

TIME

Nov. 29, 1993, pp. 47+

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THE ASSAULT ON FREUD

by Paul Gray

He invented psychoanalysis and revolutionized 20th century ideas about the life of the mind. And this is the thanks he gets?

Many are the ways of coping with the world's vicissitudes. Some people fear and propitiate evil spirits. Others order their schedules according to the display of the planets across the zodiac. There are those who assume that they carry, somewhere inside of them, a thing called the unconscious. It is mostly invisible, although it can furtively be glimpsed in dreams and heard in slips of the tongue. But the unconscious is not a passive stowaway on the voyage of life; it has the power to make its hosts feel very sad or behave in strange, self-destructive ways. When that happens, one recourse is to go to the office of a specially trained healer, lie down on a couch and start talking.

The first two beliefs can, except by those who hold them, easily be dismissed as superstitions. The third--a tenet of the classic theory of psychoanalysis devised by Sigmund Freud--has become this troubled century's dominant model for thinking and talking about human behavior. To a remarkable degree, Freud's ideas, conjectures, pronouncements have seeped well beyond the circle of his professional followers into the public mind and discourse. People who have never read a word of his work (a voluminous 24 volumes in the standard English translation) nonetheless "know" of things that can be traced, sometimes circuitously, back to Freud: penis envy; castration anxiety; phallic symbols; the ego, id and superego; repressed memories; Oedipal itches; sexual sublimation. This rich panoply of metaphors for the mental life has become, across wide swaths of the globe, something very close to common knowledge.

But what if Freud was wrong?

This question has been around ever since the publication of Freud's first overtly psychoanalytical papers in the late 1890s. Today it is being asked with unprecedented urgency, thanks to a coincidence of developments that raise doubts not only about Freud's methods, discoveries and proofs and the vast array of therapies derived from them, but also about the lasting importance of Freud's descriptions of the mind. The collapse of Marxism, the other grand unified theory that shaped and rattled the 20th century, is unleashing monsters. What inner horrors or fresh dreams might arise should the complex Freudian monument topple as well?

That may not happen, and it assuredly will not happen all at once. But new forces are undermining the Freudian foundations. Among them:

- The problematical proliferation, particularly in the U.S., of accusations of sexual abuse, satanic rituals, infant human sacrifices and the like from people, many of them guided by therapists, who suddenly remember what they allegedly years or decades ago repressed (see article, "Lies of the Mind" by Leon Jaroff*). Although Freud almost certainly would have regarded most of these charges with withering skepticism, his theory of repression and the unconscious is being used--most Freudians would say misused--to assert their authenticity.

- The continuing success of drugs in the treatment or alleviation of mental disorders ranging from depression to schizophrenia. Roughly 10 million Americans are taking such medications. To his credit, Freud foresaw this development. In 1938, a year before his death, he wrote, "The future may teach us to exercise a direct influence, by means of particular chemical substances." Still, the recognition that some neuroses and psychoses respond favorably to drugs chips away at the domain originally claimed for psychoanalytic treatment.

- The Clinton health-care reform proposals, oddly enough, which are prompting cost-benefit analyses across the whole spectrum of U.S. medicine, including treatments for mental illness. Whatever package finally winds its way through Congress, many experts concede that insurance will not be provided for Freud's talking cure. (A 50-min. hour of psychoanalysis costs an average of \$125.) Says Dr. Frederick K. Goodwin, director of the National Institute of Mental Health: "It's clear that classical psychoanalysis, which is four to five times a week for a four- to five-year duration, will not be covered. It won't be covered because there is no real evidence that it works." Goodwin, for the record, professes himself an admirer of Freud the theoretician.

- A spate of new books attacking Freud and his brainchild psychoanalysis for a generous array of errors, duplicities, fudged evidence and scientific howlers.

