

# More on Freudianism and Marxism

A reader responds to an exchange of letters between WSWS contributors Alan Whyte and Frank Brenner

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To Frank Brenner and Alan Whyte,

I want to thank both of you for the recent correspondence posted on the WSWS about Freud and Marxism.

I don't think Marxism is trying to achieve a synthesis (which I understand to be a merging) with Freudian psychology, as was suggested several times in your exchange, any more than it is trying to achieve a synthesis with physics, biology or any other science. Each of these branches of science analyzes a part of the material world and penetrates to a deeper understanding of that part of the world. Nor is Marxism trying to establish a Freudian Marxism, or vice versa, any more than there can be a Marxist biology (Lamarckianism) or a Marxist art ("Socialist Realism").

Marxism understands the materialist basis of science and therefore pursues each science to its root because it bases itself on the understanding that matter is primary to spirit. It bases itself on the understanding that what is in our brain comes from nowhere but the material world. This is something a scientist who specializes in one branch of science cannot do. As both of you pointed out, after collecting and analyzing the data to establish the processes that make up each particular branch of science, many scientists in bourgeois society eventually fall into mysticism since they are limited to their specialty and therefore cannot understand their branch of science as part of the whole. This is why there is a long tradition of scientists who are theists—Jane Goodall being the latest member of this school.

My understanding of dialectical materialism suggests that it is the method whereby, not only is each branch of science returned again and again to its material origins, but the interconnections between each of the branches of science are uncovered. Where the bourgeois scientist eventually may free-fall into the abyss of mysticism, the Marxist finds connections to other branches of science. Further, not only is it a method for understanding the interconnectedness of all knowledge, but through uncovering the processes of matter in motion it provides human beings with the method by which to understand, and therefore act decisively, in a universe in the continual process of being born and passing away.

Idealism, the belief in the primacy of spirit over matter, is especially difficult to root out in psychology because here the

mind is trying to understand the mind. Freud made many mistakes both in his clinical practice with individual patients and in his attempt to transfer his observations of patients, begun in 1901 with *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, to the understanding all human beings, individually and collectively. But this does not mean that Marxists should reject him anymore than we reject Newton for practicing alchemy and mysticism.

Freud's significance lies in the fact that he based the understanding of the human mind in our primate origins. Freud could only appear after Darwin had developed the understanding that all life was historically and biologically connected. Freud was the first to fully develop a science of mind based on the objective understanding that underlying our daily struggle for survival, our need for food and sex and our interactions are our animal origins. Further, he laid the foundation for mapping the mind based on the manner in which the human brain has evolved from these origins. Above all, he developed the concept of the unconscious and the method by which mind mediates the memory of both the individual and society as a whole.

I see many similarities between the method Freud used for trying to understand the mind and Hegel's approach in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This is no accident because Freud based his science on ideas of the Enlightenment. The assumption that understanding can only come from uncovering knowledge through a process of discovery and that appearance is only the beginning of understanding is very much the basis of Freud's work. The difference between Freud and Hegel, of course, is that a hundred years on scientists had a much more developed understanding of human origins and history, and Freud therefore approached his task from a more materialist basis. His ideas have become so much a part of our culture it is almost as hard for us to understand how humans perceived themselves before Freud developed the idea of the unconscious as it is for us to understand human consciousness without speech.

While there is much excellent discussion of Freudianism in relationship to Marxism, the main criticism I have of both letters is that you departed too much from attempting to get a historical materialist understanding of Freud and his science.

His various thought experiments are debated with only general reference to the historical context in which they were developed. A science does not spring full blown from the head of the scientist. Major leaps in science are the result of generations of collecting and analyzing information until the conditions exist for a scientist or group of scientists to make the qualitative transition to a new understanding of the part of the universe being studied and thereby change the course of human history. They occur under specific social and historical contexts. I believe Freud and his ideas can only be understood from a historical context.

The historical materialist approach to any science must be based on study of how the scientist or group of scientists made the qualitative transition to a new understanding. This has been the practice for understanding Marxism itself through studying the lives of Marx and Engels and following the evolution of their writings as they engaged in the working class struggles of their day. I think Freud should be approached in the same way. Is it an accident that the thought experiment of the death instinct (Thanatos), to which a significant part of the correspondence is devoted, was developed by Freud in 1931, during the time he daily saw the activities of the fascists in the streets? Wouldn't we understand this thought experiment better if we understood it was developed as the fascist tide was invading his everyday life and as the fascists attacked his life's work, which eventually led him to flee Vienna and which sent his sisters to death in the concentration camp?

The origins of your correspondence was the book *Freud and the Bolsheviks* by Martin Miller. While the book is limited, because the author cannot fully understand the material, due to his anticommunist "Stalinism-equals-Marxism" perspective, the history he documents is very important and should be where we turn to answer and understand many of the questions you raise. It is in the early Soviet Union that Freud's ideas were first tested on a society-wide basis. This has not been done in a conscious way since.

Critic Aleksandr Voronsky's views were held up in the correspondence as either being conclusive on Freud or rejected as irrelevant. Voronsky's views were part of a debate in the Bolshevik Party about Freud after the Revolution. They can only be understood in that context and should not be held up as definitive or irrelevant. I think that as much of the writings of Vera Schmidt, Mikhail Reisner, Tatiana Rosenthal and other Bolshevik students of psychology as possible should be made available to truly understand the pioneering work done by these leading Bolsheviks to develop psychology.

We must understand that the idealism that came to the fore in Freud's later work is the result of social development going off course with the rise of Stalinism and fascism. *Freud and the Bolsheviks* makes clear that at the time of the Russian Revolution Freud was open to Marxism and, indeed, worked with leading Bolsheviks to test his theories in the Soviet Union. Only in the late 1920s did he turn against Marxism as Stalinism

tightened its grip on the throat of the Revolution.

While, to return to the struggle for a materialist understanding of the mind we must criticize this idealism which bought into the Stalinist line that Stalinism had anything to do with Marxism, I think we must also understand it in the context of the historical period. On this basis we can find what is objective in Freud's later works in spite of the idealism which pervades them. In the same way, we can understand and therefore root out the idealism found in his early works which was based on the prevailing view at the time that human progress was inevitable and the unscientific and unhistorical view that capitalism would make a peaceful transition to social equality.

It is the role of the arts to show us the truth of the subjective, and the role of science to strive for an objective understanding of the material world—including the human mind. Psychology, like no other science, brings together the truths of art and science to the point that they become interchangeable, because psychology is the study of what it is to be human.

As we live our lives in a capitalism in the throes of its death agony, it is only with the method of dialectical materialism that we can free science from the idealist distortions that constantly impinge upon it. In studying the minds and lives of various individuals, Freud began the work of trying to understand all human behavior collectively. We should not lose sight of the objective of psychology which is to develop an understanding of human behavior through analyzing the mind. Only Marxism provides the means to truly understand the connection of the mind with the society of which it is a part. With this understanding, psychology can not only relieve the suffering of the individual buffeted and traumatized by the vagaries and brutalities of capitalist society, but it can be a guide to the form society should take when production has been established for the good of society rather than for individual profit.

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