

Psychological War

by Claire Pagès

The history of psychoanalysis is made up of violent controversies that have much to do with Freud himself—a figure who is both hated and revered. But overemphasizing these conflicts can overlook the fact that psychoanalysis also consists of a practice, which exists independently of Freudianism and anti-Freudianism.

Reviewed: Samuel Lézé, *Freud Wars. Un siècle de scandales* (Freud Wars: A Century of Scandals) Paris, PUF, 2017, 177 p., 16 €.

Mapping the Critique of Freudianism

One of the great merits of *Freud Wars* is that it completely breaks the silence surrounding anti-Freudianism, going beyond the defensive attitude it often triggers. While some count on the fact that each scandal relating to psychoanalysis inevitably subsides—a way of “kill[ing] [it] with silence” (p. 99)—the author gives full scope to this dimension of psychoanalysis—the hatred it has never ceased to arouse—by making of its critical reception a genuine object of scholarly study. He creates a map of these controversies, focusing specifically on the reception of psychoanalysis in polemical works that seek to destroy, assassinate, and fully discredit the incriminated object. This map begins by assessing a series of scandals from 1912 to 2012 that are best described as “polemical cycles” rather than critical “incidents,” and which make it possible, moreover, to identify each successive wave, as well as the critical common denominators.

Samuel Lézé is compelled to distinguish between two gestures or two positions: the critic and the opponent. It is one of the strengths of psychoanalysis’ critics that they distinguish between Freud and psychoanalysis and between Freud and his ideas, and that they can differentiate between psychoanalysis’ various currents and schools and focus on

institutions and theories rather than individuals. In addition to a desire to destroy, psychoanalysis' opponents seem to share one conviction: that psychoanalysis is wrong "because of Freud" (p. 103). Their arguments are less theoretical than *ad hominem*. This distinction is illuminating, the difference between these two approaches is clear, and it allows the author to classify the secondary literature and establish a coherent body of texts to address (excluding critical texts and including polemical writings). That said, it is not always self-evident how to distinguish between these two types of arguments. For example, Adolf Grünbaum's books, *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis* (1984) and *Testing Psychoanalysis* (1993) are critical tomes that seek to destroy psychoanalysis. Another example, Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's famous *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), contains polemical features—it offers a caricature, after all, of some classic psychoanalytic themes, notably the Oedipus complex—even as it offers a very powerful critical reading of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis that calls for an alternative—namely, schizo-analysis.

In any event, the mapping proposed in the book is based on impressive research, a glimpse of which can be found in the forty-page "bibliographical chronology" included as an annex. Nor is this documentation in vain: it is premised on the idea that intellectual polemics are "signs of the instauration of new norms and moral values in society." The study of the "Freud Wars" is a good way of grasping the latter, and, in the process, "of understanding ourselves" (p. 6). The book thus raises (rather than addresses in a detailed manner) the question of what the "Freud Wars" can teach us about "changing perceptions of mental health today" (p. 20) or "our conception of the individual" (p. 101). This polemic cycle suggests, it argues, that there is a tension between two moral conceptions of the individual, one emphasizing the mind's transparency and power, the other its opaqueness and relative impotence.

Freudianism and Anti-Freudianism: An Endless Dialectic?

The book allows one to consider the psychoanalytic movement's dialectical relationship with its most fervent opponents as a full-fledged feature of its history. In this context, the category of "anti-Freudianism" is defined not so much positively—that is, in terms of a distinct, coherent theory that anti-Freudians share—as negatively and relationally: what characterizes anti-Freudianism is a specific kind of "symbolic interaction" (p. 98) with Freudianism. Despite its heterogeneous character, it is, on the one hand, always personally directed against Freud while, on the other hand, living quite literally off the existence, persistence, and pugnacity of its Freudian enemy.

