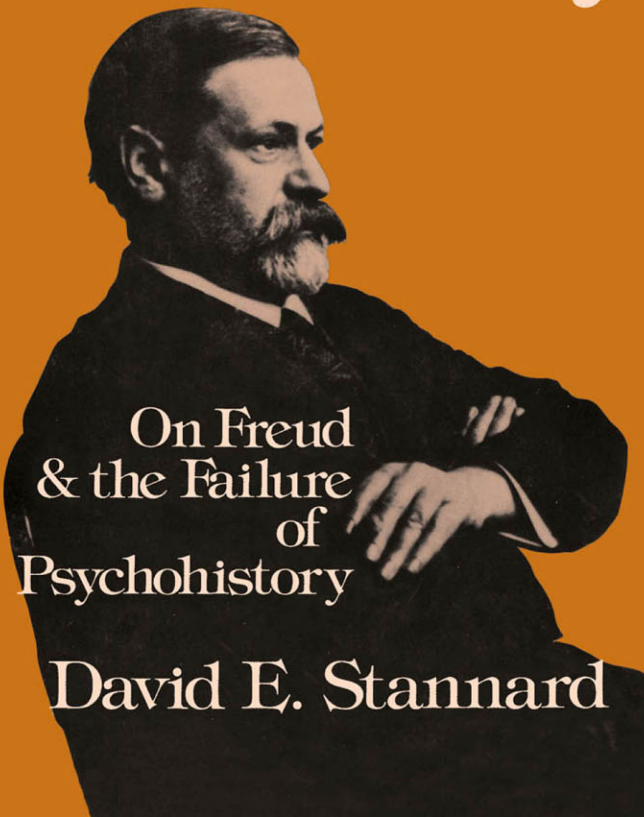
Shrinking History



On Freud & the Failure of Psychohistory

David E. Stannard

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For Valerie

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Am I obliged to believe *every* absurdity?
And if not, why this one in particular?
There is no appeal to a court above that of reason.

—Sigmund Freud,
The Future of an Illusion

Preface

IN 1958 the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss observed that the principal difference between history and anthropology can be seen "in their choice of complementary perspectives: History organizes its data in relation to conscious expressions of social life, while anthropology proceeds by examining its unconscious foundations."[1]

In that same year, halfway around the world, there appeared in print the first clear sign that established academic historians would soon begin to reject this apparent truism. In what he called "the next assignment," the president of the American Historical Association exhorted the membership of that organization to get on with the task of examining and analyzing the unconscious foundations of the social life of the past.[2] Such an effort, William L. Langer thought, was long overdue. Magnanimously (though only tentatively) ruling out "constitutional obscurantism" as the source of previous historians' reticence in adopting psychoanalysis, the tool

that could unlock the door to the unconscious world of the past, Langer preferred to think that such caution derived merely from a fear of the effects the "coldly penetrating calculus" of psychoanalysis might have on the humanistic tradition of historical explanation. Some unconvinced historians (those, Langer would have said, who remained "buried in their own conservatism") may have preferred to blame their alleged timidity on the constitutional and semantic obscurantism—to use the second meaning of that word—of psychoanalysis.

But no matter. History, at least in the United States, has not been the same since then. A few years after Langer's ringing declaration that the practice of history writing was "on the threshold of a new era," another distinguished member of the profession, in a flush of enthusiasm, went so far as to advocate individual psychoanalysis as part of the professional training of the budding academic historian. While recognizing that "a full psychoanalysis" might not always be necessary or even possible, H. Stuart Hughes wrote that in many cases "it might be precisely what was called for, and I trust that foundation funds would be forthcoming to finance such a venture." He went on:

> I hope that in the coming years a significant minority of young historians, particularly those most concerned with the psychological aspects of historical interpretation, will be going through personal analysis under the guidance of experienced clinicians. For the others, it may be possible to work out a shorter program in consultation with the Psychoanalytic Institutes established near some of our major universities.[3]

