

David James Fisher

The Free Clinics of the Psychoanalytic Movement

DURING THE DECADES between the world wars, a network of free psychoanalytic clinics in Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, Zagreb, Moscow, Frankfurt, Trieste, and Paris came to embody the heart and soul of the international psychoanalytic movement. These clinics (described in Elizabeth Ann Danto's excellent 2005 study, *Freud's Free Clinics: Psychoanalysis & Social Justice, 1918-1938*), did not represent a "left opposition" within psychoanalysis as much as it represented the social democratic mainstream; even apolitical figures in the analytic movement gravitated to social democratic ideas and aspirations in this fertile period. The establishment of the free clinics was part of a broader attempt by the second generation of analysts (those born around 1900) to democratize medicine and society.

Analysts in Central Europe were politicized by World War I and radicalized by the outbreak of social revolutions in Hungary and Germany for a brief moment in 1919, by the communal experiments of Socialist-Zionist *kibbutzim*, and above all, by the social and sexual experimentation catalyzed by the Russian Revolution. Many of these analysts embraced an egalitarian community spirit. They viewed healthy sexuality as good for the community and good for workers. Healthy sexuality generally fused with a pro-family orientation and with some movement toward gender equality: Women were to be as emancipated



Wilhelm Reich

sexually as were men. Children had to be protected within the family framework, the child's right to a safe environment being one of the more revolutionary positions articulated by Julius Tandler and the Austrian Social Democrats. One of their slogans beautifully captures the ethic: "He who builds palaces for children tears down the walls of prisons."

Accepting a definition of human beings as social creatures, and believing in the social responsibility of psychoanalysts to the wider community, these analysts designed the free clinics to provide mental health services to poor

individuals who would not ordinarily have access to psychoanalysis. The free clinics, as Danto emphasizes, were flexible, experimental, and less hierarchical and bureaucratic than contemporary American analytic institutes. Indeed, a rupture occurred after World War II, when the émigrés from Central Europe found themselves in significantly different cultural and political contexts in both England and America. In the U.S., in addition to the dominance of medical orthodoxy and severe opposition to lay analysis (that is, psychoanalysis conducted by non-medical personnel), there was a conservative climate of Cold War thinking, which made it seem un-American to combine a radical social-work perspective, a committed European sensibility, and provision of mental health care to poor people.

At the free clinics in the 1920s and '30s, the atmosphere was relaxed, and demonstrable warmth existed between analyst and analysand. Reading rooms filled with analytic literature were open to both. Because candidates (analyst trainees) were themselves offered free or low-fee analysis and often received free supervision and referrals from their supervisors, an excellent *esprit de corps* existed. In creating a climate of mutual collaboration and a shared feeling of participating in an unusual adventure, psychoanalysts in the free clinics united around a common social and therapeutic cause. Of course, private bickering and rivalries nevertheless developed, particularly around "transference" themes — for example, of vying for the admiration of Freud and other senior members of the psychoanalytic community.

Still, the free clinics cannot be dismissed as utopian. They linked creativity and experimentation with practicality. They had strong popular appeal as well as intellectual appeal. People in trouble flocked to them seeking help.

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The local press wrote favorably about them. Artists and intellectuals were impressed by their outreach.

Not surprisingly, lay analysis was encouraged at the free clinics, though it ran into considerable opposition from conservative psychiatric associations, which periodically attempted to shut down the clinics. Central European psychiatry (as opposed to psychoanalysis) in the interwar years tended to be reactionary, nationalist, Catholic, anti-Jewish, and profoundly opposed to the penetration and diffusion of analytic ideas and practices. Many psychiatric practices were brutal, including the treatment of patients with electric shock to the point of death or suicide, the placing of patients in isolation cells and straitjackets, and the use of other disciplinary measures.

At the free clinics, clinical experimentation was broadly supported, including child observation and child analysis. Melanie Klein, for example, who prior to 1920 had undertaken her first child analysis with her own children in Budapest, furthered many of her techniques at the Berlin free clinic. There were also efforts to develop forms of marriage and couples counseling and crisis intervention, using analytic principles. Psychoanalytic research was based on the gathering and organizing of clinical data. The rigorous psychoanalytic training of candidates by veteran analysts, as well as the scientific growth of the clinical discipline, were buttressed through this research. Psychoanalytic technique was safeguarded and preserved, including the reaffirmation of patient privacy and confidentiality. Trust between analyst and analysand was emphasized.