The anti-Freudian "polemicist" and the Freudian "prophet" end up understanding one another in identical terms: as scapegoats of a dominant system, be it Freudian or anti-Freudian. And it is unclear who has taken the personalization-personification of Freud the

farthest: is it the anti-Freudians, convinced that, by questioning Freud's personality, they could undermine the entire psychoanalytic edifice, or is it the Freudians, through their use and abuse of Freud's authority and paternity?

Freudianism's fate seems tied, on the one hand, to a polemical cycle, which has paradoxically never ceased to be psychoanalysis' preferred form of publicity, even though the whole point of these polemics is to attack it. Furthermore, anti-Freudianism's virulence—which is analyzed as emblematic of the resistance to psychanalysis's secrets¹—corroborates, as it were, Freudianism's value: if the former contests the latter so vigorously, it is because psychoanalysis is a genuinely disturbing theory, and anti-Freudianism seeks to resist and repress the secrets that Freudianism has discovered. Anti-Freudianism exists, in short, because psychoanalysis sees things the way they are. How fortunate for Freudians that anti-Freudians exist!

On the other hand, anti-Freudians not only dedicate their lives to Freud, but their entire professional careers are built on his existence.² For their careers to prosper, their opponent must be more than an illusion. He must be made into a hero, albeit a negative one, if the war is to continue.

The Three Great Narcissistic Wounds

Freud maintained that human narcissism "has been three times severely wounded by the researches of science": the cosmological blow (due to Copernicus' discoveries), the biological blow (following the discoveries of Darwin and his followers), and the psychological blow, resulting from his own research ("One of the Difficulties of Psychoanalysis" [1917], trans. Joan Riviere, in *Character and Culture* [New York: Collier Books, 1963], 185). While the Earth's peripheral position and the theory of evolution now seem less offensive—acknowledging them can, at least, insofar as they represent progress in our understanding of the causes of things, gratify human intelligence—the psychological wound, which is tied to the assertion of the sexuality's determining character, as well as to the existence of

¹ Freud offered an explanation of the negative reception that his research received, one that did not simply invoke human reticence in the face of the new: "One of the first applications of psycho-analysis was to teach us to understand the opposition offered to us by our contemporaries because we practiced psycho-analysis." *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964, 1965 [1933]), 179. If his contemporaries rejected psychoanalysis, it was because they *repressed* the decisive role of sexuality in their own lives. Their resistance confirmed the aptness of psychoanalysis' concepts—notably that of repression—as well as its theses, such as the preponderant place of sexual factors in psychic destiny.

² That enemies keep their opponents alive and that the respective traits of a pair of protagonists can become confused is a fact that has long been noticed. One thinks of the famous passage in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* in which Tocqueville emphasizes the fact that the revolution, at times, borrowing characteristics that in other instances it had fought against: it "became a sort of new religion, imperfect, it is true, without God, worship, or future life" and it "cover[ed] the earth with its soldiers, its apostles, and its martyrs." *The Old Regime and the Revolution* [1856], trans. George Gerald Reisman, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/tocqueville-the-old-regime-and-the-revolution-1856>.

unconscious psychological processes, seems to cut much deeper and to be impossible to overcome.

Nothing New Under the Sun?

If this dialectic fulfills Freud's prophecy, which diagnosed opposition to psychoanalysis as a form of resistance to the "third blow" it had inflicted on human narcissism, and if this adversity paradoxically confirms psychoanalysis in its certitudes, its resurgence in the late twentieth century seems, however, to have produced other effects, which prevent one from seeing it simply as a bizarre and unavoidable intellectual conflict. This never-ending war is not lacking in repercussions. They are apparent, first of all, in the institution of psychoanalysis itself. In the wake of the anti-Freudians' repeated challenges to the effectiveness of psychoanalytic practice, many practitioners trained in psychoanalysis have modified it, collaborating, for instance, with therapists of other schools. The result, for psychoanalysis, has been significant theoretical as well as practical adjustments. Some in the psychoanalytical community have reacted to attacks not with denial or silence, but by reflecting on how social factors impact psychoanalysis' theory and practice: many analysts have taken into consideration such factors as work, precariousness, situations of extreme violence, age, resources, and cultural context. These exploratory considerations coexist, of course, with traditional ways of practicing psychoanalytic therapy (such as undertaking an analysis with a psychoanalyst), on the one hand, and, on the other, traditionalist discourses that, at times, are advanced in psychoanalysis' name (one thinks of those that were recently heard during the French debate on same-sex marriage).

