

Article

NARCISSISM, PERSONAL LIFE AND IDENTITY: THE PLACE OF THE 1960s IN THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article explores the role played by psychoanalysis in the student, women's and gay movements of the 1960s as well as exploring the impact that these movements had on the transformation of psychoanalysis. It concludes that the 1960s were a turning point in the history of psychoanalysis, transforming it into an intersubjective, trauma-based culturally oriented theory.

Keywords

narcissism; self; object; unconscious; New Left

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Introduction

The history of US psychoanalysis in the 1960s presents us with a paradox. Disseminated by the student movements and the New Left, psychoanalytic ideas reached their highest point of influence in this period. At the same time, however, the profession of psychoanalysis went into decline in spite of the emergence of a new center in Latin America.



Thus, on one hand, mass diffusion and on the other, an unmistakable sense of an ending. How can this paradox be understood?

To find an answer requires reconsidering the *social* nature of psychoanalysis. Socially speaking, psychoanalysis is best understood as a charismatic movement with utopian overtones, a movement that accompanied the emergence of mass production/mass consumption capitalism. The charisma derived from Freud's articulation of an historically new experience of "personal life." By personal life I mean the awareness of possessing an intrapsychic life distinct from one's place in either the traditional family or in the economic division of labor. Psychoanalysis was the first important theory and practice of personal life. As such, it was part of a radical, historical turn toward internalization, de-familialization, and de-socialization.

In general, then, its connection with personal life was the source of psychoanalytic charisma. Its earliest, Viennese, history is that of a sect. At the turn of the century, Freud gathered followers into a charismatic psychoanalytic community. Like earlier religious charismatics, he urged them to leave behind their "families" – the archaic images of early childhood – but in Freud's case the purpose was not to preach, but to develop more genuine – more personal – relations. After World War I, psychoanalysis took on a mass character. Penetrating such new professions as social work, psychotherapy, film, and advertising, it became associated with the decline in paternal authority and the greater emphasis on youth and sexuality that accompanied Fordist mass production. Antonio Gramsci, writing from a jail cell in 1928, caught the connection between Fordism and psychoanalysis. Fordism, Gramsci wrote, needed to produce "a new type of worker," one who subjugated "natural ... instincts to new, more complex ... norms and habits" (1971, p 287). Neither increased moral coercion nor economic rewards alone was sufficient to produce this new kind of worker. Freudianism captured the inner longings, the secret wishes, of the worker. It thereby provided a new myth of the noble savage to replace the one that had accompanied the enlightenment (Gramsci, 1989, pp 277–321). By the 1920s, then, a charismatic sect had become associated with a utopian ideology.

The utopian dimension of psychoanalysis gave it a twofold character: it was in but not of the world. This ambivalence lies at the root of its paradoxical development in the 1960s. On the one hand, the dominant version of psychoanalysis at the start of the 1960s, namely ego psychology, reflected the need to adapt to reality: for example, to American world hegemony, to the organization of the sciences that had accompanied modern mass production, and to the welfare state. On the other hand, as a charismatic doctrine psychoanalysis was not easily circumscribed. Hence there was a second Freud available on the eve of the 1960s, one for whom reason arose from madness and could not be so easily separated from madness. This Freud, excluded from professional canons but never wholly banished, had inspired such figures as

Otto Gross and Wilhelm Reich; it was represented after World War II in the US by Paul Goodman, Norman O. Brown, and Herbert Marcuse. For this Freud, personal life could serve as a point of critique and transcendence.

The difference between the two Freuds is epitomized by their respective views of the ego. For ego psychology, the ego was limited in its powers, having constantly to balance reality, moral demands, and internal impulses. Determinedly anti-utopian, and closely linked to anti-fascism and to anti-communism, ego psychology was identified with the “maturity ethic”, meaning the acceptance of limits. In Philip Rieff’s description, psychoanalytic ego psychology meant “resign[ing] yourself to living within your moral means, suffer[ing] no gratuitous failures in a futile search for ethical heights” (Rieff, 1990, p 8). For the second Freud, in contrast, the ego was not only the seat of reason, but also part of the id, from which it derived its energies. Books like Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death* opened the way for a wholly different Freud, one who exploded the constraints of the 1950s culture and of the maturity ethic.

