

## SEXUAL CAUSALITY

SUZANNE STEWART-STEINBERG

Brown University, Departments of Comparative Literature and Italian Studies;  
Director of the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women  
E-mail: [suzanne\\_stewart-steinberg@brown.edu](mailto:suzanne_stewart-steinberg@brown.edu)

---

Close on the thematic heels of her groundbreaking *Sex after Fascism*,<sup>1</sup> Dagmar Herzog offers us in her new book *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* a further elaboration on her earlier thesis about the complex relationship between sex and politics. *Sex after Fascism* made an immensely productive but counterintuitive argument, one that crucially relied on the proposition of three historical periods, each defined by its particular relationship with sex(uality). Herzog claimed, first, that German fascism was not sexually repressive; second, that the immediate postwar environment was, on the contrary, sexually repressive; and third, that the “sexual revolution” beginning in the late 1960s and expanding into the 1970s was consciously contesting fascist repression, while in fact it was actually and unconsciously in dialogue with the more immediate past of the postwar era. Her tour de force argument here was that this historical sequencing had the overall effect of obscuring, indeed repressing, the sex-positive policies of the Nazis and therefore “misunderstanding” not only fascism itself but also—and especially—fascism’s (sexual) appeal. Herzog suggested that not only did the generation of the 1968-ers espouse a politics of the missed object; more nefariously, the repression of fascism’s sexual appeal also opened the road to all sorts of varieties of historical revisionism.

Herzog expands on this thesis in her new book, centering her analysis here on the vicissitudes of psychoanalysis—this as a lens through which to read the private and political movements of “sex after fascism.” *Cold War Freud* is divided into three parts. Part 1, “Leaving the World Outside,” takes on the retrenchment of psychoanalysis after 1945 into a private, apolitical and therefore conservative world. This is a world that, within psychoanalytic theory and practice, sidelines unpredictable sex in favor of the stability of heteronormative integration. Of

---

<sup>1</sup> Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, 2007).

special significance for Herzog is the fact that, at least in the United States, such retrenchment was closely aligned to religious demands. Part II, “Nazism’s Legacies,” explores the conflicts over, then eventual recognition of, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), along with the absorption into psychoanalysis of the concepts of “historical trauma” and “aggression” as possible driving factors of human development. In perhaps the best section of the book, Herzog argues that PTSD did its work in a politically ambivalent manner: it finally allowed in again the causative pressures of history, while at the same time relativizing the relationship between victims and aggressors. In other words, with the proposition that everyone is affected by “history,” victims and aggressors were allowed equal access to the category of trauma. Part III, “Radical Freud,” constitutes a revisiting of those radical psychoanalytic practitioners and theorists (Deleuze and Guattari with their recuperation of Wilhelm Reich, as well as the founders of ethnopsychanalysis), who would return psychoanalysis both to an idea that “everything is sexual” and nevertheless also political, and to an anticolonial critique of the universalist assumptions of psychoanalysis.

More broadly—and the focus of my intervention here—Herzog’s *Cold War Freud* argues that psychoanalysis as a theory and a practice is a multivalent thing, shaped by a complex interaction between psychoanalysis’s intra-institutional politics and demands, and broader historical contexts in which the discipline has sought to make its impact. Indeed, at one point Herzog comes close to stating that virtually *any* meaning or reading of the basic terms of psychoanalysis is possible:

The history of psychoanalysis . . . has been one of countless delayed-reaction receptions, unplanned repurposings, and an ever-evolving reshaping of the meanings of texts and concepts . . . what a particular reading . . . has facilitated . . . has often been more important than what was said in the first place. There has never been an essential, self-evident content to the ideas that traveled into new contexts. (14–15)

And similarly, the relationship between psychoanalytic concepts and political positions is equally fluid: “there was and is . . . no necessary correlation between a particular psychoanalytic concept . . . and the politics that . . . can be made of it” (86). Indeed, there is something in the history of psychoanalysis whereby “ideas can often take hold and accrue import in the oddest of sequences, not all at once, but selectively in some instances, cumulatively in others—and with lines of connection between concepts and their consequences running backwards and forwards and sideways in time” (181). This is certainly the case. However, as Jacques Derrida once remarked, not all authors, not all texts, are open to (deconstructive) multiple interpretations; they are of such a nature that challenges their own meanings, puts pressure on meaning as such. He was speaking of Nietzsche; Freud may be another example.