Consequently, the portrait of reactive Freudianism sketched in this book—which presents Freudians as deaf to challenges of any kind, whether they concern the effectiveness of their clinics, the organization of therapy, the validity of Freudian theory, psychoanalysis' novel-like history, or other issues—does not match up with the plurality of psychoanalytic practices. This, it will be said, is not the goal of the book, which presents its protagonists as engaged in a Homeric struggle. Yet it must nevertheless be emphasized that this war—in which the opponents pull no punches—obscures the complexity of psychoanalysis as it actually exists, which unquestionably has other faces besides Freudianism. The author himself notes that the anti-Freudians' obsession with the person of Freud spares them from having "to confront the clinical and contemporary reality of Freudianism" (p. 99). Thus psychoanalysis does not only exist as a "grand interpretative narrative" (p. 7), for which the bells have now tolled, but also as a multiplicity of smaller narratives that lie beyond the reach of anti-Freudian attacks.

This polemic is, moreover, far from painless. One should not underestimate the distress that these widely publicized attacks on psychoanalysis have had on particularly fragile

patients, who cannot but tremble when they see the therapeutic practice upon which they are often vitally dependent dragged through the mud. This Trojan War between Freudians and anti-Freudians has social and institutional effects that make it difficult to imagine that it could continue along similar lines in the future, which the author nonetheless seems to predict, as if nothing were significantly affected or destroyed by this conflict.

Anatomy of a Scandal

The book possesses another merit, that of presenting scandals in intellectual conflicts as a full-fledged critical category, endowed with their own codes and a distinct form of civility. It does not, as is usually the case, understand scandals in moral terms, whether negatively (“Woe to the world because of scandals. For it must needs be that scandals come: but nevertheless woe to that man by whom the scandal cometh!” [Matthew 18:7]) or positively (“Woe to him by whom the scandal cometh,” but “scandal must come,” André Gide, *Treatise of Narcissus*), but reinscribed in its own social and cultural logic.

Lézé advances the hypothesis that this specificity of Freudianism’s reception can be explained by the authority with which psychoanalysis has been invested—the undeniable social authority of psychanalysis, the categories of which have passed into our language and culture, and the equally undeniable authority of Freud himself, who has become a genuine icon and, unquestionably, psychoanalysis’ emblematic figure. Authority and scandal thus constitute the two mutually dependent sides of one and the same reality.

Biographism

Even if it is possible to make fun of biographism or, more seriously, to wish for an alternative relationship with psychoanalysis, particularly an interpretation of the corpus that is at once explanatory and critical, the book’s reflections on the personalization of psychanalysis are fascinating. The author shows how attacks have been directed primarily against Freud’s own personality and explains why, in the early twenty-first century, Freud can *still* trigger scandals. Paradoxically, this possibility is a social consequence of psychoanalysis itself, which, like Nietzsche’s philosophy, allows one to attribute the traits of any oeuvre whatsoever to its author’s psychology. Why, Lézé asks, have refutations of psychoanalysis so systematically involved a critique of Freud himself?

Whatever one thinks of this line of reasoning—which questions the validity of the psychoanalytic theory of personality by calling attention to the authoritarian personality of its first theorist—the fact remains that it has dominated anti-Freudian polemical thinking for

over a century, as Lézé demonstrates very convincingly by analyzing in exhaustive detail moral caricature as an intellectual weapon. It is not so much the scientific validity of psychoanalysis that has been called into question as Freud's credibility, which itself is at stake in the make-up of his clinical practice: did he lie, distort the truth about some therapies, or suppress clinical failures that might have modified his positions? This is not meant to imply that the argument about Freud's errors, faults, and even vices has been made without variation. The author points out that the possible use of archives as evaluation criteria changes the nature and scope of these debates.³ Indeed, the nagging question driving the current polemical cycle is that of how to evaluate psychoanalysis (in order to invalidate it).⁴ What kind of proofs should be used? Embarrassing letters? Testimonials? Examples of unproductive therapies? Or comparisons with therapies considered to be more effective?