This second Freud, ignored by the analytic profession, became important to the student movements of the 1960s. The second Freud spoke to the utopian possibilities of the times. The long post-World War II period of uninterrupted economic growth, a golden age of scientific progress, a vital and expressive new culture that challenged the functionalism of Fordist mass production, the flowing of the older avant-gardes into the counterculture and then into mass culture, the attack on obsolete forms of authority, for example, in the Catholic church and in the universities, all these made the maturity ethic appear dowdy and repressive by the early 1960s. The second Freud was linked to the new sense of limitlessness and to what would soon be termed “permissiveness.”

Nevertheless, both Freuds – the Freud of the maturity ethic and the Freud of the New Left – descended from a common source and were caught up in a common historical process. Revealingly, both the analytic profession and the New Left were preoccupied with the same idea in the 1960s, the idea of narcissism. Narcissism, I suggest, came to the fore in the 1960s as part of a new, post-Fordist and post-modern conception of personal life. In this paper, I will trace the changing meanings of narcissism in order to address the paradox with which I began. I will argue that there were four stages in this history: first, the discovery that it was a positive source of development, especially in Heinz Kohut’s work; second, its politicization and its use as a critique of privatism in the work of Herbert Marcuse; third, its decaethesis in the work of Lacan; and fourth, its transformation into a concept of identity and *group* subjectivity in the early women’s and gay liberation movements.

Recognition

Let me begin by characterizing the analytic profession on the eve of the 1960s, especially in its dominant North American form. Only superficially a scientific

enterprise, American ego psychology was the heir to a still-warm charismatic upheaval. In 50 years it had gone through idealization, rebellion, dissemination, institutionalization, and routinization and was becoming what Weber called a “this-worldly program of ethical rationalization,” one deeply connected to such normalizing agencies as medicine and the welfare state. Yet, even so it retained deep links to its charismatic, anti-institutional origins, and possessed the character of a vocation. No mere economic rewards could explain the discipleship, the self-denial, the years of training, the night classes, the monastic demeanor, the secrecy, and the dedication that produced the psychoanalyst. As in the history of religion, the wish to guard and protect a charismatic source of meaning had led to systematization, orthodoxy, and specialized knowledges available only to initiates, all marked by what Peter Homans has called the “*ur*-anxiety” of psychoanalysis, namely that it would be seen as a religion (1989, pp 17, 68).

In this period when psychoanalysis was as much a church as a profession, the first reaction of professional psychoanalysts in the United States to the cultural changes of the 1960s was opposition. It was analysts who invented the idea that narcissism was a signal of the dissolution of social bonds, the inability to make commitments, to engage in long-run projects, to sacrifice the self for larger purposes, that many discerned in the culture of the 1960s. Their dominant theme was that the declining credibility of Oedipal authority weakened the ego while strengthening the primitive, sadistic, self-destructive superego of early childhood. Uncritical defenders of authority, many North American analysts set themselves against the democratizing changes of the time: youth culture, women’s liberation, gay liberation.

By the early 1960s, professional psychoanalysis in the United States was in crisis. The universities excluded analysts. The word “psychoanalytic” was supplanted by such euphemisms as “dynamic psychiatry” and “psychodynamic.” The American Psychoanalytic Association received fewer applications from individual candidates and from societies seeking affiliation. The average age of members rose sharply and the number of patients declined. In 1966, a major meeting was canceled for lack of interest, and analysts commented on the widespread hostility to them in the media.

Reflecting the sense of crisis, the analytic church underwent a convulsive schism. On the one side stood proponents of internal reforms: like the great monastic movements that preceded the Protestant reformation, this generation of reformers sought to forestall the coming deluge by adapting to the needs of the age. On the other side stood the defenders of orthodoxy who sought to resist adaptations that would effectively destroy psychoanalysis as they knew it. The most important analytic response to the new cultural forms was that of Heinz Kohut.

Insisting that narcissism had replaced sexuality as the defining issue of the age, Kohut portrayed it as a positive and legitimate need, the basis

of self-respect. According to him, the ego psychologist's "courageously facing the truth morality," its "health- and maturity-morality" suppressed patients' legitimate needs for recognition. Kohut's argument seemed to imply the dissolution of psychoanalysis into a new culture of narcissism. Not surprisingly, Kohut's initiatives called forth a counter-reformation, led by Otto Kernberg. Whereas Kohut sought to break the association of narcissism with pathology, Kernberg reasserted it. Although analysts such as Kernberg represented a genuine alternative to the youth- and appearance-centered culture that was becoming prevalent, their defense of "abstinence" and "maturity" was a rearguard one. Weighted down by reactionary politics, Kernberg's Herculean explications of analytic theory bore all the marks of a restoration, aiming to hold off the end of a declining empire by systematizing and ordering its traditions. Meanwhile, the initiative had passed from the reformers and clerics inside the analytic church to the heretics and revolutionaries outside.