This last phenomenon is an intensification of an ongoing story. While Freud was winning cadres of acolytes and legions of notional recruits, he and his ideas regularly attracted sharp attacks, often from influential quarters. As early as 1909, philosopher William James observed in a letter that Freud "made on me personally the impression of a man obsessed with fixed ideas." Vladimir Nabokov, whose novels trace the untrammled and unpredictable play of individual imaginations, regularly tossed barbs at "the witch doctor Freud" and "the Viennese quack." For similar reasons, Ludwig Wittgenstein objected to the pigeonholing effects of psychoanalytic categories, even though he paid Freud a backhanded compliment in the process: "Freud's fanciful pseudo explanations (precisely because they are so brilliant) perform a disservice. Now any ass has these pictures to use in 'explaining' symptoms of illness."

The steady rain of anti-Freud arguments did little to discourage the parade of his theories or to dampen the zeal of his followers. In fact, Freud erected an apparently invulnerable umbrella against criticisms of psychoanalytical principles. He characterized such disagreements, from patients or anyone else, as "resistance" and then asserted that

instances of such resistance amounted to "actual evidence in favor of the correctness" of his assertions. For a long time, this psychoanalytic Catch-22 worked wonders: those who opposed the methods put forth to heal them and others could be banished, perhaps with a friendly handshake and a knowing smile, as nuts.

That illogical defense has largely crumbled. The recent discovery of documents relating to Freud and his circle, plus the measured release of others by the Freud estate, has provided a steadily expanding body of evidence about the man and his works. Some of the initial reassessments are unsettling.

For one example, the 10-year collaboration between Freud and Carl Gustav Jung broke off abruptly in 1914, with profound consequences for the discipline they helped create. There would henceforth be Freudians and Jungians, connected chiefly by mutual animosities. Why did a warm, fruitful cooperation end in an icy schism? In *A MOST DANGEROUS METHOD* (Knopf; \$30), John Kerr, a clinical psychologist who has seen new diaries, letters and journals, argues that the growing philosophical disputes between Freud and Jung were exacerbated by a cat-and-mouse game of sexual suspicion and blackmail. Freud believed an ex-patient of Jung's named Sabina Spielrein had also been Jung's mistress; Jung in turn surmised that Freud had become involved with his sister-in-law, Minna Bernays. Both antagonists in this standoff held bombshells that could blow each other's reputation from Vienna to Zurich and back; both backed off, divided up the spoils of their joint investigations and retreated into opposing tents of theory.

Was this any way to found an objective science? Freud's defenders argue that his personal life is irrelevant to his contributions to learning--a rather odd contention, given Freud's statement that his development of the analytic method began with his pioneering analysis of himself. Nevertheless, Arnold Richards, editor of the American Psychoanalytic Association newsletter, dismisses any attention paid to Freud's private conduct: "It has no scientific practical consequence. It's not relevant to Freud's theory or practice."

What, then, about attacks on Freud's theory and practice? In *FATHER KNOWS BEST: THE USE AND ABUSE OF POWER IN FREUD'S CASE OF 'DORA'*, academicians Robin Tolmach Lakoff and James C. Coyne offer a fresh view of one of Freud's most famously botched analyses. When "Dora," 18, sought Freud's help at her father's insistence in 1901, she told him the following story: her father was having an affair with the wife of Herr "K," a family friend. Herr K had been paying unwanted sexual attentions to Dora since she was 14 and was now being encouraged in this pursuit by her father, presumably as a way to deflect attention from the father's alliance with Frau K. After hearing this account, Freud, as feminists say, did not get it. He decided Dora really desired Herr K sexually, plus her father to boot, and he criticized her "hysterical" refusal to follow her true inclinations, embrace her circumstances and make everyone, including herself, satisfied and fulfilled. She left Freud's care after three months.

If this sounds damning, more of the same and then some can be found in Allen Esterson's *SEDUCTIVE MIRAGE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE WORK OF SIGMUND FREUD*. As a mathematician, Esterson is vulnerable to charges from Freud loyalists that he is an amateur, unqualified to discuss the mysteries of psychoanalysis. Maybe so, but his relentless examinations of discrepancies, doctored evidence and apparent lies within Freud's own accounts of individual cases make for disturbing reading. Esterson's argument is often most effective when it quotes the analyst directly on his therapeutic techniques. Freud regularly sounds like a detective who solves a crime before interviewing the first witness: "The principle is that I should guess the secret and tell it to the patient straight out." Once Freud had made a diagnosis, the case, as far as he was concerned, was closed, although the treatment continued: "We must not be led astray by initial denials. If we keep firmly to what we have inferred, we shall in the end conquer every resistance by emphasizing the unshakable nature of our convictions."

