

ATTENTION-MONGERS

Ernest Gellner's
*The Psychoanalytic Movement:
It's Place in Thought and Society.*
The Cunning of Unreason
(London: Paladin 1985)

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Psychoanalysis has often been employed to highlight sociological problems, especially in relation to modern or modernizing society. The late Roger Bastide, to quote just one of many possible examples, spent most of his publishing life digging out the social meaning of religion with the help of psychoanalytical concepts, e.g., he explained the survival of Afro-Catholic cults in the swelling towns of proto-industrial Brazil by a deft combination of Durkheimian and Freudian categories

In *The Psychoanalytic Movement: Its Place in Thought and Society*, Ernest Gellner sets out to do just the opposite. Instead of resorting to psychoanalysis to explain modern society, he applies a theory of modern society to explain the survival of psychoanalysis in our midst. His book, wittily subtitled *The Cunning of Unreason*, aims at giving a truly sociological account of psychoanalysis. This is, as far as I know, at this global level, something never attempted before. Recent studies

like Robert Castel's on the "phenomene psy" are at most critical descriptions of today's psycho-therapeutic culture, but they do not probe deep enough in the functional role of psychoanalysis in our society. Moreover they deal with the diaspora of therapeutic methods, not with the Freudian rite which goes on enjoying a unique position among the lay soteriologies of our time. Philip Rieff's insightful disquisitions on post-Freudian schools are not sociologically oriented either.

Gellner's main thesis is that Freud's ideas and especially his therapeutic dispensation answer a deeply felt need in the modern individual. Unlike traditional man, modern man has overcome the natural environment. But the secular culture which achieved this also put the individual at the mercy of other people. While nature has been tamed, personal relations are what worry and frighten us. Our life has largely ceased to be a struggle for bread but has become a constant hankering after attention and acceptance. Gellner subscribes to Riesman's views about the other-directed character of the denizens of affluent society. But he dramatizes the picture by stressing a predicament defined by acute attention-deprivation. The primary function of the analytical relation is to ensure attention.

Through psychoanalysis, attention-starved people buy complete concern from the Other. Yet in the analytical relation the patient is at once given full attention and denied a role. Our trouble is that most of us just play roles nobody seems to care much for - we live in constant fear of being ignored. Now analysis grants us a role as soon as an interpretation of our life-story, and therefore of our character, is endorsed by the "Authorized Other": the man sitting beside the couch. However, the grant of a role is hard to get; analysis is a painful, laborious process. Moreover the analyst is protected from the claims one normally addresses to others in equally emotionally intense relationships. One cannot possibly require the analyst to give one his time or personal commitment as though he were a friend or a lover; the attention-giving of the soul doctors is strictly rule-bound. A double bind ensues, which can only enhance the drama of salvation through therapy.

Of course, catering for attention is not all there is to psychoanalysis. Part of Freud's success derives from the greater realism of his dark portrayal of man as compared to the previous naturalist views on mind and behavior. For the empiricist tradition epitomized by Hume, man was the prey of a set of stimuli and responses stirred by too gentle passions. Freud replaced these almost idyllic psychological assumptions by a nastier but much more plausible picture. With him the soul became once again the arena of a battle between Beast and Angel, just like in the old religious vision, but this time, the drama of psychic strife spoke the naturalist language of a secular culture.

Gellner fully recognizes that Freud was by no means the first to substitute psychological realism for the angelism of classical empiricist psychology. Between Freud and Hume there came Nietzsche, a superb explorer of harsher psychological stuff. If anything, Nietzsche's name for the Beast, will-to-power, is still more realistic than Freud's pansexual image, since craving for domination seems still more ubiquitous and Protean than the search for libidinal gratification. Yet in comparison to Dr. Freud, Nietzsche had at least three disadvantages: he did not speak with the voice of science, did not offer an ecumenic recipe for salvation (his superhuman ideal, "transvaluation of all values," was something definitely out of the reach of most of mankind), and, last but not least, he did not organize a ritual and a "church" to enforce his salvationist ideas. In the event, notes Gellner, we got one of modern history's best jokes: whereas Nietzsche, the Teutonic thinker, is so ironical about himself, Freud, a Jew, comes out as a self-confident prophet. . . . But surely one side of the joke had a momentous precedent in the passage from, say, a Heine to Marx?

As is only too well known, Freud never boasted that he had discovered the unconscious; he just claimed the discovery of "the scientific method" to explain (and cope with) it. As an epistemologist, Gellner cannot buy this: he follows the impressive cohort of those for whom Freud's theories are a vast non-sequitur, since they illegitimately infer from an unquestionable truth - the reality of the unconscious - a set of fanciful explanations based more often than not on the crudest of unwarranted determinisms. So to Gellner what Freud really did was by no means science. Rather, he provided the unconscious "with a language, a ritual and a church."

Gellner's criticism of psychoanalysis *qua* knowledge explicitly recalls Chomsky's strictures against behaviorism. What is wrong with both Freud and Skinner is not the fact that they make determinist claims; rather, it is their failure to support the latter by identifying true causal mechanisms, convincing deep structures presented in acceptable non-anthropomorphic terms. Conventional wisdom puts Freud alongside Darwin as a great "decenterer" of man's self-image. But the truth is that Freud's story of the unconscious is too cosy, all too human, for scientific comfort.