Transcendence

In the 1960s, a second conception of narcissism emerged *outside* the institutional confines of psychoanalysis, among the New Left. To understand this second conception of narcissism we have to recall that psychoanalysis was a theory and practice of personal life. It was premised on the historically specific division between public and private life that had emerged with the rise of industry in the 19th century, a division that valorized the family as a refuge of private life in contrast to the economy. Erected on this edifice, the "first" psychoanalysis accepted both the sacred and primordial character of the private and the division between the private and the public. In contrast, the "second Freud," represented by utopians such as Reich, rejected that distinction. So too, did the New Left.

The New Left challenged the public/private distinction, especially in its efforts to create new personal relations in its own ranks. In its early years, participation was the sole basis of membership: to join, one simply had to show up. Backstage behaviors, such as nudity, informal dress, and self-disclosure took place onstage. For many, "the movement" offered liberation from the confines of the maturity ethic, as did the counterculture's communes, attacks on monogamy, and the use of drugs. "The movement" gave a social basis to the utopian moment in psychoanalysis.

The communal, anti-privatistic, and utopian bias of the early New Left explains the extraordinary popularity of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. Published in 1955, that book helped turn an obscure refugee professor into a sixties icon comparable to Che Guevara or Frantz Fanon. Challenging the public/private distinction, Marcuse argued that everything that psychoanalysis seemed to consign to the individual psyche, such as the instincts, sexuality, and the unconscious, were already constitutive of the "public" world of economics

and politics. In addition, he turned to narcissism as a means of moving beyond ego psychology. But whereas Kohut valorized an interpersonally oriented narcissism as necessary for self-respect, identity, and recognition, Marcuse invoked Freud's idea of *primary narcissism*. While Kohut's narcissism was relational, and thus implied the existence of another object, although not another subjectivity, primary narcissism was pre-objectal, reflecting a stage in which the ego was not yet separate from the external world. The "mature," rational and autonomous ego described by the ego psychologists was according to Marcuse, "an essentially aggressive, offensive subject, whose thoughts and actions were designed for mastering objects". In contrast, primary narcissism constituted "a fundamental relatedness to reality", which pointed the way from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy to eroticization of the entire body, and from utilitarianism to art, play, and narcissistic display. Through such formulations, Marcuse added a psychoanalytic dimension to the New Left's attempts to move beyond the maturity ethic – its critique of instrumental reason, its desire for a new connectedness with nature, and its attempt to liberate sexuality from its genital, heterosexual limits.

Kohut's revision of narcissism remained within the confines of individual psychotherapy. In contrast, Marcuse's vision of primary narcissism exploded those confines. Rejecting the view of personal life as the emblem of an apolitical, essentially privatistic culture, he conceived it as an orienting axis of revolution, comparable to anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and anti-sexism.

What happened, however, was not the revolution Marcuse envisioned but rather the transition to post-Fordism and post-modernism. The culture's expanded focus on narcissism coincided with changes in advertising, consumption, and family patterns. With these came the new prevalence of images, demands for group recognition, and deep changes in the relation of public and private.

Privatization

By the second half of the 1960s, a third understanding of narcissism emerged in the work of Jacques Lacan. This understanding reflected the waning of the New Left, the end of the hopes for a Marx/Freud synthesis, and the new forms of privatization that characterized post-modern and post-Fordist culture. Lacan, too, remade analysis around the theme of narcissism. But for him narcissism was not a basis for liberation, but a snare and a delusion.

While Kohut functioned inside the analytic profession, and Marcuse functioned outside it, Lacan's relation to the profession was ambivalent. His analytic vocation had begun before World War II, but his career took off in the 1950s when American-style mass consumption swept France. He adapted his

persona to the American model – Right Bank tailors, private barbers, luxurious hotels – but, as his insistence on the “short hour” demonstrated, he was consistently in rebellion. Expelled from the I.P.A. in 1963, something Lacan called an “excommunication,” he moved at the invitation of the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to the *École Normale Supérieure*, where his first seminars drew audiences of 500. Echoing Martin Luther, he called for a “return to Freud” and founded the *École Freudienne* on his own authority – “as alone as I have always been in my relation to the psychoanalytic cause”. Just as Luther rejected the clerical hierarchy, so Lacan rejected the training analysis: “*l’analyste ne s’autorise que de lui-même*”. Opening what became known as *le champ freudien*, he helped free analysis from medicine and integrate it into the social, cultural, and life style changes of the 1960s. But the result was a scaled-down, non-utopian version of analysis.