As of yet Hughes's hope has not been realized. At least analysis has not commonly become a formal part of graduate school curricula in history. Nevertheless, there remain rather few historical figures of consequence who have not, during the past two decades, been the

subject of what self-professed psychohistorian Fawn M. Brodie has referred to as the "surgical operation" of psychohistory.[4] Hardly a professional association meeting passes without a minimum of a session or two on the latest developments in psychohistorical procedure. And there are now at least two scholarly journals extant whose sole purpose is the propagation and examination of psychohistorical analyses.[5]

The quality of this work ranges from the elegant and sensitive writings of Erik H. Erikson, to the tawdry and crackpot disquisitions of too many to name without fear of overlooking others equally deserving of mention. But one example can give at least the flavor of the approach of this latter group.

Writing of the sources behind a "moment of discovery" in his thinking on the psychoanalytic meaning of war, Lloyd de Mause, the founder and editor of *The Journal of Psychohistory*, admits that "technical training" in history and psychoanalysis were of some value to him (although he has no "technical training" in history) because he "had to know how to get around in the literature of both fields." However, he continues:

> Far more crucial were . . . the long hours somewhere around the seventh or eighth year of my personal psychoanalysis when I struggled to re-experience and find meaning in dreams of drowning and sinking in a whirlpool of quicksand, or, when my son was two years old, those hundreds of hours I spent with him pretending we were babies in mommy's belly, crawling around in the dark under the bedclothes and pretending to fall off the bed crying "Help! Save me!," because that was the endless game that seemed to give him a strong sense of the pleasure of mastery.[6]

It was thanks to this sort of thing that de Mause made the inspired discovery that war is nothing less than a reenactment of the expe-

rience of birth. The real breakthrough, however, came when he found that military bands beat at the same rate as does "the elevated heart-beat of a woman during a contraction in labor." Thus, de Mause came to understand why he, "a radical and anti-nationalist, was nevertheless moved almost to tears when I stood with my son watching a parade with marching bands . . . . I obviously was a baby being born while watching the parade, being picked up and carried along by my mother's heart-beat whether I felt like it or not, and the tears in my eyes were for the impending separation from my mother!"[7]

If this were representative of the bulk of work being done by psychohistorians it would hardly be necessary to write a book on the subject. Clearly, Mr. de Mause works well beyond the fringe of even the most generous definition of the world of scholarship as do others of his colleagues, such as one Henry Ebel, who "surrounds himself with his historical materials and 'Primals' for hours while free-associating to the material in front of him, in a concentrated effort to reach deeper levels of motivation than the usual reading reveals."[8] (The published results of such "concentrated efforts" can, as one might expect, be rather mind-boggling—e.g., "Bosch, of course, is just a more finicky da Vinci. And da Vinci is just Luther with a talent for sketching.") It is not surprising that de Mause's recent declaration of independence from the discipline of history was greeted with quiet sighs of relief by other, less eccentric, practitioners of the psychohistorical craft—those who do not spend "hundreds of hours" crawling under the bedclothes with a two-year old searching for answers to the riddles of history.[9]

Yet, we must be careful here. For, as often happens when fanatics enter an already questionable field of endeavor, by the very ludicrousness of their positions they may make the work of other, more moderate, participants appear to be models of responsibility. This book argues that this should not be permitted to be the case with

psychohistory. While certainly some works of psychohistory are vastly superior to others, little, if any, psychohistory is good history.

This is the conclusion of many (probably most) professional historians. Their reasons for rejecting psychohistory, however, have often not been heard by the general public, nor found convincing by other restless and methodologically inquisitive historians who have of late been seeking out new ways of viewing and interpreting the raw data of the past. It is insufficient, for example, simply to look with disdain upon the poor taste of those who would besmirch the dignity of traditional historical explanation; and to lump psychohistory, as some have done, with the equally new efforts of historians to seek clarification through quantification utterly distorts matters. Moreover, it does not help much to argue, however correctly, that psychohistory attenuates responsibility in history, "trivializes human action. . . . exculpates the vicious and . . . debunks the virtuous"—that is, that it reduces conscious ethical decision-making by such diverse historical figures as Luther, Hitler, Jefferson, Stalin, Gandhi, and others to a crudely mechanistic determinism rooted in ideas concerning the psychopathology of everyday life.[10]

