

Article

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNCONSCIOUS AND CONSCIOUSNESS – A COMPARISON OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM¹

Siegfried Zepf

Narzissenstrasse 5, Saarbrücken, Germany

Correspondence: Siegfried Zepf, Narzissenstrasse 5, Saarbrücken D-66119, Germany

E-mail: s.zepf@rz.uni-sb.de

Abstract

The author addresses the problems that arise if the social unconscious is defined as a generalization of parts of the individual dynamic unconscious. The discussion presents the idea that the contents of the social unconscious are not psychical but social in nature, and that the social unconscious stands not in opposition to a generalized individual consciousness but to social consciousness. The author demonstrates that historical materialism conceptualizes the appearance of the social unconscious in social consciousness in the same way as psychoanalysis conceptualizes the reappearance of the individual's unconscious in his consciousness. Additionally, a specific definition of the domain of analytic social psychology is given.

Keywords

individual unconscious; social unconscious; analytic social psychology

Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (2007) 12, 105–123.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.pcs.2100118

Introduction

Fromm is probably the first to have methodically used the term “social unconscious” in psychoanalysis. He defined the “social unconscious” as “those areas of repression which are common to most members of



society” (Fromm, 1962, 1985, p 88). Six years before, Devereux, in identical fashion, declared the “*ethnic unconscious*” to be “that portion of the total unconscious segment of an individual’s psyche that he shares with most members of his given cultural community” (Devereux, 1956, 1980, p 6; see also Erdheim, 1982; Herron, 1995; Adams, 2002).

The conception of the social unconscious as a generalization of the individual’s unconscious seems self-evident. The individual’s dynamic unconscious contains instinctual wishes the fulfillment of which in his² socialization would have led to conflicts that could not have been tolerated on the conscious level. For this reason, consciousness was withdrawn from them by means of defensive operations. Since individuals were socialized in the same society, it also appears legitimate to assume that some warded off conflicts are common to them all.

On the surface, there seems to be no reason why the social unconscious should not be limited to those instinctual wishes that fall victim to defense in most individuals in a society. Closer consideration, however, reveals certain problems associated with this attribution. In the course of my discussion, I will put forward the idea that there is a social consciousness that is distinct from its individual counterpart, that the social unconscious stands in opposition not to a generalized individual consciousness, but to social consciousness, that it relates not to psychological but to social contents, and that it appears in mystified form in social consciousness in the same way as psychoanalysis conceptualizes the reappearance of the individual’s unconscious in his consciousness. The final section, then, defines the domain of analytic social psychology.

In view of the controversies that now surround all psychoanalytic concepts, I shall commence by setting out my understanding of the Freudian concept of the unconscious, to which I shall confine myself in the following.

The individual’s unconscious

As we all know, Freud sees the individual’s unconscious as falling into two parts: a descriptive unconscious, or preconscious, on the one hand, and a dynamic unconscious, on the other. A preconscious content is at any given time “not yet conscious, but it is certainly capable of becoming conscious ... without any special resistance” (Freud, 1915e, 1957, p 173), whereas a content that is unconscious in the dynamic sense is no longer directly capable of becoming conscious. Because unpleasure would arise if it were to become conscious, a resistance is opposed to it. This distinction is retained even after the topographic theory is superseded by the structural theory (e.g. 1923b, 1961, p 15; 1933a, 1960, p 71; 1939a, 1964, p 95).

If we disregard what I believe to be Freud’s untenable hypothesis of a life instinct and a death instinct,³ we see that he considers the individual’s dynamic unconscious to be made up of instinctual sexual wishes that are warded off by repression. Yet repression is only the first step in a defensive operation. As “a

rule,” Freud writes, repression “creates a *substitutive formation*” (Freud, 1915d, 1957, p 153), so that, in a second step, the instinctual wishes that have become unconscious reappear in consciousness in the distorted form of substitutive formations.⁴

These substitutive formations of the repressed – which Freud also calls “structures in the nature of a compromise between the repressed ideas and the repressing ones” (Freud, 1896b, 1962, p 170) – are not already generated by repression. Freud explicitly stresses

that it is not repression itself which produces substitutive formations ... but that these latter are indications of a *return of the repressed* and owe their existence to quite other processes. (Freud, 1915d, 1957, p 154)

Further, he points out that “there are a great many different mechanisms of forming substitutes” (*ibid.*), and emphasizes that “repression ... is more sharply differentiated from the other mechanisms than they are from one another” (Freud, 1937c, 1964, p 236). He illustrates the difference between repression and these mechanisms (e.g. displacement, reaction formation), which he holds responsible for the heterogeneity of the neuroses,⁵ by the analogy of a book in the days when books were not yet issued in editions but written out individually. Undesirable passages, Freud writes, were crossed through by the official censorship; however,

if the authorities were not satisfied with this, but wanted also to conceal any indication that the text had been mutilated, [another way] would be for them to proceed to distort the text. Single words would be left out or replaced by others, and new sentences interpolated. Best of all, the whole passage would be erased and a new one which said exactly the opposite put in its place. The next transcriber could then produce a text that aroused no suspicion but which was falsified. (Freud, 1937c, 1964, p 236)

In this example, “repression has the same relation to the other methods of defence as omission has to distortion of the text,” and the distortions of the text, the “different forms of falsification” (*ibid.*), correspond to substitutive formations whose “distinguishing characteristic ... is the far-reaching distortion to which the returning material has been subjected as compared with the original” (Freud, 1939a, 1964, p 127).

