysfunctional culture.

Freudianism on the modernist–postmodernist axis

The social theorizing Freud initiated followed several paths, but, basically, 'solutions' fall into two large groups. The first pertains to Freud's own verdict that 'sublimation' presents the best strategy for countering destructive forces (Gay, 1992). That posture need not be interpreted as pressing individuals into some conformist mold, for Freud, as a political liberal, clearly saw the oppressive character of western societies: 'The ego learns that there is yet another way of securing satisfaction besides the *adaptation* to the external world. . . . It is also possible to intervene in the external world by *changing* it, and to establish in it intentionally the conditions, which make satisfaction possible. This activity then becomes the ego's highest function' (Freud, 1926: 201), albeit in service to productive work and meaningful love. Yet, the repressive element looms large in Freud's social theorizing for he well understood that 'the liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization' (Freud, 1930: 95), i.e. individuals ultimately serve communal needs and thus the interests of the group subordinate individual happiness for collective goals. In a preamble to Foucault's conception of power, Freud observes: 'This replacement of the power of the individual by the power of the community constitutes the decisive step of civilization' (ibid.). Then two vectors must be accounted: (1) the restrictions on individual freedom imposed by the strictures of society; and (2) the successful deployment of sublimation, which not only redirects libidinal energies for individual satisfaction, but

becomes the crucial element in forging social cohesiveness when synchronized with the group's own interests.⁶ Note, the individual, more specifically, the ego characterized as possessing various degrees of autonomy, holds center stage in these discussions and that agent closely follows the modernist temperament, i.e. an ego *exists*.

The second general theoretical view organizing post-Freudian social theory, in which most postmodern interpretations fall, cannot be directly linked to Freud, namely the view that liberating 'desire' represents the only effective antidote to an ever-repressive society. This second libidinal approach radicalizes Freud's insights about sexuality, by pushing against repression and offering an alternative to a reliance on sublimation.⁷ In that formulation, the character of the self was reconceived, shifting from an emphasis on ego dominance to that of responding to the call of desire. Postmodernists of various orientations – Marxist, Lacanian, Foucaultian, etc. – extended their respective critiques along these lines and, in the process, their 'egocide' (Rogozinski, 2010[2006]) deconstructs the ego altogether with far-ranging repercussions for social theory. In such assessments, a new calibration of the costs extracted for socialization putatively showed that much of the Freudian edifice required dismantling. Then, upon that rubble, postmodern 'Man' appeared. Indeed, the very basis of autonomy – notions of subjectivity and reason – had been rejected to achieve a new kind of emancipation (e.g. Deleuze and Guattari, 1977[1972]; Butler, 2005).

Here, in assessing Freud's social thinking, we will follow two paths – 'Enlightenment' ideals of reason and autonomy versus the 'postmodern' skepticism of each. Each orientation begins with the fundamental issue as to what extent neurosis arises from inner maladjustment (inadequacies of the individual) versus the repressive role of the social itself to become the primary culprit in *producing* neurosis.⁸ Thus, both the Enlightenment and postmodern agendas begin in the same place, the very possibility of self-exploration according to psychoanalytic precepts. The utopian challenge then is to explore how limitations for analysis can be reduced, and more particularly how to distinguish gratuitous limitations from essential ones. How that project proceeds depends on a moral undertaking, for Freud's 'theory of culture opens the destiny of the human species as a "fateful question" to be taken up, a *task* to be engaged upon rather than a definitive fate to be dealt with' (Drassinower, 2003: 14–15; original emphasis). With an eye towards this moral horizon, our discussion begins with critiques firmly lodged within orthodox Freudian theory, and then we follow those approaches that more radically rethought the precepts of psychoanalysis. In sum, we describe a trajectory from 'sublimation' at one end of the conceptual spectrum to 'desire' at the other and consider the consequences of those formulations of agency and the social theory based upon such reconceptions.

Reforming the ego: Drassinower

Abraham Drassinower discharges radical utopian orientations for a more circumspect critique, which closely follows the route of sublimation advocated by Freud. To achieve the harvest of psychoanalytic theory, Drassinower adopts the educational format of psychoanalysis as presented by Philip Rieff,⁹ and, perhaps most vital to rekindling Freudianism, he, like Norman O. Brown (discussed below), identifies Freud's basic insight and subsequent challenge as finding a way to better reconcile death in a politics of the living,

or to ‘transform Thanatos into Eros’ (Drassinower, 2003: 30). Drassinower holds that by refusing fully to accept psychological reckoning of loss and death, humans impoverish themselves individually and collectively. If the fundamental conflict is regarded as enacted *within* the psyche and not *between* psyche and civilization, then the Eros/death is a struggle not between I and not-I, but rather between that which unifies and that which separates (ibid.: 22).

As Freud explained in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), the death of a loved one allows the mourner to see herself or himself as other (as dead) and the other as ‘alive’ (real).¹⁰ So the denial of death is paradoxically a denial of the other’s reality. Healthy mourning brings both the other and the mourner to life in the sense of recognizing the existential reality of living. Eros is thus the emblem of loss and desire to unify/capture. The relation of I and not-I is not necessarily an irreconcilable antagonism, but rather offers an opportunity for unification: Eros strives to regain unity and this is not derived from the unconscious (which knows no negation), but arises in the sphere of inter-subjectivity.

On this reading, Eros is the emblem of loss, and is both constituted by, and constitutive of, loss. Thus the Eros/death struggle is about how loss is to be dealt with, or signified.

It is not a question of an antithesis between an optimistic and pessimistic theory of life. Only by concurrent or mutually opposing action of the two primal instincts – Eros and death-instinct – never by one or the other alone, can we explain the rich multiplicity of the phenomena of life. (Freud, 1937: 243)

Freud’s so-called pessimism is the truth of the inevitable transience of life, so instead of ‘pessimism’ as a negative judgment, it becomes a way of celebrating life – both a recognition and an acceptance/understanding of such. Simply, mourning is superior to melancholia (denial), and, more broadly, to consider his theory as pessimistic or not is to misconceive his project: on this view, Freud’s critique is not a theory about the imprisonment of individuals in their culture, but a theory of how humans fall short of their erotic potential by denying their mortality (love) (Drassinower, 2003).

Regarding Freud as fundamentally an educator, Drassinower would draw psychoanalytic insights into an educational program to strengthen a creative dialectic of Eros and Thanatos. Thus by reconfiguring the relationship with the past (parents) through psychoanalytic education, the relationship with children (through superego formation) will consequently change, for the better. This Freudian configuration, one that ignores object relations psychology and the Kleinian focus on inter-subjectivity, falls well within the rationalistic understanding conferred by analysis and an ego possessing rational insight and self-control. Neither to gainsay the validity of this approach nor to comment on its therapeutic consequences, virtually all other serious critiques of Freudianism begin with a philosophical assault on Reason’s sacrosanct position. Theodore Adorno, whom we consider next, provided the earliest, and most influential, of these reassessments.

Reconceiving reason: Adorno

As discussed, the ‘modernist’ approach closely follows Freud’s own understanding of psychodynamics and privileges the ego and its rational faculties to accomplish an

emancipating politics. This approach builds upon the conception of the ego as freed by psychoanalytic insight to achieve the full expression of a humanistic conception of human beings, i.e. where personal autonomy and freedom of thought are assumed and only because of repressive forces remain subordinated to social authority. Erich Fromm offers the clearest example of such an orientation (Fromm, 1955, 1969, 1973) in his tacit acceptance of a self-knowing, independent rational agent, who, with proper guidance, might achieve freedom from repressive and domineering society. Arguing from a humanist perspective shared with Freud, he believed that such an agent, strengthened by psychoanalytic insight, was capable of asserting his or her own liberation and thus countering the alienation imposed by modern mass society.