To begin with, history cannot any longer be viewed as Clio, fair maiden among the muses, who must be maintained in the vale, as Jacques Barzun has said, "*virgo intacta.*"[11] To adopt or maintain this attitude in response to the challenge of psychohistory is merely to repeat the simple-minded rejection of psychoanalysis itself, when it emerged at the turn of the century, as only an exercise in bad taste and a degradation of human nature. To reject quantitative evaluations of historical data in the same sweeping motion is to court genuine obtuseness: there has, of course, been bad work (as well as very good work) done by quantitative historians, and some of them have made embarrassingly grandiose claims for the limited insights and discoveries resulting from their efforts; but there is no methodological or thematic connection between psychohistory and quanti-

tative analysis that justifies treating them as two elements of a single (and singularly troublesome) phenomenon. Nor, finally, does the argument that psychohistory trivializes both thought and action—that it is a dangerous exercise in the historical exculpation of villains and the debunking of heroes—do little more than underline psychohistorical pretentiousness: such, it is contended, is the price that must always be paid for scientific advance.

This book takes a somewhat different critical approach from those noted above, and I should be candid about it. I was for some time interested in the potential of psychoanalytic theory for opening new ways of looking at historical data, and in other writings I have both urged others and engaged myself in various interdisciplinary borrowings in an effort to coax greater meaning from the fragmented materials of history. I am not at all opposed to open (and admitted) speculation in the writing of history. After all, some of the most important historical advances in modern times have derived from the examination and reexamination of what began as bold speculations.

But mere common sense imposes a limit on this sort of thing. We would not, for instance, see much explanatory value in an effort to show that the cause of this or that historical event was traceable to the fact that the main actor in the event was a Scorpio whose governing planet was Mars; nor would the fact that this actor may have had certain specified facial features be regarded as credible evidence of a constitutional or genetic predisposition to act in a particular fashion; nor would we likely concur with an explanation asserting that such and such happened because God was pleased or displeased with the actor in question. The point is obvious: there is not sufficient believable evidence available to indicate with reasonable assurance that any of these explanatory schemes works. It is as simple as that. Divine intervention may or may not be a reality in the everyday affairs of humankind, but modern historians have generally agreed that analyses based on claims of divine intervention do not deserve a place in historical explanations of events. What is required of God must be

required of all would-be explanation systems, including psychoanalysis; that is, evidence.

Historians have not, to date, seemed especially inclined to investigate this matter at much length. They have other work to do and thus generally treat psychohistorical work on an ad hoc basis whenever a particular effort intrudes on their individual fields of specialization. This book, however, is devoted to precisely that question of theoretical efficacy, to the task of examining what evidence exists to support various psychoanalytic hypotheses *and* their applicability to history. It is not, apart from a look at a model of sorts in the first chapter, a critical survey of works thus far written in the field of psychohistory; for to do that would be to avoid the central question: does psychoanalytic theory work—does it even make sense?

We will thus be taking up a challenge laid down by Freud more than half a century ago. In his "Autobiographical Study" of 1925, Freud claimed that many of his critics had unfairly rejected his work by "the classical maneuver of not looking through the microscope so as to avoid seeing what they had denied."[12] Now, there are microscopes and there are microscopes. The one Freud had in mind was his own: a deep immersion in analysis. Whatever its benefits, such a procedure hardly deserves to be called looking through a microscope. A microscope is, after all, a scientific instrument, a piece of equipment—not a conversion experience. To follow Freud's advice on this matter (and the subsequent advice of legions of defensive analysts) is much closer to following the suggestion that only those who have spent an extended period of time as novices among the Jesuits can properly understand, criticize, or recognize the truth value of the teachings of Ignatius Loyola. Such an experience might help in understanding the matters at issue. It might also (more probably) so distort the individual's perspective that it would *hinder* objective understanding. In any case, it is hardly intellectually obligatory.