For the purposes of the following discussion, the point I wish to emphasize is that Freud sees an individual’s dynamic unconscious as consisting of instinctual wishes which are warded off, but which find their way back into the individual’s consciousness in distorted form by various mechanisms.

The social unconscious

I indicated at the beginning that the usual definition of the social unconscious gives rise to difficulties.⁶ The common problem with Fromm’s and Devereux’s

definitions of the social unconscious is that these authors are thereby asserting the existence, alongside the part that is socially determined, of another part of the unconscious that is not socially determined but is so to speak private. Fromm explicitly distinguishes the social unconscious from the “*individual unconscious*” by claiming that the latter relates to nongeneralizable issues “which an individual represses for reasons of individual circumstances peculiar to his personal life situation” (Fromm, 1962, 1985, p 88; see also Erdheim, 1982, p 220; Adams, 2002), and Devereux defines the “*idiosyncratic unconscious*” in similar terms: “*The idiosyncratic unconscious* is composed of elements that the unique and specific stresses the individual has experienced have obliged him to repress” (Devereux, 1956, 1980, p 7). Yet this distinction, as Busch (2001) and Herron (1995) correctly point out, lacks an objective foundation. Both authors point to the assumption of an interactive, and hence always socially influenced formation of unconscious personality structures from the beginning. The social demands relating to the molding of the instincts are enforced in the family, which must to that extent be seen as a “psychological agency of society” (Fromm, 2000, p 163). This implies that not just a part but the unconscious in its entirety has to be regarded as socially determined.

Analytic social psychology regards neuroses not simply as individual vicissitudes, but as socially determined, general phenomena⁷ that appear in psychoanalytic therapy in specific forms characterizing an individual’s uniqueness. If one combines the perspectives of analytic social psychology and of psychoanalytic therapy, the particularities of Fromm’s “individual unconscious” or Devereux’s “idiosyncratic unconscious” prove to be specific forms of the universal essential to their genesis. In other words, society reproduces itself at the psychological level in individuals not in specific conflicts, but in conflict *structures* whose content varies from one individual to another. The substrate of Fromm’s “social unconscious” or Devereux’s “ethnic unconscious” comprises not parts of individually unique conflicts, but their typical *structures*, which are specific for a society.

Besides this topic, there is another problem. The social unconscious is seen as a generalization of the individuals’ unconscious conflicts in terms of their common structures, so that social consciousness turns out to be nothing more than a generalization of the individual’s consciousness. But social consciousness possesses attributes that are not present in an individual’s consciousness. This consciousness is the product of an individual, reproduces his specific practice ideationally, is formed anew by each individual, and disappears with his death. Social consciousness, on the other hand, as for example Leontyev writes, is the “ideal, mental form of the crystallisation of mankind’s social experience and social practice” (Leontyev, 1959, 1981, p 226), and it does not perish with the death of an individual. Instead, it is handed down from one generation to the next by a process in which it is not created afresh, but modified.

Furthermore, examination of the relationship between social and individual consciousness shows that individual consciousness is formed on the basis of social consciousness (e.g. Delgado, 1969, pp 27, 38). Thereby, social consciousness appears in an individual's consciousness in a particular, individualized form that is always narrower. This gives rise to a further difference – namely, that social consciousness is appreciably more extensive than its individual counterpart. It takes on a reality of its own that must be distinguished from individual consciousness.

How does social consciousness come about? Admittedly, social knowledge depends on the knowledge-acquiring activity of individuals. However, no individual produces knowledge like a Robinson Crusoe marooned on an uninhabited island in childhood. As a precondition for their knowledge-acquiring activity, individuals appropriate the knowledge of their field of interest that is stored in social consciousness and then process and deepen it in mutual cooperation. The ideas that are contained in social consciousness are no more the product of different individuals working in isolation from each other than are the recording and processing of information and the production of new ideas which can then in turn enter into social consciousness. Because individuals – in the very appropriation and, in particular, when producing knowledge – enter into social “knowledge-acquiring relationships” (Wittich *et al.* 1978, 1980, p 102, translated), in which they to some extent cooperate with each other and at least engage in exchanges by way of publications, both existing and new ideas are always socially determined. That is why “the gnoseological subject proper is not the individual but society,” and the “individual subject represents the manner of existence of the social subject” (Lektorskii, 1965 [translated from the German edition: Lektorski, 1968, pp 130f.]).

The knowledge admitted into social consciousness reproduces in ideational form situations that belong to the shared social world of individuals. This has consequences for the understanding of the social unconscious. If social consciousness is lacking in the social unconscious, and this consciousness relates not to psychological issues of individuals but in general form to situations in their world, then the social unconscious too can not be made up of psychological matters of individuals. Instead, the concept of the “social unconscious” must relate to situations which exist and have effects in the world, and which have become known at least to some individuals – otherwise no one could know about them – the knowledge of which, however, did not enter into social consciousness.

