

PSYCHO-ANALYSIS AND MARXISM*

By J. D. BERNAL

IN the decade after the war Freud's theories dominated the narrow circles of British intellectuals. His psycho-analysis was accepted warmly for many reasons. It was new and exciting, it was shocking, it debunked religion and morals, it promised an internal liberation from all restraints. Nevertheless, it was essentially a creed of escape into an inner world of complexes and repressions and away from social and economic realities.

In recent years the Freudian wave has begun to recede. The effects of the world economic crisis of capitalism, and of the close menace of fascism and war, startled the intellectual strata into awareness of the objective world, and aroused a new wide interest in marxism, which the polite educated world had hitherto conspired to ignore and now approached like a new discovery.

It was inevitable, however, from this ill-digested process of thought that the demand should arise to "reconcile" Freud and Marx. The present book is an expression of this stage of extremely immature and uninformed confusion.

Great as the spread of marxism has been in the past few years it has by no means gone far or deep enough. Marxism is disturbing to existing habits; and it is only to be expected that once plain rejection and suppression are found no longer possible, attempts are made to water Marx down—to reconcile his ideas with existing fashionable modes of thought. Thirty years ago in Russia Machian positivism, so devastatingly castigated by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, was the fashionable intellectual creed; to-day we have the Freudian psychology. It is nevertheless a sad comment on the backward state of marxist knowledge in this country that such a book as Freud and Marx could be written at all, and still more serious that it should be so warmly recommended by such a well-known marxist writer as John Strachey.

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Mr. Osborn writes as if Freud and Marx had never been considered in juxtaposition before. He has never read, or shows no sign of having read, any of that voluminous amount of discussion on the subject already published in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. Worse still, however,

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almost every line of the book reveals a purely superficial understanding of marxism and a complete failure to grasp its essential principles.

He has, in effect, given a brief and far from adequate account of Freudian theory, which he accepts quite uncritically. There follows an interpretation, in hybrid marxist terms, of Primitive Society, Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism. The general thesis is that Freud and Marx are to be reconciled in a dialectical way as two opposites, one representing the psychological and the other the material understanding of humanity. Out of the fusion of these is to come a superior understanding, some applications of which are given us in the last chapter.

Put in its strongest form, the argument is that psycho-analysis gives us a scientific interpretation of human motive which was not available to Marx and Engels. Had they been alive to-day they would—so it is argued—have accepted it as they accepted Darwinism. As they are not alive, the duty devolves on us to demonstrate by what processes they would have reached the stage of acceptance. There is, however, all the difference in the world between the methods of Marx and Mr. Osborn. Marx, while welcoming Darwin's scientific results, was never for a moment taken in by his philosophy. For his part, Mr. Osborn accepts Freud's philosophy without apparently realising how completely the work of Marx and Engels has already made it untenable.

The issue is a fundamental one. Freudism can—to an even less extent than Darwinism—not be treated as an experimental science, to be incorporated like Physics or Chemistry in the marxist interpretation of the objective world. Still less can Freudism be regarded as a dialectic complement to Marxism. For all its apparent materialism it is in effect just one more form of subjective philosophy and must be understood and rejected as such. This is not to deny the greatness of Freud's own work in clinical psychology or the importance of some of the relationships in human behaviour which it has brought to light. These, though they cannot by themselves be said to constitute a science of psychology, are a contribution to science. In order to make use of them we need to separate them carefully and critically from the almost mythical and continually changing theories that are involved in their presentation.

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The implication of this book is that marxism is deficient in psychological interpretation and that this deficiency can be met by psycho-analysis. In actual fact it is through Marx, and not through Freud, that we can begin to understand the significance and the possibilities of psychology. Marx does not start, as Freud does, with the idea of an essentially unalterable human psychology from which sociology can be derived. On the contrary he makes humanity for the first time comprehensible as the

new quality which arises from social aggregation. We must understand society before we can understand man.

Human nature is not constant ; it can be and is being moulded by society. Freud is incorrect when he produces, from his study of the psychology of the bourgeois family a generalisation to fit the whole human race, reaching as far back as the hypothetical primal horde with its jealous and terrible father. To accept the Freudian analysis is to accept by implication a completely non-dialectical view of psychology which must destroy the whole basis of marxist analysis. While ignoring the development of the world process, the rise of classes and the struggles between them in which human nature is formed and transformed, the Freudian interaction seeks to set up the individual, and the bourgeois individual at that, as the centre and measure of all things.

