

RESTORING THE SUBVERSIVE EDGE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS: A CRITIQUE OF  
RICHARDS' "THE CRISIS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS: THE DANGER OF IDEOLOGY"

By David James Fisher, Ph.D.

With his customary vitality and intellectual breadth, Richards' presentation, "Psychoanalysis in Crisis: The Danger of Ideology," is actually four papers in one. It is a diagnosis of the malaise of contemporary psychoanalysis. It is a polemic against BoPS (the Board on Professional Standards) and the ideological authoritarianism of the current system of governance of the American Psychoanalytic Association, particularly its policies on certification and the selection of training analysts. It is a personal memoir of his own experiences at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and the defeat of the Brenner amendment of 1973. And lastly, it is a utopian manifesto calling for openness, democracy, freedom, creativity, and imagination in psychoanalysis, especially in the transmission of its practice and theory.

I have little to add to Richards' critique of BoPS. That this group is authoritarian is clear and evident, amply well documented. More importantly, I accept his notion that the transmission of ideology results in the stultification of thought, violations of psychoanalytic methodology, and the collapse of critical analysis. As dialectical theory becomes ossified into dogma, sectarianism becomes endemic, and polarization produces splits within the organization. Confidence, enthusiasm, and competence, as well as hard earned pride in psychoanalytic forms of knowledge, give way to demoralization and fatigue; apathy replaces active engagement. BoPS has been intransigent, petty, litigious, haughty, oligarchical, and Machiavellian. To

reflect on the power dynamics of this use of ideology can help to explain the political history of psychoanalysis in terms of its recurrent splits, its history of purges and exclusions. There are serious losses involved as ideology replaces independent and subversive thinking, including the waning of initiative, free wheeling discussion, the encouragement of research, of audacious and imaginative thinking, and of making alliances with allied disciplines and the universities. Not least, we observe the suppression of a scientific attitude and the triumph of a pernicious form of anti-intellectualism.

But now BoPS is apparently gone, dissolving itself. I was planning to argue that the politics of BoPS was largely irrelevant to the understanding of the crisis of psychoanalysis. There are other factors that contribute to this crisis.

Richards clearly defines ideology as anti-scientific; it works against exploration, empirical testing, while denigrating challenges to central features of analytic clinical and theoretical work. This is of course one definition of ideology. There are others.

Richards is undoubtedly correct about his description of the contemporary crisis of psychoanalysis. Yet, what he diagnoses are the symptoms of that malaise, not the underlying dynamics. Let me briefly outline some of my own ideas on the deeper reasons or causes of this crisis, borrowing from George Lichtheim, Karl Mannheim, Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Russell Jacoby, and Jacques Lacan.

The term ideology dates back to 1795 and the founding of the Institut de France (the French Institute). The task of the ideologues connected to the Institute was to transmit the guiding ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, particularly a moderate liberalism associated with the Directory. They privileged

freedom of thought and expression. As followers of the Enlightenment, they were critical of the ideology of Christianity and other organized religions. Similarly they rejected metaphysics. Historically, the ideologues of the French Revolution and Napoleonic era were tough forerunners of positivism and Comte, the prevailing scientific worldview of the nineteenth-century. Originally, having an ideological attitude meant a concern with ideas and the placing of ideal aims (their own) ahead of the material interests of the post-revolutionary society. Note the attitude of self-interest and idealism embedded in the concept. Ideologues insisted not only that their ideas were stronger and more cogent than their adversaries, but also those ideas were more significant than material reality.

Let me briefly review how the concept of ideology has evolved. Ideology can refer to false consciousness or imperfect consciousness. With Hegel, the left Hegelians, and Marx, unmasking became the key instrument of the critique of ideology. Critiques of ideology meant stripping the mask from respectability, from bourgeois morality, from idealist metaphysics, from Christianity and other forms of mystified consciousness. With Max Weber, ideology was thought of both as the consciousness of an epoch and the false consciousness of men unaware of their true role in society. For Weber, ideology can distort or reflect the reality it describes.

For figures like Nietzsche and twentieth-century existential thinkers, ideology was a cover for distinct forms of individual relativism and subjectivism; radical perspectivism could unmask these shams and disguises, operating with a profound suspicion toward surface appearances. In this version, all thought can be

considered ideological, whose unconscious function was to serve the life process; men veiled their real biological drives and goals under idealist costumes.