Noting the fact that Freud's published case histories largely record inconclusive or lamentable results, some loyalists have adopted a fall-back position: Freud may not have been very good at practicing what he preached, but that lapse in no way invalidates his overarching theories.

These defenders must now confront *VALIDATION IN THE CLINICAL THEORY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS* by Adolf Grunbaum, a noted philosopher of science and a professor at the University of Pittsburgh. The book, which builds on Grunbaum's 1984 critique of psychoanalytic underpinnings, is a monograph (translation: no one without a Ph.D. need apply) and a quiet, sometimes maddeningly abstruse devastation of psychoanalysis' status as a science. Grunbaum dispassionately examines a number of key psychoanalytic premises: the theory of repression (which Freud called "the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests"), the investigative capabilities offered by free association, the diagnostic significance of dreams. Grunbaum does not claim that the idea of repressed memories, for instance, is false. He simply argues that neither Freud nor any of his successors has ever proved a cause- and-effect link between a repressed memory and a later neurosis or a retrieved memory and a subsequent cure.

Off the page, Grunbaum is able to make his critique a little more accessible to lay people. Of the presumed link between childhood molestation and adult neurosis, he remarks, "Just saying the first thing happened and the second thing happened, and therefore one caused the other, is not enough. You have to show more." Grunbaum finds similar flaws in the importance Freud attached to dreams and bungled actions, such as so-called Freudian slips: "All three of these tenets--the theory of neurosis, the theory of why we dream and the theory of slips-- have the same problem. All are undermined by Freud's failure to prove a causal relationship between the repression and the pathology. That's why the foundation of psychoanalysis is very wobbly."

How wobbly? Interestingly, Grunbaum himself thinks all is not lost, although his verdict is not entirely cheering: "I categorically don't believe Freud is dead. The question is, Are they trustworthy explanations? Have the hypotheses been validated by cogent, solid evidence? My answer to that is no."

Frank Sulloway, a visiting scholar of science history at M.I.T. and a longtime critic of Freud's methods, takes a somewhat more apocalyptic view: "Psychoanalysis is built on quicksand. It's like a 10-story hotel sinking into an unsound foundation. And the analysts are in this building. You tell them it's sinking, and they say, 'It's O.K.; we're on the 10th floor.'"

Sure enough, the view from this imaginary elevation remains largely untroubled. Psychoanalysts like to point out that their treatment is gaining converts in Spain, Italy and Latin America, plus parts of the former Soviet Union, where it had formerly been banned. Some 14,000 tourists a year flock to the Freud Museum in London, where they walk through the Hampstead house Freud owned during the last year of his life. His daughter Anna, who carried on her father's work with dedication and skill, remained there until her death in 1982. Freud's library and study, the latter containing a couch covered with an Oriental rug, remain largely as he left them. Some visitors last week may have come fresh from seeing a Channel 4 TV documentary put together by Peter Swales, another persistent critic of Freud, titled *BAD IDEAS OF THE 20TH CENTURY: FREUDISM*. If so, their interest in Freud memorabilia seemed undiminished. Michael Molnar, the Museum's research director and an editor of Freud's diaries, acknowledges that psychoanalysis is being challenged by new drug treatments and advances in genetic research. "But," he argues, "Freud is in better shape than Marx."