There is a better microscope—the same one to which other systems of explanation must submit. It is the process of simply putting

such systems through some elementary tests designed to determine if they are logically sound, empirically confirmable, and capable of a reasonable degree of generalization. By and large, psychoanalysts have shunned this microscope. Their reasons have been various, but one of the most common, ingenious (and fatuous) is to claim that psychoanalytic theory is so subtle, so complex, and so sophisticated that none of the tools of evaluation yet devised by the best of human minds is capable of testing it.[13] This, like the other common *ad hominem* complaint that critics of psychoanalysis are only displaying their neuroses,[14] is a reply worthy of a mystic or an intellectual charlatan but not someone who wishes to have his or her ideas taken seriously. Because it is so common a claim, however, I will discuss it later at somewhat greater length.

* * *

This book, it should be said, is in design something of a primer—a book of elementary principles. In the present case the principles I am concerned with are, as I have said, those having to do with the philosophic, scientific, and universalistic status and validity of psychoanalytic theory. In approaching these matters, I have confined myself largely to the examination of fairly orthodox Freudian theory. In this regard I have allowed myself to be guided by the working psychohistorian. For, despite occasional theoretical forays into the hypothetical world of what psychohistory *might* be, in practice the rule of virtually all writers has been to hew closely to the Freudian line. And even the apparent exceptions—the works of those who rely upon or imitate the ideas of Erik Erikson, for example—remain sufficiently derivative of the Freudian model (in Erikson's own words, "Freud's monumental work is the rock on which such exploration and advancement must be based")[15] that the shape of the discussion that follows is as applicable to that work as it is to Freud's. Moreover, despite all the imaginative so-called alternatives to relatively

mainline psychoanalytic theory, *only* fairly orthodox approaches have thus far generated *any* empirical support—and thus, at least insofar as such support is concerned, Freudian theory provides the strongest case *for* the validity of psychohistorical analysis. Other approaches, from the fairy tale world of Lloyd de Mause to the more serious and responsible efforts of such writers as Fred Weinstein and Gerald M. Platt, suffer a single common problem: empirically speaking, they are pipedreams.[16]

Freudian theory (and that of at least the seminal work of the so-called "post-Freudians"—from Jung, Adler, Rank and the other "early schismatics," to Sullivan, Fromm, Horney, Erikson and others) is, of course, generically a therapeutic technique—however much it may subsequently have worked itself into a would-be holistic theory of human behavior of interest to certain social scientists, historians, and students of literature. As a therapeutic technique it requires the existence of a living subject, one willing and able to actively participate in the effort to reach awareness of the allegedly repressed impulses or forgotten traumatic events (and their unique interpretations) that are said to underlie the symptoms in question. This active participation—necessarily involving, it is claimed, transference of intense feelings onto the person of the analyst—is essential to the cooperative process of gaining insight, overcoming resistances, "making the unconscious conscious," and eventually effecting cure.[17] The fact that this is patently and by simple definition impossible when dealing with the scattered literary remains of a long-dead (and therefore, needless to say, inactive and non-participating) subject has led many—most notably a good many psychoanalytically trained clinicians—to dismiss out of hand as what Freud himself called "wild" psychoanalysis the retrospective psychoanalyzing that is the heart of psychohistory.[18] Despite the apparently eminent reasonableness of this rejecting attitude, *from the psychoanalytic perspective itself,* there remains in the minds of many the belief that abstract psychoanalytic *theory* can be applied to historical documents as a

method of opening up for scrutiny and intelligent analysis the unconcious mind of the past. Thus, this book—an examination of that theory and its implications for historical analysis.

There is, finally, one more thing that should be said about the presentation of this book as a primer. A primer, ideally, should be written in such a way that it is accessible to the general reader and presents in compact form the essential aspects of an otherwise forbiddingly long, complex, and esoteric argument. My purpose in writing this book in such a way is a simple one: it is merely to help open a long overdue discussion among intelligent laypeople and students of history that has for too long been rendered impossible by the protective smokescreen of functionless private jargon and cant and dogmatic Alice-in-Wonderland logic that has marked the psychoanalytic and psychohistorical enterprises—a discussion, quite simply, about one small but important aspect of the nature of historical explanation.

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