It is clear that Mr. Osborn has not only failed to notice this basic incompatibility, but throughout his book he even tries to adduce a detailed parallelism between Freudian and marxist ideas. Many of these attempts are glaring distortions, as for instance when he seeks to establish the similarity of Freud's and Engels' views on the origin of the family, whereas in fact these views are almost diametrically opposite. Even more glaring is the attempt of Strachey in the preface to equate the "false consciousness" of Engels with the Freudian unconscious.

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Though more easily recognisable, the political aberrations that are contained in the second part of the book are merely natural consequences of this initially defective theoretical approach. Nevertheless, some are sufficiently extreme to warrant special mention. The author identifies the influence of traditional, and consequently counter-revolutionary, forces with the Freudian super ego, thence drawing the conclusion that it is necessary to weaken the super ego and substitute ego-morality for super ego-morality. This is apparently considered to represent or amplify the marxist idea of class-consciousness. There could not be a more gross distortion.

The essence of marxism is not that it substitutes one psychological attitude for another but that it provides an objective and scientific picture of the processes of social change—of the inevitable breakdown of capitalism and the rôle of the working class in bringing it about. As a result of this disintegration and through active participation in the political and economic struggles of the workers, old loyalties give place to new, but the new loyalties are on an altogether different plane of consciousness.

Related to this misconception of marxism is the idea that as the material necessity for socialism is now overwhelming, all the resistance to the process of socialisation must therefore be psychological, and that psychology

should consequently now play a decisive part in the struggle. In the first place this analysis of the current situation is wide of the facts.

The rising wave of working-class activity in all countries of the world to-day springs, like other previous waves, from a keen awareness of the economic situation and its effect on the workers. But there is to-day a far wider and deeper consciousness of the instability of capitalism than ever before. What dams up the wave is not bad psychology but the tardy development of the workers' political organisation, disunity, and the widespread prevalence of the ideas of social democracy and class collaboration. To suggest an appeal to psychology at the present time is to attempt to graft on to the tactics of Marxism an entirely subjective factor.

This is the logical deduction from the false antithesis of subjective and objective which underlies most of the book. To the marxist the subjective world is not opposed to, but part of, the objective world, and this is recognised in practice by the inclusion of psychology in revolutionary tactics. The idea of psychology as an independent dynamic element in politics leads straight to the "change of heart" school—the pacifists and liberal apologists of capitalism.

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Actually the author is led further than this, for he advocates as the chief practical application of his theories a Communist leadership which in everything but the words constitutes the Führer principle of the Fascists. The "leader" is to be made into a father figure in whom his followers are to have infinite confidence and such an attitude would completely justify the reactionary propaganda of those who reject "dictatorship of the Right and of the Left" because they see no difference between Fascism and Communism.

In actuality the principles of leadership under Communism on one hand and Fascism on the other, are fundamentally opposed. The whole psychological apparatus of the Fascist "leader" is designed to deceive his followers and to distract their attention from the operations of the real masters of the State. In Communism, leadership comes from below, it is the leadership of the class and of the class-conscious party within that class. Individuals are important, but only in so far as they crystallise in definite actions the determination of the party and the class.

Communist leadership is objective in a full sense. It does not neglect psychology—it would be poor leadership if it did—but its psychology is an integral part of the appreciation of the concrete situation as a whole. The Communist is urged to think, not to trust. The ideal Communist is one who will know, even if he is isolated from all others as Dimitrov

was, what has to be done, and does it. The ideal Fascist is one who will obey any order without question.

It is only necessary to compare a speech of Stalin's with one of Hitler's to see what a vast gulf divides the two conceptions of leadership. It is intended that the mistakes of Communist leadership, and there have been many, should be cured by deeper analysis of the situation, by better organisation, by the training of really class-conscious workers—not by using "psychology" to increase the self-confidence of the leaders and whip up the blind devotion of their followers.

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Enough has been said to show how far Mr. Osborn's book wanders from the path of marxism. Yet he is probably less to blame than those marxists who have never discussed the relations of Freud and Marx at all. Freudian influence is an objective fact, and is spreading slowly out from the bourgeois circles where it originated. Politically, it is a profoundly dangerous influence, paralysing action and tending to Fascism. Yet little or nothing is being done to combat it in this country.

The workers demand and have the right to demand a knowledge of psychology. If all they get is Freudian psychology, this is because English marxist writers have not applied themselves to the subject or even translated what has been written elsewhere. The one good effect the book should have—to provoke active discussion—may, it is hoped, produce serious analysis and criticism of the issues involved.