Suspending Judgment

This reconstitution of the different twists and turns of this conflict—such as the one that, in France, marked the beginning of the new century with the publication in 2003 of David Servan-Schreiber's *Guérir: guérir le stress, l'anxiété et la dépression sans médicaments ni psychanalyse* (Healing: Healing Stress, Anxiety, and Depression without Medicine or Psychoanalysis), the edited volume *Le livre noir de la psychanalyse: vivre, penser et aller mieux sans Freud* (The Black Book of Psychoanalysis: Living, Thinking, and Feeling Better without Freud), Didier Eribon's *Échapper à la psychanalyse* (Escaping Psychoanalysis) in 2005, and Michel Onfray's *Crépuscule d'une idole: l'affabulation freudienne* (Twilight of an Idol: Freud's Fairy Tale) in 2010—makes the book undeniably readable and has the salutary effect of putting some distance between the reader and the subject matter. This effort to objectify the problem means that the book does not take sides:

The point of this study is thus not to take a position on the validity or the invalidity of anti-Freudianism, but to identify what these attacks mean in terms of fame and reputation (p. 113)

This choice is all the more interesting in that, over the course of this war, intellectuals and scholars have constantly been summoned to take sides, to pronounce themselves “for” or “against” psychoanalysis if they are to speak about it and hope to be heard. For many years, it was difficult to speak publicly about psychoanalysis without having first chosen one's camp. By resisting this injunction, the author helps to establish psychoanalysis and its history as legitimate objects of epistemological investigation.

³ Most of the “Freud” archives (which add up to some 80,000 pages) are in the United States, in the manuscripts of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Freud's work fell into the public domain in 2009, and most archives are now available. Even so, the rights holders have taken some measures to render some of these documents unavailable. As for private gifts, it is up to the donors to decide whether to push back the date at which some items will be made public.

⁴ On this topic, see notably the debate between Popper and Grünbaum.

He replies preemptively to criticism, saying that his goal is to work as an anthropologist who seeks to present and investigate a case, not to judge it. Even so, this completely external position is a bit troubling. As readers, we are, in a sense, indebted to the author for all his work in reconstructing these stories; yet, for ourselves, we also secretly long for a different relationship to psychoanalysis, one far removed from all these polemics and the ideological destiny of its scientific positions (i.e., the Freudian or anti-Freudian ideology): we recognize their importance for intellectual life, yet we also hope to extract ourselves from them, without, by the same token, reducing the opponent to silence. *Freud Wars* represents only one dimension of the reception of psychoanalysis, which has known other fates.

Indeed, in some regions of the world, psychoanalysis seems to have encountered an original institutional destiny, most notably in Latin America. Nowhere else has the socio-historical context done so much to alter theory, as brought over from Europe, as well as practice. Finally, it is here that psychoanalysis is now developing most extensively and eclectically. From this perspective, one might have expected of the book *specific* social and historical analyses of these waves of scandal that make it possible to better explain why they touched some societies and not others. Is *Freud Wars* not a very western phenomenon? Lacking such considerations, the history of the reception of psychoanalysis comes across as rather unified. In reality, its tendency to become absorbed in polemics is not quite so universal. Some countries seem to have been far less troubled by these wars, or to have been affected by them in different ways—a sign, perhaps, either that psychoanalysis was less important, or that it existed in hybrid forms that cannot be equated with Freudianism. It is, in any case, an indication that such polemics are not inevitable, or that a form of psychoanalysis exists that is independent from them—a possibility upon which the book casts doubt.

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