Herzog's argument depends, I propose, on an implicit understanding of two terms: "sex" and "causality." It also relies on an implied sense of their interrelationship, insofar as such a relationship works with the notion both that "sex" causes things—the remaking of human nature as less aggressive and more free (209), as also authoritarian longings (161)—and that causality itself is a kind of sexual pulsion. Herzog therefore engages the history of post-World War II psychoanalysis as one that struggles with—precisely—the causative effects of, more generally, all its basic concepts ("drive" and the "Oedipus complex," for example) and, more particularly, with its understanding of "sex": "psychoanalysis' own conflicted relationship to sex *explains* a great deal both about its fortunes and about the ever-evolving contents of its most cherished concepts" (57, emphasis mine). And so, for instance, it is the conservative, prudish environment of postwar America that causes at least a playing down of a more orthodox Freudian commitment to sex(uality) as an etiological factor in human development. And again, describing the fallout of this conservatism and the rise of feminist and gay movements in the late 1960s and the 1970s, Herzog writes of the impact of the liberationist psychoanalyst Robert Stoller: inspired by constructionist theories of sexuality,

Stoller helped rethink the nature of sex itself. The point was to challenge the very notion of sex as a biological drive and instead emphasize sex as an emotionally loaded phenomenon . . . the idea now was to take note of how much that was originally *nonsexual* was being brought into every sexual encounter. This was a major conceptual shift. The idea, in short, was to shift from drive to drama. (79–80, original emphasis)

As already noted, since *Cold War Freud* is in part about the historical recuperation of (psychoanalytic) theorists who put forward a program of political/sexual liberation—Reich, Stoller, Guattari, Morgenthauer and the two Parins are clearly those who speak most to the author—it seems opportune to put pressure on the relationship in Herzog's text between "causality" and "sex(uality)." If sex causes, and if, in turn, causality is infused (unconsciously and consciously) with and by sex, then what are the consequences for such close cohabitation?

\* \* \*

Sigmund Freud struggled throughout his career with the accusation that psychoanalysis constituted a sort of pan-sexualism. He consistently refuted this proposition, and this on the basis of what he saw as a fundamental difference between "sex" as a physical–somatic act and "sexuality" not only as constitutive of human subjectivity, but—and far more important in its consequences—also as a theoretical concept that places the work of causality in a sort of holding pattern. In his 1910 essay "Wild Psychoanalysis," Freud lodges the following criticism against a physician who was conducting "wild psychoanalysis": the doctor's advice to a

female patient suffering from anxiety—advice that essentially entailed her getting some sex—“shows clearly in what sense he understands the expression ‘sexual life’—in the popular sense, namely in which by sexual needs nothing is meant but the need for coitus or analogous acts producing orgasm and emission of sexual substances . . . psycho-analysis is commonly reproached with having extended the concept of what is sexual far beyond its usual range.” While Freud comments that such an extension is indeed the case, he nevertheless goes on to state,

In psycho-analysis the concept of what is sexual comprises far more; it goes lower and also higher than its popular sense . . . we reckon as belonging to “sexual life” all the activities of the tender feelings which have primitive sexual impulses as their source, even when those impulses have become inhibited in regard to their original sexual aim or have exchanged this aim for another which is no longer sexual . . . Mental absence of satisfaction with all its consequences can exist where there is no lack of normal sexual intercourse . . . unsatisfied sexual trends . . . can often find only very inadequate outlet in coitus or other sexual acts.<sup>2</sup>

As Shoshana Felman glosses these passages, for Freud sexuality cannot be taken in its literal or popular sense. Because its meaning extends both lower and higher, the relationship between sexuality and the sexual act (or “sex”) is “not a relation of simple, literal adequation, but rather a relation, so to speak, of *inadequation*: [sexuality] comprises both *more* and *less* than the literal sexual act.” Sexuality means both more and less than its literal meaning, with the consequence that, according to Felman, the psychoanalytic concept of sexuality is less a question of “the meaning of sexuality than that of the complex *relationship between sexuality and meaning*; a relationship which is not a simple *deviation* from literal meaning, but rather, a *problematization of literality as such*.”<sup>3</sup>

A second factor is in play for Freud. While he concedes that sexual abstinence *may* lead to psychic disorders, this is only so because neurotic symptoms arise because of a conflict between two opposing forces: libido and repression. Who, Freud asks, remembers “this second factor, which is by no means secondary in importance”? Repression, for Felman, is constitutive of sexuality and not a force *external* to it: “Sexuality being constituted by these *two* factors, *its meaning is its own contradiction*: the *meaning* of the sexual as such is *its own obstruction*, its own deletion.”<sup>4</sup> Freud will only a few years later, largely as a result of his formulation of the theory of primary narcissism, complicate this psychoanalytic concept as sexuality even further: narcissism and sexuality will come to be seen

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Wild Psychoanalysis,” in Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 11 (London, 1957), 219–27, at 222–3.