Like Marcuse, Lacan’s primary target was the maturity ethic. But Lacan rejected Marcuse’s idea of an originary plenitude or wholeness, arguing rather that “in man, there’s already a crack, a profound perturbation of the regulation of life”, an unavoidable element of discontinuity. This insistence on the “split subject” was also directed at some myths with a particularly French inflection: the Revolution, the people, Republicanism, and the Resistance. In rejecting such myths of origins, plenitude, and telos, Lacan was simultaneously rejecting Marxism and situating psychoanalysis in a new social field: the democratic, consumerist society of post-Fordism.

Lacan’s emphasis on the split subject converged with the New Left’s role in facilitating the transition to post-Fordism. Nonetheless Lacan, unlike Marcuse, never identified with the New Left. Whereas Marcuse articulated the experiences of relatedness, sacrifice, and self-transcendence that characterized the early 1960s, Lacan spoke for the detached, ironic, privatized culture taking shape by the end of the decade. Addressing demonstrating students in 1968, he told them that “what you as a revolutionary aspire to is a master. You will have one” (Kritzman, 1977). If Freud’s typical patient struggled to achieve integrity, if a whole line of analytic patients stretching from Ferenczi through Kohut viewed the analyst as a source of narcissistic supplies, and if Marcuse articulated the idea that through participation in a collective movement the essentially trivial problems of individual sensitivity would be resolved, then the typical Lacanian consumer of analysis was going to be “cool,” a person with his or her own individual “style,” a highly developed student of signs, linguistic systems, spin, someone who prides him- or herself on knowing how to decode films, political events, and mass culture. Reflecting the reinstatement of the public/private distinction but now in a new, post-Fordist, service-based, information economy, Lacanianism proved that Paris was not merely the center of revolutionary thought but also the capital of narcissism.

Identity

By 1968, the psychoanalytic church stood rigid, orthodox, ossified, and nakedly hypocritical. Ideas it had once bravely pioneered had become *doxa*. Efforts at internal reform had failed. Calls to “return to Freud,” historicize Freud, or move beyond Freud had all foundered. At the gates of the church were the rebellious dissenters, the Protestants, the saints. As in the history of religion, there were two alternatives: the antinomian who goes to the depths of the self, seeking a deeper, more genuine truth, and the arminian who goes outward to reform morals and collective behavior. The movement from antinomianism to arminianism is often a transformative one. 1968 was such a moment.

So long as the New Left had been preoccupied with issues of peace or social justice, the question of personal life had taken the form of alternative life styles, drugs, music, sexuality, and “communes.” Beginning around 1968, however, stronger “surrealist,” countercultural, and carnivalesque elements emerged. It was as if the private was becoming public: the issues that Freud described as intrapsychic and familial were acted out on a social scale and on a political stage. As previously private and repressed experiences – sexuality, family, gender – were externalized, antinomianism gave way to arminianism. Psychoanalysis, historically, studied “individuals.” By the mid-1970s, however, the actors involved in the politics of the family were no longer individuals but groups with *identities* centered on such essences as gender, sexuality, and race.

The transformation from an intrapsychic to an external and sociological metaphysic completed the decline of US psychoanalysis. True, a psychoanalytic profession survived the 1960s, but it lost the charismatic and utopian quality to which it had been linked in the Fordist period. Meanwhile, as psychoanalytic charisma disintegrated, its shards infused the new post-Marxist and post-analytic social movements. As antinomianism gave way to social action, and as action unfolded under the saturated light of TV and film cameras (“the whole world is watching”), movements such as feminism and gay liberation sought to transpose the Freudian view of the psyche onto the plane of sociology.

Here, too, narcissism played a crucial role, this time, however, under the rubric of “identity.” Narcissism, in the Freudian lexicon, had also referred to groups based on identification: the same skin color, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, or even gender. In the Fordist epoch, however, the significance of these group identities had been subordinated to the universalisms of class and citizenship. In the 1960s, in contrast, particularistic forms of identity became politically salient. Identity supplied the fourth, and last, redefinition of narcissism.