The free clinics sponsored the treatment of severe mental disorders, including borderline and psychotic illness, which greatly broadened the scope and practice of psychoanalysis

beyond neurotic disorders. In Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest, debates were held about attempts to standardize technique, which might justify the curriculum of analytic institutes but also risked the imposition of dogma and rigidity. Some, like Sándor Ferenczi, urged analysts to be spontaneous, warm, alive, and engaged with their patients, to operate in a relaxed and elastic manner based on a case-by-case assessment of specific patient needs, with special emphasis placed on those who had been traumatized.

To maintain a position of advocacy for the patient, the analysts at the free clinics designed a patient-centered approach. An integral characteristic of the free clinic movement was the volunteerism of the analysts and their willingness to provide financial sup-

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port for these clinics. Freud himself donated money collected for his seventieth birthday in 1926, and at other times, to the free clinics. In Berlin, analysts were expected to contribute four percent of their total income to support the clinic.

Candidates were asked to work at the clinics for two years without remuneration. In return for their sacrifice, they received broad exposure to the varieties of psychopathology, and opportunities for analytic supervision from experienced analysts, often free of charge. They learned developmental perspectives from Anna Freud, August Aichhorn, Willi Hoffer, Siegfried Bernfeld and other analysts who were pioneering methods of working analytically with children. The ethos was to respect their clinic patients and to practice with the highest degree of professionalism and seriousness toward them, just as they would toward

their higher-paying patients in private practice. Critics of psychoanalysis have often commented upon the apparent elitism and exclusionary class biases of analytic practice; the history of the free clinics documents a vast social experiment attempting to universalize analytic treatment.

Freud had carefully outlined his position on fees for analysis in “On Beginning the Treatment” (1913). There he advised analysts to be candid and unashamed about their fee for services, not to retreat into prudishness, inconsistency, or hypocrisy regarding payment. Analysts needed money for their self-preservation. Psychoanalysis was not a philanthropic activity. Analysts were urged to value their time, to bill on a consistent monthly basis,

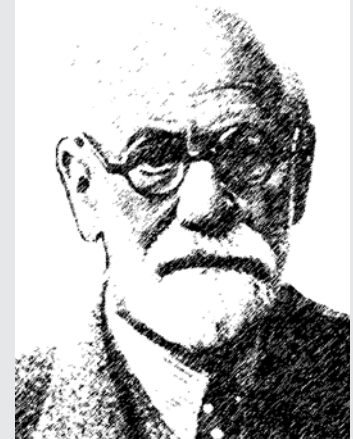
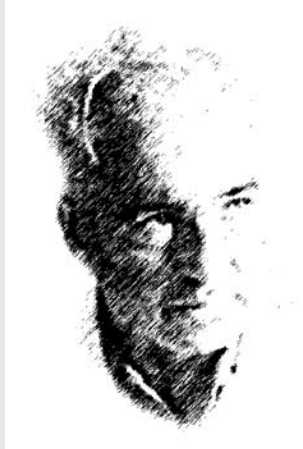
and to function in their own specialty as if they were surgeons, rendering a unique and highly skilled service.

Money, Freud argued, had to be addressed in the psychoanalytic context with the same spirit of honesty as sexuality. Patients, he said, did not always find that treatment was enhanced if a low fee is asked for and granted. Freud anticipated that analysts accepting low fees would resent their patients and possibly feel exploited by them. Through his own experiments with treating patients for free, he concluded that gratuitous treatment increased a patient’s resistances, that it exacerbated Oedipal dynamics, and intensified ambivalence about seeking and receiving help. Moreover, eliminating the fee might remove the relationship too far from the real world, where a patient might lack incentives to terminate the treatment.

Yet even Freud in his 1913 paper

Reich, Freud and the Politics of Psychoanalysis

DURING THE 1920S, Wilhelm Reich saw sexual freedom as an issue that was both political and personal. As he developed his own brand of socially-oriented psychoanalysis, he began to challenge existing political, medical, and academic traditions. He also developed a critique of psychoanalysis from within the movement. As the author of *Character Analysis* (1933) and *The Function of the Orgasm* (1927), Reich functioned as an articulate, at times abrasive, advocate of sexual revolution. He equated health



with untrammelled sexual expression, endorsing genitality, orgasmic potency, and free consensual sexual expression so long as it did no harm to others. Reich posed trenchant questions about monogamy, about the dulling and routinized aspects of married life, about the process of desexualization that he heard about from his patients and informants.

Reich was part of the left opposition within Austrian Social Democracy in the 1920s. In 1930 he moved to Berlin and joined the German Communist Party. This outraged and frightened many psychoanalysts. Soon Reich began to tie sexual repression to the political

apathy of the masses and their tendency to accommodate to the status quo. He expressed an early, penetrating understanding of the irrational roots underlying the mass appeal and dangers of Hitlerian fascism. He would synthesize these perspectives in his book, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), a book of astonishing insight into the collective psychological power of international fascism and virulent anti-Semitism.