<sup>3</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” in Felman, ed., *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (Baltimore, 1982), 94–207, at 109–110, emphases in the original.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 110–11, original emphasis.

as both identical and different, living in a kind of “propping” relationship, while simultaneously sexuality will come to be understood as an implantation or seduction from the external world into the narcissistic infant.<sup>5</sup>

If the psychoanalytic “meaning” of sexuality is such that it challenges meaning per se, including its own meaning, then it is also the case that, as a consequence, it challenges what constitutes causality. From his earliest writings, Freud spoke of sexuality’s *Nachträglichkeit*, its belated or deferred action, a form of action that loops time and undermines any simple notions of causative events. Already in his 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, Freud elaborated a theory of sexual trauma as *overdetermined*; in other words, as an event that only becomes such retroactively. The result of deferred action is therefore to *create* the sexual event. In turn, deferred action is especially in play in the realm of human sexuality, due to the latter’s uneven temporal development.

\* \* \*

It comes as no surprise that a great number of the authors treated by Herzog miss the complexity of Freud’s theorization of sexuality and the ways in which the term is understood to have or not have causative effects. And as she notes, American psychoanalysis immediately after World War II attempted quite simply to get rid of the troublesome term altogether. I wonder, however, whether this was only because of prudishness, misogyny, and homophobia, or whether it had not also to do with the radical epistemological implications of Freud’s thought. It is also telling that during the process of rewriting the DSM-III, its main editor, Robert Spitzer, set out not only to marginalize psychoanalysis altogether, but also to remove “any need, or even any opportunity, for speculation about the etiology—that is, theorization of the causes—of psychological conditions” (91). The choice of a more descriptive, “phenomenological”—and therefore anti-theoretical—approach obviated any need to think in more critical terms about causality and therefore, by extension, about the relationship between personal and political, psyche and body, or universal and contingent.

Herzog’s choice of her “radical Freudians” is surprising, however. The fact that Jacques Lacan plays no role in her story is perplexing, this because—whatever one would like to make of his theoretical contributions—at least at the level of the politics of psychoanalysis, Lacan’s interventions were crucial, indeed maybe what addled the International Psychoanalytic Association most. He also challenged received notions of sexuality as merely sex, made demands that psychoanalysis return to its revolutionary epistemological origins, and

---

<sup>5</sup> For an extended analysis of such “propping” or anaclitic relationship see Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore, 1985).

trained or was in conversation with a broader climate of French intellectuals. Lacan is not only credited with the demand that we return to Freud's most edgy concepts ("sexuality" and causality as "deferred action" being only two of them); he also trained or influenced an entire generation of practitioners and cultural, feminist, and queer theorists in France and in the world. Whether a Lacanian practitioner, a Derridean literary critic, or even a historian attentive to psychoanalysis (Dominick LaCapra being a case in point), the critical impact has been significant, and all this in the name of Freud's work; that is, in the name of psychoanalysis as a mode of *critique* of assumed stable categories and concepts.

My own sense is that Herzog's radical psychoanalysts conceptually, theoretically, replicates the enemy. In other words, whether one is sex-positive or sex-negative ultimately locks the adversaries into a sort of perverse agreement that "sex" has causative effects—and this not problematically conceived. "Sex," as Freud alerted us, is not "sexuality." And once one enters the field of Freudian sexuality, the notion of causality becomes a challenge. The challenge is immense: how to think about Freudian categories as a form of critique without being subjected to universalist assumptions? How to make that critique relevant today?

There is no question that Dagmar Herzog has zeroed in on the real issue: desire. I think she is hampered by her adherence to the idea of "sex" as opposed to the concept of "sexuality" along the lines as Freud understood it. "Sex" is causal in ways that puts a stop to critical thinking, this because it must insist on a positivist relationship between causes and effects. Freud's concept of sexuality, on the other hand, broadens our critical horizons to the extent that it encompasses the operations of language. As Shoshana Felman writes, sexuality's meaning cannot "be univocal or unified, but must necessarily be *ambiguous*. It is thus not rhetoric, which disguises and hides sex; sexuality *is* rhetoric, since it essentially consists of ambiguity: it is the coexistence of dynamically antagonistic meanings. Sexuality is the *division and divisiveness of meaning*; it is meaning *as* division, meaning *as* conflict."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," 112, original emphasis.