With twentieth-century Marxist thinkers like Lukacs, Adorno, and Horkheimer, the concept of totality, the concept of a world system, was used to transcend all positivistic worldviews. Again, if ideology is a form of false consciousness, a mode of mistaking the part from the whole, the advocates of ideology were guilty of thinking incorrectly. This critique of ideology meant seeing through the veil of illusions, of uncovering false ways of thinking and of exposing lies and deceptions. Equating ideology with false consciousness permits the critic of ideology to do the work of debunking through devastating critical analysis. Ideology then can refer to a total structure of a mind, an epoch, or a group mind; a suspicious approach reveals the distortions, the conscious lies, the half conscious deceptions and unwitting disguises condensed in an ideology.

Underpinning Richards' paper is a distinct ambivalence toward Freud. He sees Freud as the founder of a political movement, suppressing dissent, purging heretical members, and requiring adherence to core ideas of his writings, specifically the centrality of the Oedipus complex and the critical importance of libido theory. Above all, he criticizes Freud for his authoritarianism. Yet, he also views Freud positively, as someone who responded to criticism by revising his ideas, introducing innovative perspectives, producing significant new works, and revising his metapsychology and theory of technique. One could view the history of psychoanalysis as an exploration of ambivalence toward Freud. Let's remember that Freud was ambivalent toward himself, continuing to revise and reevaluate his

theory, engaging in continuous self-analysis, and remaining aware of the incomplete and fragmentary nature of psychoanalytic knowledge.

In the important final chapter of his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* of 1933, "The Question of A *Weltanschauung*," Freud declared that psychoanalysis was not and could not be a *Weltanschauung*. In contrast, it was the science of the exploration of the unconscious, that is, it was a branch of psychology and its practice and mode of operation were scientific. A *Weltanschauung*, he said, was an integrated view of the universe that solves all problems of existence, leaving no question unanswered. Contrasting psychoanalytic methodology with religion, philosophy, and political anarchism and Bolshevism, Freud argued that psychoanalysis was neither designed to answer all the issues of existence, nor to soothe and console. A *Weltanschauung* corresponded to the wishful, childish fantasies of all human beings, of their desire to feel secure, to learn how to deal with their unruly passions, conflicting self-interests and displaceable emotions. In opposition, psychoanalysis militantly defined itself as opposed to illusions. Moreover, Freud asserted that psychoanalysis was a young science, still incomplete and neither all comprehensive, nor self-contained, or systematic. Psychoanalysis, in short, was not an ideology, subordinating itself to the scientific and empirical search for the truth. Its chief weapon was the reason or intellect of the psychoanalytic practitioner. Freud exhorted his colleagues to be "relentlessly critical."

This position by the late Freud was both anti-utopian and anti-ideological.

Now clearly Freud did not always practice what he preached, especially in terms of the politics of the psychoanalytic movement. In my own researches on the relationship between Freud, Jung, and Spielrein, I recently discovered a letter to Freud from Eugen Bleuler, effectively resigning from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Dated 1 March 1911, Bleuler protested the paranoid and exclusionary policy of psychoanalysis, writing “Who is not with us is against us, the principle of all or nothing is necessary for religious sects and for political parties...but for science I consider it harmful.” (Cited in John Launer, *Sex Vs. Survival: The Life and Ideas of Sabina Spielrein*, 2015, p. 148). Freud did not reciprocate Bleuler’s trust in scientific dialogue. Ironically, Bleuler was the theorist of ambivalence. Other examples of his exclusionary tendencies can be documented. But to add to the complexity of this issue, there are also examples of Freud sustaining warm personal contact with psychiatrists and critics who disagreed with his work; the case of the existential psychoanalyst Ludwig Binswanger comes to mind.

I prefer another approach to Freud, one that is critical and historical. I personally do not blame Freud for the sterility of orthodox psychoanalytic thought or for the loss of the authority and prestige of the entire analytic enterprise. He has been dead for seventy-six years. Freud was not a Freudian. Rather than debunk Freud, I prefer the option of revising and preserving the subversive spirit of Freud’s writing. Freud’s radicalism emerged from his understanding of false consciousness, from his ability to unmask human self-deceptions. As a radical thinker and one who practiced a hermeneutic of suspicion, we need to maintain and update his legacy of

boldness, freethinking, his attack on taboos and conformist ideas. Freud was in essence a reformer working for a rational and ethical reform of mankind.

The crisis of psychoanalysis may be linked to a larger American dilemma of the rise and consolidation of oligarchy in American politics. Psychoanalytic institutions mirror or reflect oligarchical structures in society. Let's consider the upcoming presidential elections of 2016; each presidential candidate will spend between one to two billion dollars for their campaigns. Because of the recent Supreme Court decision and the influence of the Super Pacs, billionaires, often with idiosyncratic and reactionary ideologies, will have an enormous influence on the outcome of this election, not to mention state and local elections. Big capital is perverting American democracy, corrupting democratic structures.