Reich advocated the rights of children and mothers, supporting legalized abortions, contraception, and adolescent sexuality. He blended forms of counseling with radical social work perspectives, propaganda, and sexual education. He came to emphasize prevention over individual treatment modalities. Reich also understood the economic dependence of women as feeding the multiple aspects of misery on the everyday level, sexual, social, educational, and vocational.

Reich's rhetoric about sexual expressiveness for all, including the young, the unmarried, and women, upset

qualified his opposition to free treatment by saying that he had achieved "excellent results" with certain deserving people, that free treatment had been no obstacle to the desired outcome of restored health, efficiency, and improved earning capacity. Regarding his own practice of treating patients, Freud apparently operated with a Robin Hood model: taking from the rich (charging high fees) and giving to the poor (charging moderate fees or seeing them for free). He gave money to people in need, and whether or not they were or had been patients

was not of particular concern to him in this respect; his financial generosity was legendary and consistent over several decades. He also pointed out in his self-analysis that his generosity had its roots in the poverty of his own early childhood.

At the free clinics, continuous case conferences were created by Wilhelm Reich, a figure who has been demonized and pathologized in certain histories. Psychologizing critics tend to trivialize Reich's politics and dismiss his fertile ideas, underestimating his

seminal contributions to the early psychoanalytic movement, yet Reich was highly respected in Vienna in the 1920s. He conducted some of the earliest investigations into the defensive maneuvers of the ego, developing his own form of ego psychology. He was considered a crackerjack clinician with an uncanny feel for unconscious dynamics. His students regarded him as a terrific teacher. Reich hoped that case presentations would engender heated clinical debates. He also had the courage to discuss treatment failures and to present his own clinical

both his constituencies, the organized political left and institutional psychoanalysis. Many analysts, after all, remained tied to Victorian attitudes and bourgeois life styles. Reich stirred up a hornet's nest with his searching critique of sexual monogamy and his assault on bourgeois respectability, the sanctity of the family, and conventional sexual morality. As a spokesperson for the leading edge of psychoanalysis and Marxism in this period, Reich raised the specter of both social and sexual revolution. He became too much for everyone, and was expelled from the Communist International in 1933 for being too Freudian and from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1934 for being too Marxist.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud took sharp issue with all utopian viewpoints and offered a searing attack on sexual and social revolution — in short, on Reich and the Freudian left. The text emerged from Freud's growing awareness of the rise of fascist mass movements, including those of a particularly virulent anti-Semitic variety, and was informed by the massacres and mass horrors of the First World War. Freud wrote eloquently of the lethal potentialities of modern science and technology — even raising the possibility of world destruction — and expressed his increasing pessimism about the inherent aggressiveness of human beings.

Reich considered the text a frontal attack on him. In arguing that civilization made individuals miserable, Freud conceived of no possibility of overcoming the frustrations and restrictions of modern civilization other than through sublimation, that is, the rechanneling of powerful instinctual urges into cultural, scientific, and artistic activities. Deeply pessimistic about the individual's conflict with society, Freud posited that sexuality would be severely impaired and happiness diminished by modern civilization.

As for Communism, Freud disagreed with the assumption that private ownership of property was at the root of what corrupted man's nature. Socialist conceptions of human nature were built on a naïve belief in the essential goodness of man, he believed. Freud asserted that human aggression existed before capitalist economic systems were formed, that violence and hostility were built into human nature, embedded in our own psyches, and that modern civilization's task was to contain the outbreak of cruelty and aggressiveness. Psychoanalysis, for Freud, was not compatible with Marxism; he was skeptical about the possible mediations between the two clashing world views and explanatory models.

Moreover, Freud had deep reservations about aligning psychoanalysis to either a political party or a political philosophy. To safeguard its legitimacy and credibility as a scientific method with therapeutic concerns, Freud insisted that psychoanalysis remain above political parties and that analysts remain suspicious of totalizing world views.

—DAVID JAMES FISHER

work, not fearing the vulnerability that often accompanies such presentations; Reich assumed analysts could learn more about the analytic process by studying errors and blind spots than by exploring successful case histories. The clinical case presentation still persists as an essential part of the teaching methodology at contemporary analytic institutes.