Some psychoanalysts who have also taken an interest in sociological issues may perhaps be reminded in this context of the “invisible hand,”⁸ invoked by Adam Smith (1776, 1937, p 477) as a metaphor of the social forces that operate independently of individuals' conscious interests. Few, however, will recall that Marx and Engels stripped this “invisible hand” of its metaphorical cloak and revealed it as the action of material social conditions – as a force that asserts

itself in terms of social consciousness, even though it is unconscious. For instance:

Development of the productive forces of social labour is the historical task and justification of capital. This is just the way in which it *unconsciously* creates the material requirements of a higher mode of production. (Marx, 1894, 1976, p 259; my italics)

The *determination of the market-value of products* ... is a social act, albeit a socially *unconscious* and unintentional one. It is based necessarily upon the exchange-value of the product (Marx, 1894, 1976, p 661; my italics)

But when we see that the three classes of modern society, the feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat, each have a morality of their own, we can only draw the one conclusion: that men, consciously or *unconsciously*, derive their ethical ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based – *from the economic relations* in which they carry on production and exchange. (Engels, 1878, 1987, p 87; my italics)

When, therefore, it is a question of investigating the driving forces which – consciously or *unconsciously*, and indeed very often *unconsciously* – lie behind the motives of men in their historical actions and which constitute the real ultimate driving forces of history, then it is not a question so much of the motives of single individuals, ... as of those motives which set in motion great masses, whole peoples, and again whole classes of the people in each people. (Engels, 1886, 1941, p 50; my italics)

That the *material life conditions* of the persons inside whose heads this thought process goes on, in the last resort determines the course of this process, remains of necessity *unknown* [in German: *unbewusst* – literally, “unconscious”] to these persons, for otherwise there would be an end to all ideology. (Engels, 1886, 1941, p 56; my italics)

Social consciousness and the social unconscious

Although the individuals’ psychic unconscious is socially determined, it should not be labeled “social unconscious.” This term refers to issues that are not psychical but social in nature, and the social unconscious stands in opposition not to the individuals’ consciousness but to social consciousness.

Social consciousness consists of ideas that differ in content, in which different spheres of society are reproduced. It can be broken down into, for example, a moral, a scientific, a legal, a political, a religious, and an economic consciousness. And this economic consciousness is to be seen as the point of reference of what Marx and Engels labeled “unconscious.” For them, the economic structure of society which essentially determines social processes does

not exist in the economic social consciousness. Therefore, it is socially unconscious.

This does not imply that an unconscious must be attributed to society itself. Society is not a subject but an object, of whose characteristics individuals can become to a greater or lesser extent conscious. “Socially unconscious” refers to those economic relations that have effects but are not contained in social consciousness. Since social consciousness forms the basis of individual consciousness, these relations remain also outside the consciousness of the majority of individuals.

What does the term “economic relations” refer to and why are they excluded from social consciousness? “Economic relations,”⁹ which Freud (1933a, 1960, p 178) himself considered to exercise a “decisive influence” upon men’s “intellectual, ethical and artistic attitude,” refer to a society’s relations of production. In a capitalist societal formation, these are characterized by the fact that a minority owns the productive assets and that the majority comprises those who are excluded from their ownership. This majority has only its labor to sell – labor that produces more value than the amount of its own market price. This “surplus value” is appropriated by the minority. The contradiction of this societal system to which Marx and Engels draw attention is between social production and private appropriation of the socially earned surplus value.

The existing economic social consciousness is understood by Marx & Engels as the “final pattern of the economic relations as seen on the surface” – a pattern which can be “very much different from, and indeed quite the reverse of, their inner but concealed essential pattern and the conception corresponding to it” (Marx, 1894, 1976, p 209). The reason for this concealment is that the “ideas” of the owners of the productive assets “are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx and Engels, 1846, 1976, p 59), and that these owners have no interest in allowing the “concealed essential pattern” to become visible in the social consciousness in concepts that correspond to it.

A kind of concealment of this “essential pattern,” whose concepts point both to its historical origins and always also beyond them, is demonstrated by Marcuse (1964). The continuity of the past with what points beyond the present moment in history is abolished by stripping concepts of their intensional definitions and then defining them solely by the functions and operations that are currently performed with objects to which they relate.

This can be explained by the example of the concept of labor. As we know, Marx understands labor as a conscious, active, and goal-directed process whereby human individuals, using tools in the course of the cooperation that links them together socially, act on nature, produce their conditions of existence for themselves, and realize themselves in this production. In this understanding, labor is defined as

the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and Nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence,

and therefore is independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather is common to every such phase. (Marx, 1867, 1967, p 183f.)

This concept of labor includes not only the past forms of human labor, but also all potential future forms. If labor is seen in these conceptual terms, it is possible, while preserving their identity, to take account of the specific differences between different forms of labor, to reconstruct the historical development of these forms in their interaction with social relations, and to determine the forms that have become possible and necessary on the basis of the existing historically specific social relations.

The situation is different if one's definition of "labor" disregards the fact that labor's essence is determined by a social relation and instead defines it only functionally – for instance, as an "activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something" (Encyclopedia Britannica 99). In these definitions, an extensional aspect of labor – one of its specific historical phenomenal forms – becomes its universal defining element. The concept of "labor" now relates only to the form in which labor appears today, and no longer to what it once was in the past and what it could be in the future. If the noun in a sentence is equated with the predicate,

the functionalization of language expresses an abridgement of meaning, [for] names of things are not only "indicative of their manner of functioning," but their (actual) manner of functioning also defines and "closes" the meaning of the thing, excluding other manners of functioning. (Marcuse, 1964, p 79)

If the historically specific mutates into the universal, the connection in thought between the contents of the specific phenomenal forms of the universal is broken. A thought based on operational concepts always remains confined to the present, which it isolates both from the past social practice of humanity, from which it has arisen, and from its future practice, into which it could develop. Historical reconstruction of a factual situation, which at the same time provides information about that situation's potential for further development, is feasible only with concepts whose intensions have not been trimmed to suit operational requirements.

