

# A comment on Freudianism and Marxism

7 December 1999

*The WSWS received the following letter in response to "An exchange of letters on Freudianism and Marxism—A WSWS contributor responds to Intrepid Thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union and Frank Brenner replies" (WSWS, 30 November 1999).*

I have very much enjoyed reading the writings of Frank Brenner and Allen Whyte on Freud and Marxism, and had a few brief comments.

First, I think that Mr. Whyte's quote from *Civilization and Its Discontents* that gives Freud's view of communism deserves some criticisms, which Mr. Whyte does not give. In this passage, Freud says that he "has no concern with any economic criticisms of the communist system ... but I am able to recognize that the psychological premises on which the system are based are an untenable illusion." Freud seems to believe that the elimination of aggression and all "destructive" instincts is a *premise* of communism. This is simply not true. A communist society does not require an elimination of aggressive impulses, and the elimination of aggressive impulses and "ill-will" is not the goal of communism. It is certainly the case that the society in which we live is not healthy. But a healthy foundation of society does not imply the elimination of aggression, rather aggression in such a society will be channeled into productive outlets, and will not result in actions such as we see at Columbine. A reduction in the expression of these instincts will certainly come about given a truly healthy society, but they will most likely still exist.

These considerations are important because they lead to the conclusion that it is not necessary that communists "in one way or another ... neutralize or eliminate the death instinct or else ... the project [of synthesizing Freudian psychology and socialism] is impossible," as Mr. Whyte writes. Mr. Brenner's points about human nature are important here, as I suspect that aggression—an emotion common to most animals—is a feature of this nature. Man, biologically speaking, is not

a blank slate, and communism does not necessitate that the writing on this slate be altered.

Second, I think that Mr. Brenner's statement that a synthesis of Marx and Freud is necessary for a "scientific conception of human nature" grossly overestimates the position that Freud now occupies within materialist psychology. While it may have been the case that Freud represented the only materialist psychologist (or developmental psychologist) 70 years ago, this is certainly no longer the case. Vast strides have been made in this field, and most psychologists today are materialist. A synthesis is important, but it is not a synthesis between Marx and Freud that is needed, rather a synthesis between historical materialism (i.e., Marxism) and psychological materialism. The latter has still quite a long ways to go, and it may very well include aspects of Freud's thought. The thought of Freud (in spite of his genius), is, however, not by any means at the level where we can speak of a synthesis with Marx, and it is specifically lacking in its scientific rigor. I am speaking here purely of Freud's psychology. His ideas on sociology and history are, of course, another matter entirely.

Sincerely,

JT



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