Espousing a human-centered social philosophy, Fromm's views radically differ from those of Adorno, who attacked the very foundations of agency bestowed by the Enlightenment, namely the belief that human knowledge can fully capture reality and that rational understanding can direct moral choices. Instead, Adorno argued that such a view ironically impoverishes rationality. Following a basic Freudian template, he placed modern neurosis at the doorstep of an ego that used a restrictive rationality to dominate the id-instincts, and, in so doing, caused a disruption of psychic balance. In a complex philosophical construction, Adorno argued for a conception of reason that might better account for the 'unaccountable' aspects of emotional and aesthetic experience.¹¹ In positing the displacement and ultimate subversion of ego-derived, directed pleasure, Max Horkheimer and Adorno built an encompassing theory of social dynamics (1993): the degeneration of ego functions not only ultimately results in the impoverishment of individual psychic health, the same introgression applies to the collective of advanced post-industrial societies. Adorno's *positive* dialectic of Enlightenment and absorption would mediate the opposition of id and ego within the self to direct both groups of instincts outward towards 'healthy' engagement with the world (Sherratt, 2002). The goal then becomes the achievement of a utopian reconciliation of conflicting drives and the consequent fulfillment of a creative agent.

The reformed process requires true Enlightenment – a kind of knowledge not limited by instrumental reason: because of *ego*-blocked objects of desire and stymied pleasure, due to the ego's need for hegemonic domination, the id-instincts weaken in relation to the outer world, which in turn weakens the structural boundary around the self. The compromised sense of selfhood leads to ambiguous discrimination of self and other, from which knowledge acquisition begins a downward spiral of projection. The id-instincts consequently turn toward the self for gratification in progressive 'fantastical narcissism', which is then coupled to a second form, 'instrumental narcissism', where the ego finds gratification within itself and thus further compromises the boundary between the self and the world (Sherratt, 2002: 106–9). With the id's deeper rotation inward and deepening narcissism that accompanies the ego's further ingression, full narcissism emerges. Through projection, the self mistakes objects derived from the ego as reality, projecting a conceptual instrumental system onto the object of two kinds: the id's (the 'old demons' [Horkheimer and Adorno, 1993: 46]) and the ego's 'mathematization' of thought (ibid.: 25). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the 'enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system' because its 'process is always decided from the start' (ibid.: 24) and thus disallows modes of thinking and experience other than its own abstract, instrumental reduction

of nature. ‘Mathematization’ (by which they label Enlightenment thought) disallows ‘thinking about thought’ and ‘turns thought into a thing, an instrument’ (ibid.: 25) offering an impoverished appreciation of reality. And thus two kinds of myth – ‘fantastical’ (myth proper) and ‘instrumental’ (the world seen as an abstract mechanical system) – enfold the other.

The psychic projection of this last phase construes the world as an instrumental system, where objects attain their significance only as instruments of power and dominance, and ‘thought becomes meaningful only when meaning has been discarded’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1993: 93). The centralizing of the ego and the marginalizing of the id (‘rational’ over ‘non-rational’) undermines the Enlightenment, and the rationality upon which it is based is dismantled. The cascade begins with the ego’s need to control through reason, a domination that ultimately leads to its self-destruction and failure of Enlightenment. The id’s impoverishment, external to the Enlightenment’s first-order aims, sets off a decline in the subject’s own instincts, which in a regressive spiral undermine internal aims of the Enlightenment. ‘Hence enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude’ (ibid.: 27). In the realm of subjectivity, the subordination of the id-instincts imbalances the ego-/id-instincts with collapse of both. The counter-move requires a balance between ego and id to form a productive dialectic.

Adorno’s prescriptive social theory lodged itself in an alternate philosophical construction of a form of reason (‘non-identity thinking’) that joined an ambitious aesthetic theory (Adorno, 1973). For Adorno, inasmuch as part of reason’s foundations resides in the id-instincts, he sought to establish their cognitive standing. Because the separation of the ego-instincts and the id-instincts results in regression, a strategy to rectify this state required a dialectic in which the id-instincts might find their just place in the psychic economy. To complete his reconstruction, Adorno proposed a non-instrumental kind of knowledge acquisition, which he placed in the aesthetic realm, and in that move, he turned from epistemology to aesthetics (Adorno, 1973, 1997, 2007; Buck-Morss, 1977; Zuidervaart, 1991). Although not developed systematically, this strategy of subjectivity would empower the id-instincts with a cognitive role and place the ego and the id in a positive dialectical relationship. If successful, enlightenment would then become an intensified subjectivity, one better able to balance the dominance of instrumental reason (in the employ of an ego turned oppressive by the dominance of its authority) with desire (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1993: 18).

For Adorno, the ‘aesthetic’ – typically associated with the Dionysian – is not destructive or ‘irrational’, but rather orients and leads the ego’s employment with the world and thereby strengthens the ability of the self to engage the other (the world/reality). The basic move is to shift the ego’s defensive, introverted narcissism to outward participation by revising the modality of thinking to an aesthetic-based encounter with the object, one mediated through different kinds of emotive cognition. On Adorno’s view, instead of representation, manipulation, control and dominance, the aesthetic builds on enchantment, or a balanced ‘receptivity’ with the object.¹²

This effort to save Enlightenment ideals achieved mixed results. The philosophical conception of a self-destructive ego exposed the deep vulnerabilities of the Cartesian agent, and thereby, ironically, supported later postmodern theories based precisely on the destroying of the ego Adorno attempted to save. To set the stage for that discussion, we

first consider the most direct response to Adorno's response to Freud, that of Joel Whitebook, and then we move along the libidinous axis to complete our survey with a review of the *désirants*.

Sublimation vitalized: Whitebook

Joel Whitebook developed a utopian Freudian interpretation based on a much fuller theory of sublimation than anything envisioned by Freud himself. Beginning with Freud's observation that the introduction of the reality principle leaves only fantasy (and day-dreaming) subordinated to the pleasure principle (1911: 222), Whitebook builds upon the coupling of utopia and perversions (each adherent to the pleasure principle) to offer his own interpretation of a Freudian-based new social order.¹³ In probing the possibilities of better integrating the ego and unconscious in order to free each for fuller life, he reviews a course already rejected and then presents a second option. On the one hand, the Freudian ego, read in a Kantian formulation, achieves autonomy by suppressing heteronomous desire through dissociation and repression of the id. That strategy, Adorno, Marcuse and many others condemned as violent and restrictive of human potential (Whitebook, 1995: 15). So another course must be found to circumvent or break the impasse at the heart of human nature as depicted by Freud, where reason, which controls the id, also imprisons *das Ich à l'Adorno*. For Whitebook that liberating psychology valorizes perversion (and fantasy) as the good Other of the repressive ego and thereby maximizes 'free intercourse' (Freud, 1926: 98) between the ego and the unconscious (Castoriadis, 1987: 104).