Social knowledge, operationally narrowed down, penetrates into social phenomena only to the extent that the ideas obtained do not call into question the prevailing form of social organization. The ideas remain in line with the superficial configuration in which social relations present themselves. For instance, "wages," "profit," or "interest-bearing capital" are taken as what they appear to be: wages as the remuneration for work actually done, profit as a special case of wages – the reward accruing to the owner of the productive assets for his work of organization in the production process – and interest as being produced by capital. These phenomenal forms conceal the essential content, which appears in them in disguised form. In reality, profit is a phenomenal form

of surplus value, in which, “[d]isguised as profit, surplus-value denies its origin, loses its character, and becomes unrecognisable” (Marx, 1894, 1976, p 167). Similarly, interest-bearing capital is “a converted form of surplus-value, a form in which its origin and the secret of its existence is obscured” (Marx, 1894, 1976, p 48), and categories such as the “value of labour” are “categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations” (Marx, 1867, 1967, p 537), in which these are both concealed and presented. This applies not only to this category. “For the rest,” Marx writes,

in respect for the phenomenal form, “value and price of labour,” or “wages,” as contrasted with the essential relation manifested therein, viz., the value and price of labour-power, the same difference holds that holds in respect to all phenomena and their hidden substratum. (Marx, 1867, 1967, p 564)

These phenomenal forms are not a matter of chance, but are necessary for the continued existence of the societal formation. For instance, on “the surface of bourgeois society the wage of the labourer [appears] as the price of labour, a certain quantity of money that is paid for a certain quantity of labour” (Marx, 1867, 1967, p 535), and Marx adds that precisely this “wage-form ... extinguishes every trace of the division of the working-day into necessary labour and surplus labour,” so that “[a]ll labour appears as paid labour” (Marx, 1867, 1967, p 539). To ensure that the fundamental structure of the accumulation of surplus value can be reproduced and maintained, those on whose surplus labor the surplus value depends must act in conformity with this phenomenal form – with the “categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations.” If they did not believe that their entire labor was being remunerated, they would come to understand the essence of their exploitation, and might also be more prepared to change the conditions under which they work.

The structural similarity between the relationships of the unconscious and consciousness in psychoanalysis and in historical materialism

The structural similarity between the relationship of the individual’s unconscious and his consciousness and that of the social unconscious and social consciousness here emerges with particular clarity. Whereas individual substitutive formations are necessary for the continued functioning of the mental apparatus and present the real state of affairs in a way that does not correspond to the individuals’ reality but only to its appearance, and individuals can gain information about themselves only through substitutive ideas, the economic categories present phenomenal forms that are necessary for the continued existence of the present organization of society. The real conditions are conceptualized in these categories in a way in which they appear in reality

but which does not correspond to their reality, and the “bearers and agents” of the “economic relations” can only “seek to understand them” in these “conceptions” (Marx, 1894, 1976, p 209). In both instances, the true essence of the conscious phenomenal forms can not be deduced from direct empirical experience, but can be established only by a historical analysis.

Besides displacement – the appearance of the value of labor-power as the remuneration for work actually done can be seen as a structural counterpart of the psychoanalytic concept of displacement – it is also possible to discern mechanisms such as “reaction formation,” in which the opposite of what is unconsciously meant appears in consciousness. For instance, in German the entrepreneur (employer) is called the *Arbeitgeber* [literally, giver of labor] and the employee the *Arbeitnehmer* [literally, taker of labor], whereas in reality the workers *give* their labor and it is the entrepreneurs who *take* their labour, which they acquire by purchasing it. Ulmann draws attention to the consequences of this redefinition:

Since the word “giver” defines attributes to which the words “benefactor,” “helper,” and the like also refer, while the word “taker” tends rather to imply “recipient of alms” or even “thief” or “robber” ... , an employer [“giver of labor”] appears as a “special case” of ... “benefactor,” ... but not as a robber; while an employee [“taker of labor”] can be seen not as a benefactor, but ... always only as a taker (in the sense of a recipient of alms, a robber, etc.).
(Ulmann, 1975, p 103, translator’s translation)

Similarly, the term “reform” signified a change in the existing situation for the better. But by now, the “reform of the pension system,” “reform of the labor market,” and “reform of the healthcare system” actually entail a deterioration in the amounts received by pensioners and the unemployed, and in patient care, while the cost of health insurance goes up, so that what is in reality a deterioration is portrayed as an improvement.