For here lies the major intellectual weakness of psychoanalysis: despite his recognition of the mind's complexity, Freud simplified too much our idea of psychological knowledge by holding a naive realism whenever it comes to assessing the possibilities of self-apprehension. Our objective grasp of ourselves is far more arduous and problematic than Freud ever admitted. Therefore we are left with a shaky cognitive theory coupled with a notoriously doubtful therapy, which goes on comparing poorly with the performances of most non-Freudian techni-

ques and even with the mere absence of therapy. The devastating criticisms of Hans Eysenck are reinforced - on the epistemological level - by the lavish demonstrations of a Frank Cioffi of the unrepentant cognitive license of Freudian literature, and by the sharp remarks of Adolf Grunbaum on the fallacies involved in our assumptions about introspection. One of the extra interests of Gellner's book lies in the way he weaves all these lines of criticisms into his own philosophico-sociological arguments.

In the Gellnerian *oeuvre*, which roughly amounts to a sustained theory of modernity, *The Cunning of Unreason* provides the completion of his inquiry into modern ideology: it contains his critical interpretation of our culture's main individual soteriology, the counterpart, as it were, to Marxism as a collective salvation faith. As in Marxism, Gellner thinks that the key to the appeal of Freudianism comes not so much from the doctrine as from the practice it generates, once the organizational weapons (the party, the psychoanalytic guild) are set on their feet. There is always a functionalist anthropologist in Ernest Gellner, a creative disciple of Evans-Pritchard and the new Professor-designate of Anthropology at Cambridge; and it is he who believes that society normally endows what is vital for it with ritual significance. What is vital for societies is in turn both their ways of sustenance and their objects of fear and bewilderment. Industrial society, states Gellner, is an oddity in this respect since it does not normally invest its own vital spots with "sacral" meaning. Hence the gap filled by the Freudian creed.

Given the intensity of the "creedal" side of psychoanalysis, Gellner's book will probably be passionately dismissed by Freudian circles (for Freudians, too, are capable of fierce "resistance"). Gellner himself notices a curious discrepancy between established religion and Freudian faith. Now that most Christian churches in our midst are just societies for the preservation of collective folklore, inspiring neither fear nor hope any longer, Christians often welcome many a sociology of religion, as though they were anxious to find in social science some alien solace or support for the rickety foundations of their beliefs. The Freudian tribe, by contrast, still reacts angrily to any attempt to account for its functions in other terms than its own. Gellner reads it as the mark of creedal strength: Freudianism, as distinct from Christianity, is socially still in its prime, no matter how increasingly discredited its theories have become by sheer intellectual standards.

Gellner cannot be held responsible for what he does not propose to do. For instance, clearly his explanation of the role of psychoanalysis keeps at a strictly social level, a level of reasonably assumed social averages. Therefore it does not purport to explain why individuals as such choose to go into analysis. Had it done so, it would be difficult

to account in its terms for the fact that not every attention-starved person, who could afford to pay for it, seeks Freudian analysis. Like other high moments of Gellner's sociology, above all his *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), *The Cunning of Unreason* is an impressive achievement of theoretical analysis of culture, not an empirical research in social psychology.

On the other hand, one might wish that Gellner had extended his discussion in at least two directions. One is social structure. He is of course well aware that psychoanalysis remains a bourgeois cult - a custom, on both sides of the couch, of "people whose work is non-manual, and consists of manipulating people and meanings rather than things, presupposes education, verbal sophistication, the habit of persistent inner monologue, the expectations of coherence which is offended by free association and status-anxiety due to a formally egalitarian, fluid, yet prestigious and status-conscious milieu." But he does not elaborate on the intra-class differences within the Freudian believers, nor indeed does he stress this class context in its manifold symbolic projections in our narcissistic culture. It would be rewarding to have him uncovering the social underpinnings of Christopher Lasch's loose but often perceptive phenomenology of the hydra-headed narcissism of our affluent bourgeoisies.

The other area where one feels more could have been said refers to some latter-day developments in Freudian culture. While Gellner's decision to stick to orthodox Freudianism, neglecting its historical dis-sidences, is certainly wise, sharpening as it does the sociological focus of his analysis, a number of significant changes within Freudianism could have benefited from his approach, if at the cost of some conceptual adjustment. How are we to account, for instance, for a phenomenon like the vogue of Lacan? Officially a Freudian fundamentalism in point of doctrine, Lacanianism broke spectacularly with more than one Freudian tenet both in theory and therapy, going as far as to drop the hour-long session. Furthermore, it brought about a decisive blend of psychoanalytical theory and humanist lore in avant-garde literature, (pseudo-)linguistics and continental philosophy from Hegel to Heidegger - an intellectual move blatantly alien to Freud's own cast of mind, so much more materialist and positivist. What in particular is the real position of Lacan, the Freud of the humanist clerisy, amidst what Gellner has felicitously termed (in previous works) the "ironic culture" of the half-rationalized, half-romantic civilization of late industrialism?

Freud set great store by the power of scandal of psychoanalysis as a striking challenge to Victorian sexual taboos. But his countryman Wittgenstein (not exactly Gellner's favorite philosopher) saw it differently. He shrewdly observed that instead of shocking, Freudian

therapy was bound to spell a lot of charm. In the hostile time of troubles of our century, thought Wittgenstein, the myth of a warm (however beastly) unconscious would act as one's guardian angel, protecting each of us from the excessive impersonality of our social environment. Such is the insight to which Gellner has now given the backing of a full sociological argument. That he does so in his customary graphic style, enlivened by a deft use of metaphor and his knack for witty epigrammatic formula, can only add to the distinction of this cogent essay.