Reason, in the form of free will, ironically 'determines' (and minimizes) choice and 'free life'. How might such a new form be fashioned? What would it draw upon or how might it be redirected to allow more effectively for the 'intercourse' Freud described? Adorno had embraced art and philosophy to pursue his utopian vision, but Whitebook, writing within the psychoanalytic context, formulates a complex dialectic between fantasy and perversion to argue for a theory of sublimation that forgoes the 'romantic idealization of the irrational'¹⁴ and the rationalist isolation from it' (Whitebook, 1995: 12) in order the more effectively to tap into a wellspring of creativity and break the hold of stifling reason.

Phantasy not only plays a constitutive role in the perverse manifestations of sexuality, as artistic imagination, it also links the perversions with the images of integral freedom and gratifications. In a repressive order, which enforces the equation between normal, socially useful, and good, the manifestations of pleasure for its own sake must appear as fleurs du mal. (Whitebook, 1988: 424)

He erects his case on a careful reading of Freud's later work, where a non-conflictual psychic utopian model is envisioned.

The early Freud saw a hierarchy of psychic centers, and he leaves little doubt where he placed his endorsements. The ego, preferably a psychoanalytically enlightened ego, must live with an unruly unconscious that seethes with desires and needs often completely incompatible with life in the social realm. Health might be assessed as better

integration, but *dialogue* or libidinal *release*? In the pre-1920 Freudian universe, the unconscious speaks, but does it listen? Does it respond? The uninstructed ego can hardly make sense of the fantastical dreams and misbehaviors to which it is subject. Psychoanalytic interpretation based on a particular cast of reason is required to understand, and ultimately to derive, a strategy by which to live with painful memory, unrequited desire and irresolvable need.

Then after 1920 the other side of the coin appeared in the form of a major revision: there are no sharp boundaries within the psyche, only artificial ones (Freud, 1933: 79). In 'Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety' (1926), Freud articulated most clearly the refashioning of psychic centers and thereby launched a dialogical interaction between ego and id based on a new psychic architecture. Freud now thought (after a convoluted clinical exposition of frustrated forces reminiscent of his earliest speculations [1895]) that 'the ego is identical with the id, and is merely a specially differentiated part of it' (1926: 97). Both the ego-id and the ego-superego are bound together and each component is *strengthened* in that unity; health = integration.

The new topography was hardly arbitrary, for it addressed the key issue of repression, which Freud transfigured from a mechanical-like ego control over unconscious desire to an abnormal separation of that which is normally whole. Now he calls the ego

... an organization. It is based on the maintenance of free intercourse [with the id] and of the possibility of reciprocal influence between all of its parts. Its desexualized energy still shows traces of its origin in its impulsion to bind together and unify, and this necessity to synthesize grows stronger in proportion as the strength of the ego increases. (Freud, 1926: 98)

And correspondingly, if the integration of the ego and id is disrupted, the ego is weakened. Indeed, repression becomes indicative of imbalance and dysfunction, 'a process of dissociation in which the ego refuses to communicate with particular contents of the id' (Whitebook, 1995: 116). Psychoanalysis then is directed at healing the splits, knitting the psyche back together (*ibid.*: 117), which also becomes the communal goal, the ultimate 'work of culture' (Freud, 1933: 80). Whitebook builds upon this formulation.

To achieve a utopian state, the 'autonomous subject ... would establish an active relation toward fantasy life that would no longer be defensively warded off' (Whitebook, 1995: 118) and the vital imaginative core thus released (Castoriadis, 1987: 104). This is normally accomplished through sublimation, or what Plato called the 'erotic ascent' (*Symposium*). Just as Diotima directed the transformation of love as a progression from sexual congress through successive stages to some erotic ideal of beauty and sublime ecstasy (Freud, 1905: 134), so too did Freud see the erotic instincts find their fulfillment in erotic objects increasingly distant from raw genital sexuality in which the libido could never fulfill its desire with the imposition of civilization's restraints (Freud, 1910: 80, 122-3; 1912: 190). What occurs at the individual level finds expression in culture-at-large, from the development of primitive religion to the greatest artistic and scientific accomplishments of western civilization. Leonardo served Freud as the case par excellence of sublimation (Freud, 1910: 132-6), but no theoretical explanation of how libidinal instincts might be coupled to ego functions to achieve sublimated activity is offered, other than to note that a psychic calculus is at work: repression leads to redirected

libidinal forces that attach to ego objects, so transcendence of inner nature has been replaced with a conduit to the outer realm, albeit in the sublimated transfigured form from the original manifestation of the drive.

This capacity to find satisfaction in desexualized objects remains obscure. Freud made no effort to distinguish sublimation from reaction-formation, aim-inhibition, idealization, or repression, nor is a mechanism postulated. He only asserted that an exchange occurs whereby an original sexual aim is displaced by (and thus substituted for) another 'related' non-sexual one (Freud, 1908: 187). And this 'capacity for sublimation [resides] in the organic foundations of character on which the mental structure is only afterwards erected' (Freud, 1910: 136). As Laplanche and Pontalis observe, 'Freud's formulations regarding sublimation were never far-reaching' and 'the lack of a coherent theory of sublimation remains one of the lacunae in psycho-analytic thought' (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 432–3). This weakness also limits Whitebook, who, following current psychoanalytic theorizing, basically waves the sublimation baton to integrate the psyche: 'the unity of the self is not achieved by the exclusion of the "lower" from the "higher" but through their integration' (Whitebook, 1995: 250), by which he means that psychoanalytic theory points to health as a product of the successful integration of the ego with the drives, or, in another lexicon, the promotion of an 'embodied self'.

While Adorno agreed with this popular psychoanalytic prescription, he found that move inadequate. For him, the bourgeois taming tainted the instincts as they emerged in sublimated form (Adorno, 2005: # 79). In advocating a more direct outward turning of the instincts into the world through art he hoped to go beyond 'sublimation' for something more in character of the original instinctual drive. How successful his 'aesthetic turn' might be in terms of his own philosophical agenda is one thing, its appropriation into a wider social theory is another. A more explicit Marxist critique (and prescription) was offered by another Frankfurt School theorist, Herbert Marcuse, whose *Eros and Civilization* (1955) in many respects followed orthodox Freudian theory, but drew far different conclusions from its precepts.

Freudo-Marxist: Marcuse

The literature that makes the utopian orientation explicit concerns (primarily) a revision of the relationship of the social (its repressive power) and of the individual (her or his liberation) within that cultural context. Marcuse, who sought (like Adorno) the better to place reason in psychic life and meld the ego- and id-instincts into an improved integration for health and human industry, explicitly developed that theme, albeit with a philosophical orientation quite distinct from those embedded in orthodox clinical theory (e.g. Whitebook).

'Sigmund Freud's proposition that civilization is based on the *permanent* subjugation of the human instincts has been taken for granted. . . . But Freud's own theory provides reasons for rejecting his identification of civilization with repression' (Marcuse, 1955: 4–5; emphasis added). So begins *Eros and Civilization*, and Marcuse, using the same strategy employed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1993), historicizes Freudian tenets to attack the very foundation of psychoanalysis:

In Freud's theory, freedom from repression is a matter of the unconscious, of the subhistorical and even subhuman *past*, of primal biological and mental processes; consequently, the idea of a non-repressive reality principle is a matter of retrogression. That such a principle could itself become a historical reality, a matter of developing consciousness, that the images of phantasy could refer to the unconquered *future* of mankind rather than to its (badly) conquered past – all this seemed to Freud at best a nice utopia. (Marcuse, 1955: 133–4; original emphases)

And with this challenge, Marcuse proceeds to show how, indeed, such a freedom potentially is attainable within *consciousness*, i.e. as a function of the ego, by redefining the reality principle and thus reconfiguring repression.