If the economic ideas admitted into social consciousness in fact relate only to the superficial configuration of society and no longer permit anything else to be judged as knowledge, social consciousness acquires the characteristics of what psychoanalysis describes as rationalization. This term, which was introduced to psychoanalysis by Jones (1908), denotes attempts to keep unconscious instinctual impulses that motivated substitutive actions out of consciousness by means of logically coherent reasons consistent with socially approved explanations of behavior. Like psychic rationalizations, social knowledge too always means more than it actually says. Just as in the psychological field, the motive warded off is covered up in rationalizations, so that which is not supposed to enter into social consciousness appears in this knowledge in mystified form. In seemingly rational guise, both perform the same function: the former conceals that which is essential in the mental life of the individual, while the latter hides that which is essential in social reality. Both are simultaneously

true and false, depending on whether they are considered in terms of the phenomena, or in terms of the overall structure of the mind in the one case and of society in the other. And in both instances the content of knowledge is falsified to the same extent as it is narrowed down. In a rationalization of psychological phenomena, the reduction is due to the fact that unconscious material can only appear in consciousness in distorted form, and the individual can only act in conformity with the conscious phenomenal forms of his unconscious contents; in rationalizations of social phenomena, the reduction entails their remaining in accordance with the superficial phenomena of society, and their foundation lies in the objective necessity that stems from the internal organization of society itself and compels one to remain on the level of objective phenomena if its fundamental structure is to be preserved. In both instances, issues appear in consciousness while at the same time remaining outside the field of vision; in both instances, these are held captive in rationalizations of the existing situation – of the subjective in the one case and of the social in the other – and in both instances, objective and necessary phenomena are taken literally and mistaken for their essence.

The consequences that ensue from the psychic unconscious for individual action, and from the social unconscious for social action, are likewise the same, as Dahmer (1973, p 379f.) points out. Just as the light of consciousness illuminates only a part of an individual's psychic world, so an appreciable part of the social world of individuals is concealed within a blind spot. In their individual activity, the psychical unconscious compels individuals constantly to repeat the same relational patterns, which assert their demands behind their backs like a force of nature – psychoanalysis describes this process as the “repetition compulsion” –, while in their social activity the laws of their societal form too assert their demands like a force of nature as long as they remain outside consciousness. In a societal formation based on private ownership of the productive assets, what is no longer directly accessible to the consciousness of individuals is the social context in which they act, produce and exchange their products. Instead, their activities are determined by the principle that each acts for his own individual benefit.

Production and exchange of products then become a blind compulsion to which each individual's activities are subjected – a process that operates in accordance with *seemingly* natural laws. As long as people do not know what they are doing, the results of their activities take on the appearance of a natural phenomenon. Although the conditions result solely from their own activities, individuals are in this way subject to the laws of their unconsciously generated societal form as if these were natural laws. The monopolization of capital, the economic cycles, the downward trend of the profit rate, and the periodic occurrence of crises and unemployment thus become just as predictable as the disconcerting behavior of an obsessional neurotic or a phobic patient (cf. Dahmer, 1973).

The engine of the efficacy of the “natural law” underlying these phenomena is in both cases the “unconsciousness of the participants” (Engels, 1844, 1975, p 434). Dahmer summarizes the situation tellingly as follows:

In its practice that which escapes consciousness achieves its ends like a force of nature Individuals are subject to the laws of their unconsciously generated (psychic or social) second nature as if these were natural laws. (Dahmer, 1973, p 379f., translator’s translation)

At the end of this section, then, one can see that the social unconscious can manifestly lay thoroughly justified claim to this denotation. Whereas, in the individual, interests serving the avoidance of unpleasure keep the dynamic individual’s unconscious below his horizon, in social reality it is social forces resulting from economic partial interests that prevent the internal structure of society from entering into social consciousness. Again, just as an individual’s unconscious life history appears and is concealed in individual consciousness, so, too, the social unconscious both appears and is masked in social consciousness.

Individual and social consciousness

Before proceeding further, I would like to point out that the structural similarity between the relationship of the individual’s unconscious and consciousness in psychoanalysis and that of social unconscious and consciousness in historical materialism is not only of historical interest. It is also of current relevance. At first sight it may seem antiquated and out of tune with the times if, in discussing the social unconscious, one resorts to a set of concepts that are more than a century and a half old and no longer mentioned in the recent literature on the subject. In the light of the foregoing, however, it is not astonishing that the concepts of historical materialism – the Marxian historical analysis of the genesis and workings of capitalism in particular – are excluded from social consciousness. That these ideas are more than a century and a half old can not justify their exclusion. Just because something is older, it is not necessarily obsolete. At all events, the quality of a scientific contribution can not be judged by an inherent sell-by date as if it were a pot of yoghurt. Neither has the content or the methodology of acquiring knowledge by means of historical materialism thus far been repudiated in such a manner that would justify its abandonment. Given that there is no sign of any critical theory with the potential to delve into the underlying laws of capitalism in greater detail and depth than that of Marx, there can not at present be any objective reason to relinquish it.

Pursuing my line of arguments further, it follows from the foregoing that the social unconscious remains mystified in the consciousness of the majority of individuals in categories with which individuals must live, in the conceptual

“pattern of the economic relations as seen on the surface” (Marx, 1894, 1976, p 209).

A crucial reason why individuals adhere to this conceptual pattern is that, in the formation of their individual consciousness, substitutive formations of their psychic unconscious also become components of the necessarily false social consciousness prevailing in them. In the same proportion as the false concepts of the individual’s unconscious contents enter into these false concepts of the social, the psychic unconscious is rationalized into social consciousness, whose abridged concepts it cements into an impermeable barrier to knowledge. The socially produced psychic unconscious of individuals becomes fused with the prevailing rationalizations of the existing societal situation in such a way that these rationalizations are no longer amenable to argument and modification because they have to be adhered to for unconscious reasons.