At the Frankfurt clinic, analysts established a potent connection to the Institute for Social Research, thus initiating dialogue between clinical and theoretical psychoanalysis and

the brilliant critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. This alliance, lasting only a few years in Europe before being relocated to Columbia University, proved to be highly generative in terms of the quality and quantity of work by this exceptional coterie of intellectuals, which included Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse. Figures like Ernst Simmel, Otto Fenichel, and Fromm especially understood the possibilities of cross fertilization of many disciplines in the human and social sciences that

might result if this alliance could be forged.

Karl Marx had condensed the core humanism of his philosophy into one sentence: "From each according to his capacities, to each according to his needs." The free clinic movement updated that doctrine by advocating help for the poor, indigent, underprivileged, unemployed, underemployed, and marginalized, and stating that specific diagnosis and the particular needs of the individual mattered most, not the individual's ability to pay for the services. This shifted the model

formerly based on the principles of an individual medical entrepreneur to one based on service and responsibility to the community.

Building a conceptual and practical bridge between Freud and Marx was Reich's major project. Charismatic, a gifted orator, with a deep sense of humanity, he attempted to link the practices and theories of both.

Freud's main focus in the period between the wars was less on clinical or therapeutic outcomes than on saving the "cause" of the psychoanalytic movement by popularizing psychoanalytic ideas and practices in the world. After the victory of the Nazis in Central Europe, Freud hoped to preserve psychoanalysis as a viable entity in exile.

In Berlin after the Nazi takeover in early 1933, Ernst Simmel, a Jew and a prominent Socialist, was arrested and forced to flee for his life to Switzerland. Martin Grotjahn's own four-month analysis with Simmel came to a harrowing conclusion that year when during a session a friend alerted Simmel by telephone that the Gestapo would be sweeping his neighborhood, arresting psychoanalysts. Grotjahn had to help his analyst escape by pushing him out a window to a backyard route.

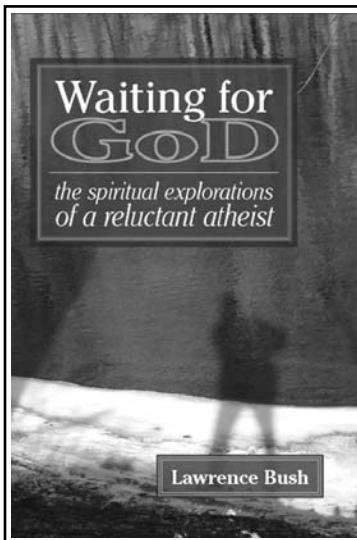
Other leftwing analysts were threatened, harassed, and jailed by the authoritarian and racist politics of the Nazi government. The Berlin psychoanalytic community was rapidly "Aryanized" and Jews, homosexuals, and Marxists were expelled. As the process of Nazification accelerated from 1933 to 1935, the Nazi slogans for psychoanalysis as "Jewish-Marxist filth" became transformed into institutional practice. Filth had to be cleansed. Renaming it the Göring Institute, the Nazis purged the Berlin Society of all Jewish practitioners of psychoanalysis, leaving the institute under the direction of Felix Boehm and Carl Muller-Braunschweig, both of whom subscribed to the fascist ideology and would sign their letters with "Heil Hitler!" Freud's books were prohibited and subsequently burned. Carl Gustav Jung lent the prestige of his name, in addition to furnishing a spiritual-ideological framework, to the Göring Institute in his role as director of the German Medical Society for Psychotherapy in these years.

Similarly, after the Nazi takeover of Austria in March, 1938, the Vienna Society for Psychoanalysis expelled a hundred "non-Aryan members," leaving behind only two gentiles from its original coterie. Carl Muller-Braunschweig presided over the dis-

mantling and ultimate "Aryanization" of psychoanalysis in Vienna. His actions effectively destroyed the Vienna Ambulatorium, abruptly concluding its history of the free clinics at the same time.

The free clinics were exported in a considerably limited way to England and America. Only Chicago, under the influence of Franz Alexander, and Topeka, Kansas, under the influence of the Menningers, were open to the European perspective, became enclaves of progressivism, and established free outpatient clinics. Clearly the existing American tradition of medical hegemony, conservatism, and individual, professional, entrepreneurial activity would trump, or coöpt, the leftwing practices and spirit of the free clinics.

The story of the free clinics is nevertheless one of hope, outreach, prevention, and the self-confidence of the psychoanalytic movement, despite the presence in the period between the wars of serious opposition and political impediments. In contemplating this movement, we help ourselves to imagine ways to strengthen and vitalize psychoanalysis in contemporary urban centers, where many social problems persist, and where analysts sometimes fail to engender any strategies for positive solutions. ■



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