Holding autonomous agency sacrosanct and regarding repression as the variable, Marcuse trains his sights on society. Following Adorno and Horkheimer, he began with historicizing the reality principle. Even though 'Freud's theory precludes the construction of any psychoanalytic utopia' (Marcuse, 1955: 119) – due to an uncritical acceptance of the bourgeois society – Marcuse reinterpreted the instinct theory by revising the relationship of individual desire within the social order. In his rewriting the organizing principle of Freudian theory, the reality principle became the 'performance principle', and Marcuse thereby redefined repression in terms of 'surplus repression' (as distinguished from 'necessary repression'). Simply, because renunciation arises from the performance principle, radically changing society's demands would release human libido.

Marcuse's program rests on the prospects of post-industrial progress and the resulting bountiful leisure that would allow freer expression of libidinous pleasure. With a shift in the demands of society, the reality principle radically changes and, correspondingly, the repressive structure of Freud's theory is altered in parallel: so, non-repressive development would naturally arise from economic success as the performance principle reduced its demands and leisure would increasingly play its role in western life. Accordingly, Marcuse's interpretation (and prognostication) would

... not simply [offer] a release but a *transformation* of the libido: from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy to erotization of the entire personality. ... The free development of transformed libido within transformed institutions ... would *minimize* the manifestations of *mere* sexuality by integrating them into a far larger order, including the order of work. In this context, sexuality tends to its own sublimation: the libido would not simply reactivate precivilized and infantile stages, but would also transform the perverted content of these stages. (Marcuse, 1955: 184–5; original emphases)

The ethics of psychoanalysis shifts the onus of health upon reformed society: excess repression leads to guilt; diminished repression leads to health and happiness. In terms of formulating human agency, Marcuse championed an ego exercising choice and autonomy, and with that *telos*, 'the historical possibility of a gradual decontrolling of the instinctual development must be taken seriously, perhaps even a historical *necessity* – if civilization is to progress to a higher stage of freedom' (Marcuse, 1955: 122).

Although *Eros and Civilization* unabashedly projects a Marxist orientation, in later works, Marcuse distanced himself from ideology. In *The Aesthetic Dimension* he

admitted that the ‘inexorable entanglement of ... Eros and Thanatos cannot be dissolved into the problems of the class struggle’ (1978: 16) and he, like Adorno before him, turned to the aesthetic realm to seek ‘reconciliation of the Dionysian and the Apollonian’ (ibid.: 29). To extend the Marxist critique to a more expressive and true emphatic expression, we must turn to the appropriation of Freudian psychoanalysis by Brown, who, despite bypassing Critical Theory, nevertheless may be drawn into a circle of shared concerns, parallel approaches, and not so dissimilar alternatives to orthodox Freudian theory.

The Nietzschean Freud: Brown

Brown set out, like Adorno, on a psycho-historical interpretation of culture, where ‘the theory of neurosis must embrace a theory of history; and conversely a theory of history must embrace a theory of neurosis’ (Brown, 1959: 13). And again in the spirit of Adorno’s own philosophical approach, Brown revised Freud’s essential oppositional construction of the instincts into a creative dialectic.¹⁵ For Brown, the unsettling consequences of the introduction of Eros lead directly to a reconfiguration of the pleasure principle and precipitate a new understanding of sublimation, as discussed above. In a very different voice, celebrating a liberation identity politics, Brown explicitly asks the reader to suspend ‘common sense’ in order ‘to open a new point of view’ (ibid.: xi). He concurred with Marcuse that Freud failed to fulfill the potential of psychoanalytic extrapolations to social theory, because he was ‘not equipped’ to make the shift to anthropological (and historical) perspectives (ibid.). However, with expanded horizons the full impact of Freud’s theory could be appreciated.

As an American classicist, Brown might appear out of place among postmodern French philosophers (e.g. Foucault, Deleuze), but he joins their intellectual heritage in the shared admiration of Nietzsche, and, as a Marxist, he situated his study of psychoanalysis within a critique of the capitalist setting in which it functions.¹⁶ More, in his argument that would emancipate desire, he strongly resonates with the focus on fulfilling desire that coordinates much of the program of French postmodernity, especially as enunciated by Lacan (1991, 1992) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1977[1972]). Indeed, *Life Against Death* (1959) claims good standing among the *désirants*, snugly fitting into the post-Freudian French psychoanalytic criticism (discussed below) in its central theme: despite western civilization’s attempts – through ‘parental discipline, religious denunciation of bodily pleasure, and philosophical exaltation of the life of reason’ – to renounce (or at least effectively to repress) the pleasure principle, the unconscious holds fast to its own nature and thus, from the inevitable conflict, neurosis results. ‘Man remains unconvinced because in infancy he tasted the fruit of the tree of life, and knows that it is good, and never forgets’ (Brown, 1959: 31). Brown then embarks on his major thesis that ‘childhood remains man’s indestructible goal’ (ibid.: 32), because we remain pleasure-seeking animals. His analysis and utopian program to free westerners from asceticism focuses upon social reform organized to release chains of repression by recapturing the potential first tasted in childhood and then lost.

Brown’s analysis builds on what he thought constitutes Freud’s basic error, namely, structuring psychoanalytic theory on conflict-ridden dualisms, e.g.

hunger–love, love–hate, love– aggression, and the last, Eros–death instincts. Because Freud always placed them in struggle, social demands required repression and, with severe control, ultimately neurosis results.

Freud, misled by his metaphysical bias toward dualism¹⁷ . . . often speaks as if the ambivalence of love and hate were a fundamental fact of human nature, present in the child from the start. But when he is not theorizing but simply analyzing the facts, he says that in the earliest phase ‘there is no ambivalence in the relation to the object, i.e. the mother’s breast’. ([Freud, 1933: 99] Brown, 1959: 53)

Directed at recapturing the pleasurable union of innocent childhood, Brown would redeem desire’s exile, whose call cannot, should not, be ignored, and if repressed, liberated in one form or another. (This theme closely echoed that of the contemporaneous Lacan, discussed below.)

Brown began his critique with proposing a psychic structure differing from the conflict-driven scenario described by Freud to build a psychology on a dialectical dynamic:

It is the privilege of man to revolt against nature and make himself sick. But if man has revolted from nature, it is possible for him to return to nature and heal himself. Then man’s sickness may be again . . . a sickness in the sense that pregnancy is a sickness, and it may end in a birth and a rebirth. The Freudian dualism . . . precludes the notion of a return to nature. . . . Dialectics rather than dualism is the metaphysic of hope rather than despair. (Brown, 1959: 84)

Brown would complete the romantic dialectic tradition, in which Schiller, Herder, Hegel and Marx described humankind’s history as a series of undifferentiated primal unity, succeeded by differentiation, antagonism and alienation, and finally resolved with a final return to unity on a higher level.