Freud explains this by the example of religious ideas. Individuals connect these ideas with now unconscious “conflicts of [their] childhood,” bring them “to a solution which is universally accepted” (Freud, 1927c, 1964, p 30), spare themselves “the task of constructing a personal ... neurosis” (*ibid.*, p 44), and instead join together in a “usual group formation” [*habituelle Massenbildung*] (Freud, 1921c, 1955, p 142). This process unconsciously underpins the religious convictions that guarantee cohesion, with the consequence that these can no longer be seriously called into question by any arguments or even by reality.

This conception of religion can easily be applied to the prevailing social forms of intercourse. In the light of this, the prevailing social forms of intercourse come into view as socially approved offers for ways in which the individuals’ specific unconscious contents may be manifested. As with religious convictions, here, too, individuals join together in a “usual group formation” [*habituelle Massenbildung*],¹⁰ and, with the fusion of the individuals’ unconscious and social consciousness, are pressed by way of their personality defects into the service of the prevailing social ideology and at the same time kept in a narrow-minded state in conformity with the system. All that can still arise in their consciousness are keloids of thought, which seal individuals off from the social suffering concealed in their psychic structures in the same way as they distort their vision of the contradictions inherent in society.

As a result, individuals hold fast to the social forms of production and exchange even though the contradictions of these forms and the associated problems become ever more manifest – distorted, so to speak, to the point of recognizability. After all, the incorporation of the unconscious into the prevailing social forms of intercourse – this rationalization of the irrational – is necessarily accompanied by an irrationalization of the rational. What objectively is irrational appears subjectively to be rational – for example, ensuring the persistence of the existing organizational form of society, even when climate change unmistakably demonstrates to us that we are in the process of sacrificing to the interests of the valorization of capital the natural conditions

on which our very existence depends to the interests of the valorization of capital; whereas what would be objectively rational – the substitution of a more rational form of organization for the present one – appears irrational to individuals. Owing to the intimate association of social and subjective irrationality, rationality becomes a rationalization of both, or, in Adorno’s inimitable and telling formulation, “scars of reason in a state of unreason”. (Adorno, 1955, 1968, p 82)

The domain of analytic social psychology

The domain of an analytic social psychology is defined precisely by this situation. Its task, in relation to these rationalizations, is to “establish both their falsehood and their necessity and to bring what was hidden to light” (Adorno, 1955, 1968, p 82). Whereas psychoanalytic therapy illuminates the problematic relationship between the individual and society by taking as its starting point the “mental frontiers [*Seelenende*] of this world” (Freud, 1985c, 1986, p 273), and attempts to restore the subjecthood of the individual so far as is feasible under the prevailing social conditions, analytic social psychology addresses the matter from the social standpoint and considers these conditions by opposing but interlocking approaches. It inquires into the ways in which unconscious issues are socially generated in individuals, and into the function performed by these unconscious issues in the establishment, preservation, and modification of the social organization and its institutions.

In its investigation of the social function of the individuals’ unconscious, analytic social psychology can rely with its approach on both the Freudian and the Marxian critiques of religion. For Freud, “the effect of religious consolidations may be likened to that of narcotics” (Freud, 1927c, 1964, p 49), paralyzing human beings in their social action. He advises the individuals to cast off their “childish helplessness” (*ibid.*, p 24) *vis-à-vis* reality, and not to trust that the world to come will “compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them” (*ibid.*, p 18). Instead, they should withdraw “their expectations from the other world and [concentrate] all their liberated energies into their life on earth,” so that “life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone” (*ibid.*, p 50). “Then,” he adds, ironically quoting Heinrich Heine, “without regret we leave Heaven to the angels and the sparrows” (*ibid.*).

By this demand, Freud is drawing close to Marx’s critical position. For Freud, religion is like a narcotic; for Marx, it is “the *opium* of the people.” For Marx, furthermore, to “abolish religion as the *illusionary* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness” (Marx, 1843, 1975, pp 175f.). Whereas Freud is concerned only with the substitution of a rational, scientifically based superstructure for the religious one – he pleads for the ascribing of “purely rational reasons to the precepts of civilization; that is to say, for deriving them

from social necessity” (Freud, 1927c, 1964, p 41), and for replacement of “the effects of repression by the results of the rational opinion of the intellect” (*ibid.*, p 44) – Marx calls upon man to change the material foundations of society. This is because the “demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*”. (Marx, 1843, 1975, p 176)

By laying bare the irrational “libidinal ... ‘cement’” (Fromm, 1932, 1970, p 130) that holds society together, and paralyzes any action that might bring about change in this “state of affairs,” analytic social psychology is at the same time a critique of the social situation that needs illusions in order to survive. As a “science of the irrational” (Fromm, 1970, p 26), psychoanalysis in the guise of analytic social psychology is an “indispensable auxiliary science” to sociology (Horkheimer, 1932, 1993, p 119). Whereas sociology can give reasons as to *why* irrationality precipitates in individuals and – as Marx (see p 110, 113) explained – *why* they must live in conformity with a false consciousness, analytic social psychology can provide information on *how* the irrational “libidinal cement” comes into being and *how* the false consciousness sets hard.

No matter whether psychoanalysis, in its therapeutic method, detects the unconscious in individuals and makes the unconscious system of conflicts that are blindly acted out accessible again to self-experience, restoring self-disposal by way of critical self-enlightenment, or whether, as an analytic social psychology, it explores the unconscious in social phenomena that are maintained by the unconscious life practice of individuals, in both cases it is criticizing individuals with the aim of enabling them to cast off their self-produced pseudonatural living conditions, and of helping them to achieve the capacity to organize their lives in society, and hence also their personal lives, more consciously.