In this case, too, ego psychology supplied the point of departure, but now it was cast as a wholly repressive form of control, and conflated with psychoanalysis *tout court*. The attack began in the “anti-psychiatry” movement of the 1950s. Pioneered by such figures as Ronald David Laing and Erving Goffman,

that movement had viewed schizophrenia as a realistic response to an oppressive situation. The most important text of anti-psychiatry, however, was Michel Foucault's 1963 *Madness and Civilization*. The common thread between the psychiatrist and the analyst, according to Foucault, was that both were representatives of order. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis had added something new. Whereas earlier forms of control, such as hypnosis, reduced their subjects to objects, Freud's genius lay in inventing a technique through which free subjects reduce themselves to slavery, abjectly seeking an ever-receding and impossible self-knowledge.

Foucault's critique of analysis was part of the broader 1960s attack on the great, normalizing categories of the Keynesian welfare state – homosexual, maternal employment, racial minority, single mother, dysfunctional family, categories that US psychoanalysis had done much to construct. As such, it converged with second-wave feminism and gay liberation. Unlike the New Left, these movements built their politics on specific, categorial identities. In their understandings, a social conception of oppression replaced a psychological one, and the Freudian focus on “individual explanations” appeared repressive. As many novels, films, and jokes of the period testify, the new mood opposed introspection. Dora became a feminist icon because she *left* analysis. The farewell of Erica Jong's heroine to her analyst in her 1973 novel *Fear of Flying* was emblematic: “Don't you see that men have *always* defined femininity as a means of keeping women in line? Why should I listen to *you* about what it means to be a woman? Are you a woman? Why shouldn't I listen to myself for once? And to other women? ... As in a dream ... I got up from the couch ... and walked ... out I was free!” (pp 20–22).

If, on the one hand, feminists and proponents of gay liberation rejected the this-worldly side of psychoanalysis, on the other hand they inherited much of its utopian impulse. Consider the case of homosexuality. For classical psychoanalysis, one could understand a homosexual object choice psychologically, but there was no such entity as “a homosexual.” In the course of the 1970s, however, homosexuals began to understand themselves as persons with a distinct way of life who belonged to an historically specific community, which in many ways transgressed the public/private division. In this context, efforts to understand the psychology of homosexuality began to seem bigoted, like efforts to understand the psychology of races. The last thing homosexuals needed was psychoanalysis: they needed services, community institutions, and political organizations. Hence, as new churches of identity emerged, the psychoanalytic hegemony faded into history.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by returning to the paradox with which I began: the fact that the mass diffusion of psychoanalysis coincided with its decline as a profession.

I have suggested that the theme of narcissism provides a key for understanding this paradox and I have identified four stages in its development in the 1960s. First, Kohut valorized narcissism as the legitimate need for self-display and self-respect. Second, Marcuse valorized primary narcissism as the basis for an explosive new reorientation of the culture, one that challenged the Fordist work ethic and the Fordist family form. Third, Lacan redefined narcissism as the centerpiece of a new analytic project, which accompanied a new, post-Marxist and post-Fordist politics; here, narcissism was de-idealized and de-utopianized. Fourth, and finally, narcissism triumphed as psychoanalysis was discarded in favor of new identity-based conceptions of the self.

Let me put this in a still larger perspective. Just as capitalism did not develop without Calvinist “Saints” who oriented individuals to the state of their souls and therefore facilitated a new ethic of work, self-sacrifice and savings, so 20th-century men and women did not separate from traditional familial morality and enter into mass consumption’s sexualized “dream worlds” without undergoing a charismatic reorientation to meaning. Psychoanalysis was a vehicle of that reorientation. It served as the “Calvinism” of Fordist mass production. Like Calvinism earlier, it helped supply the inner motivations for a socio-economic transformation that could not have won committed followers on its own terms. As it became broadly dispersed, its charismatic core gave way to utopianism.

In fact, Fordism is hard to imagine without psychoanalysis. While psychoanalysis needed the social and cultural changes associated with mass production, it gave at least as much as it received, contributing not only in the course of its birth and epochal rise, but also in the course of its decline, death, and transfiguration. Even as classical psychoanalysis expired, its death throes helped facilitate the disintegration of the Fordist mass production, the shift toward a highly individualized service economy, the rise of feminist and post-colonial demands for recognition, and the decline of the Keynesian welfare state.

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