

Brian Connolly

## Introduction

### Psychoanalysis and History

The relationship between psychoanalysis and history has long been a vexed one. Indeed, in Freud's writings, history occupies an ambivalent place—the analytic situation offered a radical revision of personal history, which had a profound effect on larger, collective history.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, in his drawing on archaeology and anthropology, Freud offered a civilizational history that was deeply implicated in racial, national, and colonial formations that have long structured dominant configurations of modernity. By the middle of the twentieth century, historians and historically minded intellectuals took up psychoanalysis as a new way of thinking historically. While radical outliers such as Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown offered liberationist historical projects grounded in revisionist readings of Freud (in conjunction with Marx), the more common trajectory was evident in psychohistory, which drew primarily on ego psychology. By the 1980s, psychohistory was on the decline. While the work of Michel de Certeau might show up in various courses and texts on historiography, Freud and the larger psychoanalytic project seemed doomed. And yet, in recent years, one can discern a revival of sorts at the juncture of psychoanalysis and history, at times more indebted to the feminist psychoanalytic criticism that emerged out of an engagement with the work of Jacques Lacan beginning in the 1970s. In other works, the engagement between psychoanalysis “and the rest of the world,” to borrow Derrida's formulation, has been the impetus for new and vital critical histories (El Shakry and Pursley; Khanna). For all the fraught engagements, a specific turn toward psychoanalysis, which would privilege the unhistoricizable conditions of the Real, the disruptive trajectories of desire, the (anti-)foundational foundation of sexual difference, and

the phantasmatic condition of historical knowledge and narrative seems more relevant, vital even, than ever.

Nonetheless, the dominant epistemological conditions of history, which, since the nineteenth century, have tended toward empiricism and positivism, work to exclude psychoanalysis. On the one hand, this stems from a misunderstanding of the psychoanalytic project, reducing it to the psychological and then claiming that there is no evidence to document the complex inner workings of the psyche. Yet this misunderstands the fact that psychoanalysis captures the interplay of inner and outer, interiority and sociality, so that the psyche is something like a hinge between the two. As Norman O. Brown put it in 1959, “the psychoanalytical approach to history is pressed upon the historian by one question: Why does man, alone of all animals, have a history? . . . the historical process is sustained by man’s desire to become other than what he is. And man’s desire to become something different is essentially an unconscious desire. . . . The riddle of history is not in Reason but in Desire; not in labor, but in love” (15–16).

On the other hand, we might turn to Theodor Adorno’s oft-repeated aphorism from *Minima Moralia*: “In psychoanalysis nothing is true except the exaggerations” (54). While history as a discipline has excavated stories both mundane and spectacular, methodologically it may best be described as a discipline averse to exaggeration. This is true even of some of the most searching twentieth-century critics of conventional historical method. Michel Foucault described genealogy as essentially anathema to exaggeration. “Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary,” Foucault wrote, “it operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (139). If there is something in the second sentence here that resonates with psychoanalysis, there is nonetheless a more general sense that exaggeration is the province neither of history nor genealogy. While it would be wrong simply to deem Adorno’s aphorism true—psychoanalysis is more than exaggeration and it has its own rigorous, documentary aspects—it does, nonetheless, capture that vexed meeting between psychoanalysis and history—psychoanalytically informed history has always struck many observers as exaggerated, without basis in the documentary record, wild speculation obscuring the real stuff of history.

The articles in this issue all rethink the complicated relationship between psychoanalysis and history and in doing so push well beyond the strictures of psychohistory and the trajectories laid out by the feminist critique of Lacan. Indeed, the authors collectively draw on a wide range of psychoanalytic thought in efforts to interrogate received historical narratives and, simulta-

neously, to interrogate psychoanalytic categories through a close attention to the tension between analysis and historical evidence. The issue as a whole demonstrates the uses of psychoanalysis for thinking about concrete historical materials and the importance of history for thinking psychoanalytically, whether it is the contrasting ways in which historians have represented the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the puzzling emergence of QAnon and new forms of paranoia as a political movement. The concern generated about the Anthropocene by climate historians turns out to contain traces of colonialist thinking embedded in it and there are previously unexplored links to be made between Freud and the US plantation economy. The political trajectories of psychoanalysis, particularly that of the Left Freudians of the mid-twentieth century, are revisited to offer fresh insights on the politics of history and psychoanalysis. And the vicissitudes of the instincts, about which Freud famously wrote, are here addressed for their intersection with history and inscription to generate more attentive, ambivalent critical readings. These original and incisive essays, though they are on disparate topics and historical periods, testify to the importance of taking the unconscious dimensions of our thinking into account when we try to understand the workings of politics and the ways in which we represent our pasts. ■

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#### NOTE

- 1 The first two paragraphs appear, in a slightly different form, in Connolly 2021.

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