Evidently, then, the addressees of psychoanalytic insights and of those of analytic social psychology are different. Whereas in the therapeutic process insights are directed to the patient and the individual’s irrational attachments to the existing situation are loosened by raising them out of the darkness into his individual consciousness, the knowledge accruing from studies of analytic social psychology is admitted into social consciousness. It is true that society is thereby enabled

to learn something about itself, and moreover something for which it otherwise has no organ of perception, something of which it is not yet able, in the present state of its consciousness, to gain an overview, and which is therefore not yet in a position to correct (Mitscherlich, 1966, 1969, p 34, translator’s translation).

However, consciousness of this situation does not yet suffice to eliminate the irrational attachment of individuals to the prevailing forms of production and exchange. Even if people were to come to realize that they cling to these forms of their society for internal reasons that are concealed from them, their

irrational attachment to the existing situation could not be corrected or inactivated by virtue of this insight alone. Such a change would call for a change in society itself. Because this change can come about only in the arena of social conflict, only political groups can be the addressees of the knowledge ensuing from analytic social psychology.

I conclude with a brief summary of this section.

- Whether in the form of psychoanalytic therapy or of analytic social psychology, the matter addressed by psychoanalysis is suffering, the reasons for which it attempts to discover. As therapy it focuses on the suffering of the individual resulting from his individual life, and aims to bring about a change in his life by way of a change in the individual's consciousness. As analytic social psychology it concentrates on the suffering occasioned by society, and aims to achieve a change in social structures by way of a change in social consciousness.
- Knowledge acquired in therapy is directed to the patient. Knowledge accruing from analytic social psychology is addressed to political groups.
- Since Freud correctly notes that "all our knowledge is invariably bound up with consciousness," it follows that in psychoanalytic therapy we "can come to know even the *Ucs.* only by making it conscious" (Freud, 1923b, 1961, p 19). In psychoanalytic therapy, therefore, the change in the subject of knowledge – the unconscious – precedes the acquiring of knowledge about it. In the approach of analytic social psychology the acquisition of knowledge about the subject – the unconscious attachment of individuals to society – precedes change. Thus, in analytic social psychology, Freud's "inseparable bond between *cure* and research" is transformed into an "inseparable bond between *cure* and *research*" (Freud, 1927a, 1959, p 256; my italics).

About the author

Siegfried Zepf, MD is former director of the Institute of Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatic Medicine, University of Saarland (Germany) and a training analyst (DPG, DGPT). He is the author of numerous publications on epistemology, psychosomatic medicine, socio-psychology, and psychoanalysis. His most recent publications are: *Allgemeine psychoanalytische Neurosenlehre, Psychosomatik und Sozialpsychologie* (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2006); Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis – Some remarks from an Epistemological and from a Freudian Viewpoint, *Int. J. Psychoanal.* 87, 2006, pp. 1529–1548; Freud's Concept of Psychical Reality Reconsidered, *Can. J. Psychoanal.* 14, 2006, pp. 197–211; and Some Remarks about Constructivism in Psychoanalysis, *Can. J. Psychoanal.* 2007 (in press).

Notes

1 Translated by Philip Slotkin MA Cantab. MITI

2 [Translator's note: The masculine form is used for convenience for both sexes.]

- 3 Freud himself regarded his thesis of Eros and Thanatos as an “often far-fetched speculation” (Freud, 1920g, 1955, p 24), as “hypotheses” concerning which he did not know “how far I believe in them” (*ibid.*, p 59). For a more detailed critique of this Freudian concept, see for example Fenichel (1945, pp 59–61) and Zepf (2006a, pp 35–39).
- 4 Substitutive formations of the repressed differ from the repressed itself in content, but remain identical with it structurally. As an example Freud cites an obsessional neurotic patient who “suffered from having to take a long time over putting on his stocking,” and – “after overcoming his resistance” – “found as an explanation that his foot symbolized a penis, that putting on the stocking stood for a masturbatory act” (Freud, 1915e, 1957, p 200)
- 5 Freud states that he “himself conceives of the neuroses as substitutive formations for the repressed libido and explains their differences in terms of the different mechanisms of repression and of the return of the repressed” (Nunberg and Federn, 1967, p 268).
- 6 The same goes for Jung’s concept of a “collective unconscious,” which he defines as “the all-controlling deposit of ancestral experience from untold millions of years, the echo of prehistoric world events to which each century adds an infinitesimally small amount of variation and differentiation” (Jung, 1928, p 162). I shall not discuss this concept further here.
- 7 As Ferenczi (1908, 1980, p 290) puts it, neurosis is a “sickness of society.”
- 8 The passage that includes this concept reads as follows: “He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an *invisible hand* to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (Smith, 1776, 1937, p 477; my italics).
- 9 [Translator’s note: The German word is *Verhältnisse*, which is also translated in the *Standard Edition* as “conditions” or “circumstances.”]
- 10 This idea might also underlie a comment by Freud on child-raising which Anna Freud (quoted in Sandler, 1983, p 35) recalled in a conversation with Sandler: “I am reminded of something my father said ... when he spoke of how we bring up our children. He said we supply them with a map of the Italian lakes and send them to the North Pole.” At all events, if the family is the psychological agency of society, the map of the Italian lakes allows the children, when grown up, to survive in the frozen waters of the North Pole by imagining them to be Italian lakes.