Institutional rigidity, authoritarianism, and oligarchy are signs of a larger external and internal crisis in American society, not just an issue within establishment psychoanalysis. On a disciplinary level, it is the anxiety of the psychoanalysts themselves, the waning of confidence, the loss of authority, and fears about the present and future. The revolutionary period of psychoanalysis was prior to World War I. After the Great War and World War II, the middle classes became more conservative and more conformist. Most patients and practitioners derive from the middle classes, sharing many of the anxieties, prejudices, and aspirations of their class. As psychoanalysis embraced the ideology of middle class liberalism, it lost its subversive edge as a critical discipline, one that stood for radical changes of the individual and the need for society to be modified to adapt to the individual, subjective needs of its citizens. Analysts became defensive and cautious, adopting

many of the precepts of bourgeois respectability, including the web of hypocrisy about sexuality and aggression, about the dysfunction of the family, about the pathology of intimate relationships, and the prevalence of narcissistic modes of living and interacting. The old psychoanalytic dimension of honesty, of confronting dark and disturbing unconscious aspects of the personality, gave way to dishonesty.

American psychoanalysis became medicalized, professionalized, and bureaucratized, taking a conservative turn. As analysts shifted away from a theory of the unconscious, the discipline changed from a radical, penetrating, and liberating one to one more stagnant and conformist. Psychoanalysis became reconstituted as a substitute for religion, politics, and philosophy; it became an esoteric sect that developed its own arcane jargon, with its secret and often mind numbing rituals of initiation. The graduate analyst would then function as a self-satisfied priest, or a detached, smug, arrogant scientist, posing as if he were all knowing. Theory became reduced to a number of banal formulas, technique was standardized, and practice became ritualized, focusing on treating people's behavior, as a means of re-adapting the individual to his social environment.

Because of the hostility and misunderstanding surrounding psychoanalysis in the culture, because other therapeutic modalities challenged its dominance, analysts became anxious, searching for protection by an organization such as the American or the International. Members became obedient to the organization. They idealized Freud as if he had discovered the whole truth about human psychology rather than accepting the fragmentary and tentative character of analytic knowledge. Members of the organization were not encouraged to think independently or courageously,



leading to a diminishing of creative clinical thinking. With the triumph of bureaucracy and dogmatism, discipleship replaced radical thinking and independence of mind. Some of this may be built into the system of training analysis and of unconscious identifications of analysands with their analysts. Psychoanalysis became co-opted by consumer society, resulting in a further alienation of thought and a stifling of research. The Internet age has intensified the emphasis on speed, instant gratification, and the external, leaving little room for deeper forms of reflection and mindfulness toward the inner world.

Meanwhile, the psychoanalytic left became a minority, the tradition of Siegfried Bernfeld, Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and R.D. Laing forgotten, misrepresented, or pathologized. Radicals became marginalized in local institutes, not given teaching positions, excluded from committee chairmanships, and deprived of referrals. This served a disciplinary function, reinforcing compliance and conformity.

Psychoanalysis is indeed in crisis. Will that crisis lead to a slow decay or death, or can psychoanalysis be renewed? Our task is to find ways to keep people healthy and to permit them to feel alive in a sick society. We know that the family and society produce psychogenic conditions in man, including alienation, anxiety, loneliness, fears of feeling deeply, insensitivity toward other human beings, and the absence of joy. I remain cautiously optimistic about the future of psychoanalysis. As long as people value understanding, the potential healing capacity of a long-term intimate relationship, as long as they search for meaning and coherence in their lives, psychoanalysis will find its place and thrive.

I want to express my gratitude to Arnie Richards for his stimulating paper. Good papers raise rather than resolve significant issues. His study does precisely that.

Questions to ponder:

- 1) Is the critique of ideology an ideology?
- 2) If ideology is a form of false or imperfect consciousness what constitutes true consciousness? How do we develop a method of differentiating true from false consciousness?
- 3) How do we implement changes to democratize psychoanalysis, making it a true meritocracy, a genuinely free association?
- 4) Are there other tactics available to revitalize psychoanalysis other than the reformist solutions, namely opening up nominating processes and free elections?
- 5) Is psychoanalysis curable? How can we change the form and content of psychoanalytic education, the transmission of the discipline, so it does not indoctrinate its new members? Is the malaise of psychoanalysis, including oligarchy, linked to the sickness of American society?
- 6) How do we restore and privilege the subversive edge of psychoanalysis, preserving and updating the humanistic core of its approach to suffering human beings?

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