But these categories [unity, differentiation, harmony] . . . remain in the romantics arbitrary and mystical because they lack a foundation in psychology. The psychoanalytical theory of childhood completes the romantic movement by filling this gap. . . . A philosophy of history has to take the form of an eschatology, declaring the conditions under which redemption from the human neurosis is possible. The possibility of redemption lies in the reunification of the instinctual opposites. (Brown, 1959: 86)

So Brown’s utopian aspiration replaces Freud’s conflicting dualism with a constructive dialectic, in which Eros, in alignment with Thanatos, would emerge triumphant as a life-giving force. He embarked on his program by aligning the erotic instincts and death instincts with the same basic goal of seeking fusion, albeit in different ways. Eros desires union with an object, and the death instincts pursue the ultimate union of life and death, which in the living state is characterized as Nirvana. The eastern principle of a One Becoming captures Brown’s sense of Thanatos, and on that basis he dispenses with the conflict model for one in which peak pleasure is experienced through mystical union or Dionysian frenzy or sexual climax, each of which captures the essential desire of both

life and death forces. In other words, the death instincts are not necessarily destructive (i.e. the aggressive mode typically characterizing them), but rather they may manifest positively, or, as Brown opines, Freud is 'perhaps too pessimistic about the id' (Brown, 1959: 85). More, given the inextricable linkage of the life–death forces, man, in flight from death, denies life (ibid.: 101).¹⁸

Brown oriented his proposal well within psychoanalytic theory and the western philosophical tradition, and offers nothing less than psychological emancipation, a theory of history and an articulation of human redemption:

If repression were overcome and man could enjoy the life proper to his species, the regressive fixation to the past would dissolve; the restless quest for novelty would be reabsorbed into the desire for pleasurable repetition; the desire to Become would be reabsorbed into the desire to Be. (Brown, 1959: 93)

And this would be achieved with a psychology of childhood enchantment achieved through the 'resurrection of the body' and, like Nietzsche, highlighting art's central role in accessing the sensuous.¹⁹ Building on Nietzschean Dionysian exuberance, Brown proclaimed,:

If we can imagine an unrepressed man – a man strong enough to live and therefore strong enough to die, and therefore what no man has ever been, an individual – such a man, having overcome guilt and anxiety . . . would have a body freed from all the sexual organizations [to become polymorphous perverse] – a body freed from unconscious oral, anal, and genital fantasies of return to the maternal womb. . . . In such a man would be fulfilled on earth the mystic hope of Christianity, the resurrection of the body, in a form, as Luther said, free from death and filth. (Brown, 1959: 291)

Revamping current modes of child-rearing in order to celebrate the sexual and legitimate play in all of its forms, Brown would have a childhood ethos trump repressive society.

Perhaps in ways he could not have imagined, *Life Against Death* offered an anthem to the libido-celebrated individualisms of the 1960s, but its message has since lost its wider social impact and among the French postmodernists who soon followed, Brown's treatise had little influence, if any at all. Nevertheless, Brown set an agenda that continues to linger and has been reconsidered in less radical terms, perhaps most notably by Drassinower (2003), who offered an attempt to incorporate Brown's erotic structure of the psyche with a more conventional theory of sublimation (discussed above).

Call of desire: Lacan

Among those who wrote searchingly on the problematic of desire, none more directly challenged Freud's placement of reason than Jacques Lacan, who argued that *desire* has its own calling that must be validated. Although Freud had dethroned the ego's authority, he still entrusted reason to fortify a rational ideal. For Lacan, the ego is another object, with a powerful self-deceptive facility that cannot effectively preside over the unconscious. He essentially dispensed with the ego and the restrictions imposed through its

agency. Thus Lacanian psychoanalysis shifts from rational interpretation linked to potential control (through understanding) of unconscious drives to a therapy of rediscovering and liberating desire.

So in contrast to a utopian vision grounded in Enlightenment ideals, Lacan's psychology dismissed basic modernist precepts that Freud himself held, namely the strength of reason and the autonomy of the individual. In that displacement of the ego from the center of psychoanalytic theory, Lacan, as the pre-eminent revisionist voice, dismantled Freud's project and paved the way for postmodernists, who built on the rubble that remained.²⁰

So, whereas Freud asserted the primacy of the ego, whose moral agency he embraced, anti-humanists following Lacan contested the very notion of an autonomous rational agent and the moral possibilities attached to such a subject. Freud had concurred about the forfeiture of the ego's autonomy, while at the same time holding to a modernist concept of a psychic normative; Lacan goes further. His theoretical portrait emphasizes the ego's constraints, not its freedoms. Beginning with an ego lacking autonomy, he challenged the ego psychologies (e.g. Fromm and Hartmann) that would provide for the subject to achieve varying degrees of freedom. Furthermore, because an objective, knowable reality does not exist, the health of the ego cannot be defined objectively in adaptation to 'reality'. The normative structure having collapsed in the social ether created by historical contingencies, any human-centered perspective loses authority. Lacan derived this position from erasing any real boundary between 'man' and society (i.e. the ego incorporates the social and thus the distinction of private and social becomes a bourgeois ideology), and with a nod to the Marxists, instead of adaptation, Lacan stressed personal discovery and from there a utopian glimmer appears.

Lacan's 'return to Freud' reinterpretation orients postmodern critiques by shifting psychoanalysis from the medical 'cure' model to a 'science' of individual 'research' and self-discovery. Accordingly, adaptation to the social has been subordinated to understanding the misalignments of the analysand and his or her world, which are due to the oppressive cultural environment itself. From this orientation, largely the result of a very different understanding of the ego (both as a psychoanalytic *locus* and a social construct), Lacan swung psychoanalytic social theory from the more traditional post-Freudian ego psychologies to one positioned to understand and radically reform the social.

The contemporary ensemble of critiques, which drew from a synthesis between Lacan and French Marxist theorists (following the events of May 1968 [Turkle, 1978]) have been widely influential. Clearly, much of post-Freudian culture criticism has characterized the 'de-centered subject' and explored opportunities for a psychoanalytic-inspired reconfiguration of social repression from this perspective.²¹ Indeed, Marxist reinterpretations of Freudian social dynamics and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory forged an important alliance, whose ideology of personhood radically altered Freudian ethics.

From a moral point of view, a schism emerges between the Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, where Freud sought rational insight leading to control as the *modus operandi* of psychoanalysis, Lacan built an ethics from the subject's liberation of her or his desire ('Do not give way to your desire').²² Lacan indicted Freud at the deepest reaches of moral ideals by asserting that Freud had discovered that 'man isn't entirely in man' and had thus abdicated his humanist standing (Lacan, 1991: 72).

From an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire. Whether it is admissible or not in a given ethics, that proposition expresses quite well something we observe from experience. In the last analysis, what a subject really feels guilty about when he manifests guilt at bottom always has to do with – whether or not it is admissible for a director of conscience – the extent to which he has given ground relative to his desire.

Doing things in the name of the good, and even more in the name of the good of the other, is something that is far from protecting us not only from guilt but also from all kinds of inner catastrophes. To be precise, it doesn't protect us from neurosis and its consequences. If analysis has a meaning, desire is nothing other than that which supports an unconscious theme, the very articulation of that which roots us in a particular destiny, and that destiny demands insistently that the debt be paid, and desire keeps coming back, keeps returning, and situates us once again in a given track, the track of something that is specifically our business. (Lacan, 1992: 319)

With desire displacing reason, the rational psychoanalytic ego has effectively been dethroned with wide-ranging repercussions for social theory. Following the displacement of the ego's authority, much of post-Freudian French criticism hinges on the 'question of the self' and the ability to marshal reason for insight and liberation from repressive society. Assaulting the humanist position under the postmodernist dual banner of celebrating the sensuous and demoting reason begins with Lacan's ironic slogan, 'Return to Freud'. Indeed, those who wrote searchingly on the problematic of desire (notably the later works of Barthes, 1978[1977]; Kristeva, 1987[1983]; and Foucault, e.g. 1986; Deleuze and Guattari, 1977[1972]), were deeply influenced by Lacan's revisionist argument that *desire* has its own calling.