References

- Adams, M.V. (2002). African American Dreaming and the Beast of Racism. *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 19, pp. 182–198.
- Adorno, T.W. (1955, 1968). Sociology and Psychology (Part 2). *New Left Review* 47, pp. 79–97.
- Busch, H.J. (2001). Gibt es gesellschaftliches Unbewusstes? *Psyche – Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und ihre Anwendungen* 55, pp. 392–421.
- Dahmer, H. (1973). *Libido und Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.
- Delgado, J.M. (1969). *Physical Control of the Mind*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Devereux, G. (1956, 1980). Normal and Abnormal. In Devereux, G. (ed.) *Basic Problems of Ethnopsychiatry*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 3–71.
- Encyclopedia Britannica CD 99. CD-ROM (1999). *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th edn. Merriam Webster, Inc.
- Engels, F. (1844, 1975). Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy. *Karl Marx–Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3. New York: International Publishers, pp. 418–443.
- Engels, F. (1878, 1987). Anti-Dühring. *Karl Marx–Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 25. Moscow: Progress Publishers, pp. 5–309.

- Engels, F. (1886, 1941). *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*. New York: International Publishers.
- Erdheim, M. (1982). *Die gesellschaftliche Produktion von Unbewusstheit*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.
- Fenichel, O. (1945). *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Ferenczi, S. (1908, 1980). Psycho-Analysis and Education. In Ferenczi, S. and Balint, M. (eds.) *Final Contributions to the Problems & Methods of Psycho-Analysis*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, pp. 280–290.
- Freud, S. (1896b, 1962). Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 3. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 156–185.
- Freud, S. (1915d, 1957). Repression. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 141–158.
- Freud, S. (1915e, 1957). The Unconscious. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 159–204.
- Freud, S. (1920g, 1955). Beyond the Pleasure Principle. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 1–64.
- Freud, S. (1921c, 1955). Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 65–143.
- Freud, S. (1923b, 1961). The Ego and the Id. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 19. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 1–66.
- Freud, S. (1927a, 1959). The Question of Lay Analysis. Postscript. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20. London, Hogarth Press, pp. 177–258.
- Freud, S. (1927c, 1964). The Future of an Illusion. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 1–56.
- Freud, S. (1933a, 1960). New Introductory Letters on Psycho-Analysis. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 22. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1937c, 1964). Analysis Terminable and Interminable. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 23. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 209–253.
- Freud, S. (1939a, 1964). Moses and Monotheism. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 23. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 1–137.
- Freud, S. (1985c, 1986). *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*. In Masson, J.M. (ed.) Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Fromm, E. (1932, 1970). The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology. In Fromm, E. (ed.) *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, pp. 110–134.
- Fromm, E. (1962, 1985). *Beyond the Chains of Illusion. My Encounter with Marx and Freud*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Fromm, E. (1970). The Crisis of Psychoanalysis. In Fromm, E. (ed.) *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, pp. 1–29.
- Fromm, E. (2000). The Social Determinants of Psychoanalytical Therapy. *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 9, pp. 149–165.
- Herron, W.G. (1995). Development of the Ethnic Unconscious. *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 12, pp. 521–532.

- Horkheimer, M. (1932, 1993). History and Psychology. In Hunter, G.F., Kramer, M.S. and Torpey, J. (trans.) *Between Philosophy and Social Science. Selected Early Writings*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 111–128.
- Jones, E. (1908). Rationalisation in Everyday Life. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 3, pp. 161–169.
- Jung, C.G. (1928). *Contributions to Analytical Psychology*. New York: Harcourt & Brace.
- Lektorskii, V.A. (1965). *Problema sub'yekta i ob'yekta v klassicheskoy i sovremennoy burzhuaznoy filosofii*. Moscow: Vysshaya Shkola [German translation: Lektorski, W. A. (1968). *Das Subjekt-Objekt-Problem in der klassischen und modernen bürgerlichen Philosophie*. Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften].
- Leontyev, A.N. (1959, 1981). *Problems of the Development of the Mind*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One Dimensional Man*. London: Routledge & Kegan.
- Marx, K. (1843, 1975). Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. *Karl Marx-Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3. New York: International Publishers, pp. 175–187.
- Marx, K. (1867, 1967). *Capital, Vol I*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1894, 1976). *Capital, Vol III*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1846, 1976). The German Ideology. *Karl Marx-Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5. New York: International Publishers, pp. 19–539.
- Mitscherlich, A. (1966, 1969). *Studien zur psychosomatischen Medizin. Krankheit als Konflikt I*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.
- Nunberg, H. and Federn, E. (eds.) (1967). *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, Vol II: 1908–1910*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Sandler, J. (1983). Reflections on Some Relations between Psychoanalytic Concepts and Psychoanalytic Practice. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 64, pp. 35–44.
- Smith, A. (1776, 1937). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. New York: Modern Library.
- Ulmann, G. (1975). *Sprache und Wahrnehmung*. Frankfurt/M: Campus.
- Wittich, D., Gössler, K. and Wagner, K. (1978, 1980). *Marxistisch-leninistische Erkenntnistheorie*. Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften.
- Zepf, S. (2006a). *Allgemeine psychoanalytische Neurosenlehre, Psychosomatik und Sozialpsychologie, Bd I*. Giessen: Psychosozial-Verlag.