Across the English Channel, a play called "The Visitor," by the young French dramatist Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, has opened in Paris, featuring the octogenarian Freud and his daughter Anna as principal characters. Meanwhile, the Grand Palais is staging an exhibition called "The Soul in the Body," with objects that manifest the interplay between art and science. One of the major displays is the couch on which Freud's patients in Vienna reclined. In his leather-upholstered office a few blocks away, Serge Leclair, 69, an ex-president of the French Society for Psychoanalysis, notes all this cultural hubbub in France and contrasts it with the assaults on Freud in the U.S. "What happened to Freudian psychoanalysis in America is the fault of American psychoanalysts," he says. "They froze things into a doctrine, almost a religion, with its own dogma, instead of changing with the times."

For their part, U.S. psychoanalysts admit that Freud has been taking some pretty hard knocks lately but deny that his impact or importance has waned as a result. Says George H. Allison, a Seattle-based analyst: "I think Freud's influence in mental health as well as the humanities is much greater than it was 40 years ago. I hear much more being written and said about Freud." Allison points to the proliferation of therapies--there are now more than 200 talking cures competing in the U.S. mental health marketplace, and 10 to 15 million Americans doing some kind of talking--and he argues that "they really are based on Freudian principals, even though a lot of people who head these movements are anti-Freudian officially. But they are standing on the shoulders of a genius."

This image raises anew the quicksand question. If Freud's theories are truly as oozy as his critics maintain, then what is to keep all the therapies indebted to them from slowly sinking into oblivion as well? Hypothetically, nothing, though few expect or want that event to occur. Surprisingly, Peter Kramer, author of the current best seller LISTENING TO PROZAC, comes to the defense of talking cures and their founder: "Even Freudian analysts don't hold themselves 100% to Freud. Psychotherapy is like one of those branching trees, where each of the branches legitimately claims a common ancestry, namely Freud, but none of the branches are sitting at the root. We'd be very mistaken to jettison psychotherapy or Freud."

Frederick Crews, a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, and a well-known reviewer and critic, once enthusiastically applied Freudian concepts to literary works and taught his students to do likewise. Then he grew disillusioned and now ranks as one of Freud's harshest American debunkers. Even while arguing that Freud was a liar and that some of his ideas did not arise from clinical observations but instead were lifted from "folklore," Crews grows cautious about the prospect of a world suddenly without Freud or his methods: "Those of us who are concerned about pointing out Freud's intellectual failings are not, by and large, experts in the entire range of psychotherapy. I take no position on whether psychotherapy is a good thing or not."

Such prudence may be well advised. Freud was not the first to postulate the unconscious; the concept has a long intellectual ancestry. Nor did Freud ever prove, in empirical terms that scientists would accept, the existence of the unconscious. But Jonathan Winson, professor emeritus of neurosciences at Rockefeller University in New York City, who has done extensive research on the physiology of sleep and dreams, now claims Freud's intuition of its existence was correct, even if his conclusions were off the mark: "He's right that there is a coherent psychological structure beneath the level of the conscious. That's a marvelous insight for which he deserves credit. And he deserves credit too for sensing that dreams are the 'royal road' to the unconscious."

That, finally, may be the central problem with declaring Freud finished. For all of his log rolling and influence peddling, his running roughshod over colleagues and patients alike, for all the sins of omission and commission that critics past and present correctly lay on his couch, he still managed to create an intellectual edifice that feels closer to the experience of living, and therefore hurting, than any other system currently in play. What he bequeathed was not (despite his arguments to the contrary), nor has yet proved itself to be, a science. Psychoanalysis and all its offshoots may in the final analysis turn out to be no more reliable than phrenology or mesmerism or any of the countless other pseudosciences that once offered unsubstantiated answers or false solace. Still, the reassurances provided by Freud that our inner lives are rich with drama and hidden meanings would be missed if it disappeared, leaving nothing in its place.

Shortly after Freud actually died in 1939, W.H. Auden, one of the many 20th century writers who mined psychoanalysis for its ample supply of symbols and imagery, wrote an elegy that concluded:

...sad is Eros, builder of cities,
and weeping anarchic Aphrodite.

Auden's choice of figures from Greek mythology was intentional and appropriate. Perhaps Homer and Sophocles and the rest will prove, when all is said and done, better guides to the human condition than Freud. But he did not shy away from such competition.

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