The postmodern challenge: Deleuze and company

In contrast to Freud's vision grounded in Enlightenment ideals, the Parisian train conducted by Lacan dismissed the strength of reason and the autonomy of the individual, and in dislodging the ego from the center of psychoanalytic theory Lacan offered a theoretical base for their collective anti-humanism. This reconfiguration explicitly redirected psychoanalysis towards a social vision where individual desire would trump the displacements offered by consumerism and popular culture. Instead, a subject fulfilling personal *desire* would become the new agent composing the social matrix. These theorists have been widely influential, but those who find their writings largely outside their concerns might well ask, as does François Cusset, 'Why still bother with theory, French or otherwise?' (Cusset, 2008: xi). Now, a generation later, the answer rests on acknowledging that these critics have provided an influential challenge to a modernist vision.

Indeed, under the postmodern banner, the standing of reason and notions of personal identity have undergone critiques that have radically challenged modernist conceptions of political and social agency. The very idea of selfhood has been reconfigured within a domineering social context of 'power' and manipulation (Foucault), and, concomitant with that move, the arch-principle of autonomy, upon which Enlightenment ideals placed the epistemological and moral agent, has been deconstructed: ephemerality,

fragmentation, discontinuity and the chaotic are accepted as given and no effort is made (as in classical modernism) to transcend or counteract the lack of structure and the apparent multiplicities at work in all sectors of human experience. Simply, postmodernism 'swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is' (Harvey, 1990: 44). And if some unified representation of the world is impossible to fulfill and the complex connections and differentiations can only be described in terms of perpetually shifting fragments and changing relationships, what epistemology *works*? Into the breach falls pragmatism, where local knowledge and practical modes of action replace meta-strategies (ibid.: 52; Tauber, 2009b). Accordingly, a different kind of 'solidarity' (e.g. Rorty, 1991b, 1991c) must replace guiding ideals of Truth, Objectivity and the Real (Brandom, 2000; Auxier and Hahn, 2010).

Jean-François Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1993[1974]) well represents the post-modern ethos in the psychoanalytic context. In its adaptation of key Nietzschean tenets that celebrate the emancipation of desire, specifically, and the demotion of reason as a faculty of human fulfillment, it must be counted as a key text of the politics of desire (and one of the most histrionic social critiques of the period). Following a theme closely aligned with *Anti-Oedipus* (1977[1972]), the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (by Deleuze and Guattari; discussed below), Lyotard maintained that desire had been coopted by oppressive forms of family, work, economy and state. Not only is desire then used to energize its own oppression, but also the vitality and resources originating in desire are sapped upon its transmutation into non-libidinal objects. Accordingly, Lyotard endeavored to release desire into fuller, freer expression. This he suggested would be best accomplished through forms of writing and art that moved from a representational modality to what he called a 'tensor' modality. *Tensor* is a 'routing' for desire that ends not in a form of representation *of* that desire, but rather a way of expressing, and thus freeing, libidinal forces. In short, a politics of desire becomes a strategy for liberating creativity and vitality, both for attaining psychic health and for achieving a social utopianism.

Deleuze and Guattari joined Lyotard in discrediting foundationalism and unified meta-narratives for a liberation politics based on the celebration of individual desire. From a political perspective, these preferences reflected their rejection of the dominance, if not imperialism, of modernist normative discourses and the consequent erasure of variety and pluralistic flourishing. Closely following a Marxist critique of capitalism (akin to Foucault and Althusser), their work framed the relationship of a psychoanalytic conception of the individual within a capitalist system they regarded as constitutively oppressive. Thus their reading of Freud, and the alternatives they offered, coalesced around the basic premise that capitalism, and the modernism in which it is situated, helps establish the hegemony of a restrictive social power at the expense of the individual. Their utopianism thus revolves around reconfiguring the politics of personal identity with an eye towards this larger Marxist agenda.

Deleuze and Guattari presented a deconstructive theory of the ego, in which a dynamic unconscious assumes a new primacy. The rational subject is thereby rendered as an artifice and a new psychic identity emerges. This decentered subject presents the ego as possessing a fluid identity, unconfined by some rigid unitary notion of *the self*, whose Cartesian heritage they utterly rejected. Deleuze and Guattari maintained that

Freud was not radical enough in his critique of civilization's discontents because his construction of the subject, based on his universalized reading of the Oedipal conflict, subordinates freedom and the primacy of desire as a revolutionary force in the resistance to social and psychic repression (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977[1972]: 113–22). The Oedipal conflict enacted within the narrow confines of the Victorian nuclear family, 'colonizes' psychic life with the psychological adjustment to paternal dominance and the ensuing psychic adjustments then required (i.e. repression and conflict) (ibid.: 170; Schwab, 2007: 4). Instead, they offer 'anti-Oedipus', a theory, which, in essence, overthrows paternal dominance. Accordingly, the individual might be permitted to pursue desire unencumbered by the traumatic baggage of the family drama enshrined by Freudianism, and thereby Deleuze and Guattari radically reconfigured personal identity through a politics of expressed and enacted desire.

Anti-Oedipus (1977) presents Lacan's psychoanalytic revisionism in its full post-Freudian political flowering. Giving the affects a more faithful depiction of their role in psychic life, one that would free them from what might be called reason's tyranny, Deleuze and Guattari dispensed with any normative ideal, where the rational ego has been replaced with a subject whose desire trumps all else. In such a psychic universe, what then frames moral choice (Frank, 1989; Murdoch, 1993)? Indeed, the narcissism that Freud so carefully elucidated ironically came to dominate the ethos of a theory recast with very different presuppositions.

Conclusion: A shared utopian ethos

On one side of the modernist–postmodernist divide, Lacan, Lyotard, Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault and their co-travelers discharged Freud's own humanist commitments based on the autonomy of the moral agent to leave the ego, missing the 'conceit' of reason, as only the product of various modes of social power that nullify individuality. Bruised, but standing, the modernist ego, relying on the machinations of pragmatic intercourse governed by 'communicative reason' (Habermas, 1987), has been placed within an alternative social theory, which still adheres to the remnant of the 'unfinished project of modernity' (ibid.). We sit in the midst of this dispute, yet, even at close quarters, we may discern the outline of the philosophical scaffold, which holds all parties together: beneath the descriptive dismissals of individual autonomy lies the persistent moral demand for personal freedom. Indeed, postmodernism must be understood in two modalities: on the one hand, based upon a deconstructed ego, pessimistic portrayals of mass society have been proffered; and on the other hand, prescriptive declarations have been made to regain personal freedom. So, whereas the modernist and postmodernist notions of self-hood diverged, their respective ethical commitments for a liberation politics unite them in common effort and mooted optimism.

Postmodernists, while appearing to have proposed a radically different formulation of agency, have only extended Freud's own skepticism of a rational, self-determined ego, whose uncertain self-knowledge and problematic ability to become free of unconscious forces set the stage for those who would deconstruct the very notion of a 'self' conceived as a *cogito*. In this respect Freudianism may be regarded as the portal through which the ego marches from modernity to postmodernity. In that transit, much of the ego's moral

character remains unperturbed: postmodernist depictions follow the value-structured goals of psychoanalysis, which are freedom from anxiety, fulfilling love, productive industry. Indeed, post-Freudians of whatever stripe are united in establishing a *therapeutic* strategy by which Freud's own ethical aims might be achieved. They follow a long modernist tradition, which combines a social fantasy with a pronounced moral goal. Thomas More, and all who followed him in the genre of utopian writing, understood that in seeking a 'no-place', they were engaged in an ethos directed towards an ever-receding aspiration of human fulfillment, not some final political blueprint (Kumar, 1991). Freud and later psychoanalytically inspired thinkers joined that general venture, for despite accepting the liberal critiques of utopianism (Jacoby, 2007) and the fragility of human fraternity, they still would embrace the regulative idea of human perfection (Kolakowski, 1982). From this perspective, the linkage of fantasy and utopia becomes an explicit heritage of Freudianism, one that seeks to rescue the western precept of progress and Enlightenment:

The business of political discourse is to convince people to take or to endorse actions that are supposed to bring about desired outcomes, despite the fact that no one controls the direction of change or could foresee all of the consequences of an action. Consequently, the political discourse of social change must make its appeal as wish-fulfilling dreams of omnipotent intentions or destined futures. From this perspective, every political program is not only inherently fatalistic, but also mired in fantasy and narcissism from its inception. The discourse of social change takes place on the terrain of the Imaginary. (Rothenberg, 2010: 153)

Post-Freudian theorists have unabashedly embraced the imaginary, and they did so in the wake of Freud's own understanding of the creativity of 'perversion' and its expressive character in a utopian 'fantasy' (Whitebook, 1995). Whether pursued through a Lacanian-inspired celebration of desire (Lacan, 1991, 1992), or with the radical anti-psychiatry of Deleuze and Guattari (1977[1972]) and Foucault (2003), or in a reconfiguration of gender and identity politics (Butler, 2005), each of the mainstreams of post-Freudian social theory takes its bearings from the vector of hope psychoanalysis presents. After all, constitutive to the 'therapeutic', Freudianism offered an implicit ethics of personhood (Rieff, 1959; Tauber, 2010) and by its extension, a basis from which a new social order may be imagined. In this regard, modernists and postmodernists remain united.

Notes

1. 'To tolerate life remains, after all, the first duty of all living beings. Illusion becomes valueless if it makes this harder for us' (Freud, 1915: 299) and thus he considered it 'a scientific duty, to apply the research methods of psycho-analysis, in regions far remote from its native soil, to the various mental sciences' (Freud, 1919: 260).
2. For a cogent revision of Freud's purported negativism, see Thompson (1991).
3. As Donald Moss (2005) observes, the utopian orientation follows from Freud's basic analytic method:

The task of free association informs much of clinical psychoanalysis. This task is implicitly utopian. The pursuit of free association sets up an impossible ideal whose achievement would mark the end of mind as we know it; that is, the end of repression – psychoanalytic utopia. (2005: 379)

And regarding the analytic experience itself:

... more happens than is permitted to happen. The dialogue therefore transgresses. Each successful treatment goes further than anyone could have been imagined. In spite of being burdened with the weight of Zeno-like paradoxes, the accumulated history of these private transgressions has the potential to move us all incrementally in a utopian direction. This potential for excess is the necessary ingredient for effective clinical work. The potential reveals a utopian presence, an idea protected from the policing forces of the norm. (2005: 379)

See also Eckstein and Caruth (1965) and Werbart (2007).

4. Carlo Strenger (1997) describes classic and romantic visions in psychoanalysis – variations on a basic motif in psychoanalytic thinking by which the character of the meeting between inner nature and outer reality compete.

Classic visions see this meeting as unavoidably painful, whereas romantic views see it as potentially harmonious. Correspondingly, classicism sees the sense of authorship, the sense of truly living one's life, as dependent on the ability to come to terms with fate, whereas romanticism sees it as dependent on the possibility of undoing the damage inflicted by fate. (1997: 207)

5. Strictly speaking, Freud never acknowledged the contradictions of this conclusion, which I have called a paradox: 'Analysis does not set out to make pathological reactions impossible, but to give the patient's ego the *freedom* to decide one way or the other' (Freud, 1923: 50; original emphasis), and then referring to the deterministic unconscious, Freud observes that its demands will not be denied by 'the proud superstructure of the mind' (Freud, 1919: 260), by which he means the rationality of self-consciousness.
6. Freud did not develop a theory of sublimation and consequently this aspect of his social criticism remains nebulous. However, the mechanisms of conformity imposed by society were amply discussed: for Freud, the most powerful tool civilization deploys against the destructive instincts is an internalized authority and policeman, the superego, which employs guilt to enforce conformity. In 'Civilization and its Discontents' (1930), Freud dissected the internal and external causes of the guilt complex, of which a significant portion concerns fear of external authority, as well as the fear generated from the internalized power of the superego. Guilt can hardly serve the pleasure needs of the individual, and, in a terrible regression, he saw guilt leading to further repression and (following his 'hydraulic thinking') increasing frustration of the id-instincts with their eventual violent expression in direct relation to their suppression. Indeed, he found 'guilt' to serve as the unifying construct of his analysis. 'My intention [is] to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt' (Freud, 1930: 132). This depiction segues into a discussion of how guilt might be placed within social dynamics, and this in turn leads Freud to ponder the likelihood that the dynamics he described might be redirected to avoid the apparent inevitability of cultural barbarity and self-destruction. His non-committal conclusion for radical psychological reform is well known (ibid.: 145).
7. Freud's writings on sexuality (infant and neurotic) schematize a dammed-up libido, which must find a weakness and flows forth in pathological symptoms; this is the crude hydraulic

conception of the instincts, but release is no cure for the toxic effects of unsatisfied sexual needs, because of the moral corrosive effects of infidelity on individuals, as well as the broader cultural disruptions of such behavior. Freud did not endorse free sexual expression, but instead suggested reform through education: because humans cannot escape their libidinous constitution and inwardly rebel, a less repressive social regime would provide the required education to ameliorate the consequences of excess repression (Kaye, 2003). Simply, replace failed repression with healthy repression, a theme discussed below.

8. 'It was discovered that a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposed upon him in the service of its cultural ideals, and it was inferred from this that the abolition or reduction of those demands would result in a return to possibilities of happiness' (Freud, 1930: 87).
9. Consideration of psychoanalysis as a form of education (as distinguished from individual therapy) has provided a broad platform for social commentary. For example, in *Freud: Mind of the Moralizer* (1959), Rieff presented 'psychological man', who *learns* to live with his conflicts and contradictions and seeks to maximize pleasure through the careful management of his inner life, which would then result in instinctual release and private well-being. Reconciliation with the permanence and immutability of conflict offers freedom to choose, happiness and solitude. These views have been critiqued as a form of consumerism by Gabriel (1983) and as 'a traditional type of moral doctrine' by Shor (1961).
10. This view of *living* is expanded in 'On Transience' (Freud, 1916), where Freud argues that the truth of life is the transience of what we love, and unlike the poet who cannot abide the loss of that which must expire, for Freud, living in true psychic reality of 'proper loss' is what Life is all about. Eros is to live in truth (a duty): we must 'work through' the conflict as a labor of 'mourning'. Thus the Eros/death struggle is both an ethical and existential conflict: the death of the loved one opposes denial to knowledge, and for Freud, illusion transmuted into recognition by proper mourning leads away from neurosis. Only in healthy mourning, recognizing loss can direct longing towards real, mortal objects and thereby strengthen Eros. The poet's love of the immortal spoils enjoyment, for it is a secret love of death. Love is always love of what will die. And when considered on the societal level, a culture unable to endure the ambivalence of life and death must end in war (war is ironically the denial of death and war puts a stop to that denial) (Drassinower, 2003).
11. For further elaboration of Adorno's critique applied to psychoanalysis, see Whitebook (1995) and Chessick (2007) and for a rebuttal of Adorno's understanding of rationality as critiqued by Habermas, see Cook (2004).
12. The term, *aura*, introduced by Walter Benjamin and adapted by Adorno for his own program, evokes this notion of absorption to establish a different kind of identification, a non-identity form of 'thinking' or experience outside the instrumental sphere (Buck-Morss, 1977).
13. Following Marcuse (and Chasseguet-Smirgel) Whitebook concurs that

... there is a certain logic to Marcuse's argument: if fantasy and perversions oppose the reality principle and remain loyal to the pleasure principle, if the reality principle is historically mutable, and if it is also desirable to transcend the reality principle, then it makes sense to extrapolate the principles of a qualitatively different social order from fantasy and the sexual perversions. In other words, if it is assumed that the pleasure principle has been suppressed throughout history primarily because of the existence of

scarcity, and that scarcity can now be eliminated, phenomena that have remained loyal to the pleasure principle can provide some indications of the nature of a society beyond material scarcity. (Whitebook, 1988: 423–4)

14. Whitebook fails to cite Brown's anthem for a freer libidinous life and thus discharges *Life Against Death* (1959) altogether from his consideration (see below). In seeking more accessible fields for humans to feed upon, Whitebook makes no effort to critique Brown's Nietzschean program. This seems an omission inasmuch as he might well have drawn from Brown's attempt to ground his utopian vision in a strengthened Eros, which as Whitebook himself acknowledges has import for his own theory of sublimation: 'Eros itself can function as a vehicle for Logos. One can argue that the basic impulse toward rationality itself, to find, across difference and otherness, manifestations of the same [Castoriadis, 1987: 299], that is, to synthesize, derives from the ego's erotic roots', whose origins pose no problem if 'one has a theory of sublimation to account for the relative disentanglement of the ego from the distorting conditions of its origins' (Whitebook, 1995: 114). Further, he goes on to assert that the post-modern complaints about the aberrations of the ego and its rationality are not a result of reason as such, but rather 'constitute pathologies of the synthetic function and do not belong to its nature per se' (ibid.: 115). So stepping back from the particular issues we have considered, Brown's omission from Whitebook's study reflects the divergence of modernity and postmodernity, namely, the displacement of reason's authority. That theme, traced to Nietzsche's celebration of Dionysus, brings the underlying role of reason in the ego's domination of unconscious forces to the foreground of theoretical discussions concerning the place of desire and its fulfillment, a theme discussed below.
15. As Whitebook notes of Freud's later work, 'the really novel element in the twenties was not the death instinct but Eros. The death instinct had been present *in nuce* in Freud's thinking since he first introduced an entropic, tension-reducing force in the form of the constancy hypothesis in the *Project* [1895]' (Whitebook, 1995: 128).
16. Marxist theory has not prospered in the past 30 years, and Freud-Marxism has been characterized as 'a dead tradition of thought' (Elliott, 1999: 10). For instance, Whitebook, in assessing *Eros and Civilization*, opined that the work suffered from 'naiveté, recklessness, impracticality', but most of all 'hubris' (1995: 4) to conclude that 'Marcuse can approach the perversions in a utopian manner because he excludes the problems of trauma, disavowal, and aggression from his analysis' (ibid.: 42). Such criticism may be directed at any of the social theorists who failed to enfold their writings fully within a clinical context and highlights the division between those who closely adhere to Freudianism (e.g. Whitebook and Drassinower) and others who freely use psychoanalysis for their own theorizing (e.g. Adorno, Marcuse and Brown).
17. The theory of the drives, which Brown calls a 'metaphysics' (Brown, 1959: 82), places psychoanalysis 'in its most opaque and most unsympathetic form' (ibid.: 77).
18. Drassinower (2003) further develops this theme as already discussed. Brown spreads his interpretation wider than Drassinower, but without the close reading of Freud's own writings with which the latter builds his case. The strength of Brown's contribution rests in his provocative interpretations of Nietzsche, capitalism, the psychoanalytic conception of time and human development, and his own metaphysical musings on human nature, and the way in which he aligns psychoanalytic theory with a philosophy of history resonant with Adorno's own efforts.

19. Note, while celebrating the sensuous, Nietzsche recognized that only through the ‘bond of brotherhood’ between Apollo and Dionysus, might the supreme goal of all art be obtained (Nietzsche, 1999: 104). For Nietzsche, the issue is not the sensuous per se, but rather *art*, which is a product of reason and order, on the one hand, and the expression of the emotions and the sensuous, on the other hand. Nietzsche’s exalted view of art, the ‘saving sorceress, with the power to heal’ (ibid.: 40), placed artistic creation and participation at the center of his program promoting a vital and healthy life: ‘art is the highest task and the true metaphysical activity of this life’ (ibid.: 14). Accordingly, art not only affirms life, but also becomes ‘the unvarnished expression of truth’ (ibid.: 41) and thus bestows meaning, ‘for only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*’ (ibid.: 33). But more, Nietzsche would accuse a hegemonic rationality as sapping the vitality of Greek tragedy, and art more generally. He described Socrates as ‘an instrument of Greek disintegration, as a typical decadent’, who destroyed tragic vitality by asserting “‘Rationality’” *against* instinct, “‘Rationality’” at any price as a dangerous force that undermines life’ (Nietzsche, 1967: 271). Obviously, Nietzsche’s philosophy radically opposes the centrality of rationality in Freud’s own theoretical configurations (Tauber, 2010: 161 ff.).
20. A general suspicion of reason’s authority had many expressions in this interwar period. Given the various political, historical and cultural forces that configure ‘enlightened’ Reason and employ it for larger social requirements, Kant’s formulation appeared as a vulnerable site for manipulation by mass forces, which conspired against individual choice and freedom. For instance, as already mentioned, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (1993) charged that Reason could not escape the spell of its own representations. And when individuality was configured as a rational agent, Foucault argued that the ‘self’ was an invention of 19th-century human sciences (Foucault, 1970) and possessed no essential features, but was a mere creation of ‘imminent’ (internal) social forces (‘power’) (Foucault, 2001). Accordingly, individuals can never stand in a position counter to a system inasmuch as they are determined *by* it. Foucault thus joined Lacan to form a twin program designed to challenge the Enlightenment ideals of reason and autonomy that Freud had embraced.
21. Lacan, and Althusser (1996) as well, begin with Freud’s early works, where they discern a more critical view of self-knowledge and the search for meaning, and they thus dispense with the later metapsychology works, which they see as having different concerns, i.e. the mechanisms of negotiation between ego and social reality at the expense of the earlier commitments. They also dismiss the unfortunate alliance with sociology and anthropology, which in this context became assimilatory vehicles for social power and manipulation.
22. Lacanian ethics explicitly contrasts with the ethics of responsibility to the other extolled by Levinas and Derrida, not to mention utilitarian ethics as well (see Rothenberg, 2010: 194 and 205 ff., where Zizek’s ‘self-aestheticization’ seems nothing more than extolling narcissism, and for that matter Lacan’s championing desire).

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