

AMERICANIZING PSYCHOANALYSIS

MITCHELL G. ASH

Department of History, University of Vienna, Austria

E-mail: Mitchell.Ash@univie.ac.at

John Burnham (ed.), *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012)

Lawrence J. Friedman, assisted by Anke M. Schreiber, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013)

Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Americanization of Narcissism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014)

The general theme that unites the works to be discussed here is the history of psychoanalysis in America over the past hundred years, particularly during the heyday of its public impact from the 1950s through the 1970s. The broad outlines of this story have been well known for some time. Interesting about the volumes discussed here is the step that each book takes in its own way beyond a narrow focus on Freud and his followers or the institutional history of the psychoanalytic profession to examinations of so-called neo-Freudianism and of the entry of psychoanalytic discourse into American middle- and highbrow popular culture. The question whether, how, or to what extent psychoanalysis became “Americanized” in the course of all this is addressed explicitly in the volume by Elizabeth Lunbeck, and implicitly in the other books under review. In the following I will discuss each volume in turn, pointing to linkages among them along the way.

After Freud Left, edited by John Burnham, the doyen of American scholarship in the history of psychology and psychoanalysis, is the widest-ranging of these works both thematically and chronologically, yet also the one most closely connected with the traditional historiography. The title refers to Sigmund Freud's only visit to the United States, in 1909, as an honored foreign guest (with Carl Gustav Jung and others) at the twentieth jubilee celebration of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, at the invitation of its president, psychologist G. Stanley Hall. Two valuable contributions in the volume place this often recounted event in new contexts. Sonu Shamdasani's chapter details the varied

psychotherapeutic concepts and approaches that were current in America by 1909, showing convincingly that psychoanalysis was known by then and had already received both positive and critical reviews as a therapy, but was seen as only one of many approaches to the treatment of the neuroses. Richard Skues provides the most detailed study to date of the event at Clark itself and its public reception, showing among other things that although Freud was noted as an interesting personality, Jung was more prominently noticed, in part because he was a psychiatrist but also because more of his work was available in English at the time. As Skues writes, “Psychoanalysis formed no coherent body of thought in America before 1909, and Jung’s work had an independent existence that cannot be apprehended as a mere extension of Freud’s project” (53). The later significance of Freud’s five lectures at Clark in English, which are still assigned today as a useful historical introduction to psychoanalysis for beginners, and which also mark the beginning of Freud’s merger of the history of psychoanalysis with his own biography, was not immediately apparent. Both texts make clear that it is a mistake to read the later significance of psychoanalysis in American culture or the subsequent iconic status of Freud’s name backward to 1909.

Contributions by Ernst Falzeder and George Makari then address the passage of psychoanalysis from Vienna to New York (*nota bene*: not from Berlin to Chicago or Topeka!). Falzeder details Freud’s notorious disdain for America and offers an original interpretation for his strong feelings. In this view, Freud dealt with the anti-Semitism he experienced in Austria by projecting its central feature, the Jews’ alleged love of money, along with his own principal weakness, overambition, onto the Americans. In addition, Falzeder claims that this dynamic was reinforced by a subconscious defense against the humiliation Freud actually suffered due to an episode of incontinence while visiting New York. Makari recounts how New York psychoanalysts had been on their way toward developing a locally distinctive approach since the 1920s, only to be confronted by émigré Freudians from Vienna after 1938, who ultimately instituted an orthodox version of ego psychology under the leadership of Heinz Hartmann. As he notes, one of the losers in this conflict, ironically, was Lawrence Kubie, who as head of an emergency committee in aid of displaced psychoanalysts had been responsible for assuring the emigration of many of these Viennese, only to be cast off by them later. Unfortunately, Makari chooses not to cite already existing studies of this episode by Edith Kurzweil and others, thus exaggerating the originality of his account. Hale Usak-Sahin supplements these perspectives by focusing on the careers of two lesser-known women analysts, Ruth Wilmanns Lidz and Edith Weigert, who later worked with Frieda Fromm-Reichmann in Baltimore. Of interest here is her account of Weigert’s sojourn on Turkey, where she experienced a professional culture far less open to women.

The volume's final section discusses postwar developments. In a wide-ranging essay, Dorothy Ross reminds us yet again that literary avant-gardists paved the way for the reception of Freud in cultural modernist circles long before psychoanalytic thought entered academe, and then extends the story into the 1940s and the postwar period. Predominant in these decades, in Ross's view, was an "Apollonian" interpretation of Freud as a manly agent of enlightenment. Primary advocates of this approach were Lionel Trilling, Daniel Bell, H. Stuart Hughes and others (though it should be noted that Bell rejected literary modernism). Emphasizing the Dionysian Freud, according to Ross, were Erik Erikson (who, as she notes, never claimed to be a modernist) and Herbert Marcuse; Norman O. Brown might also have been mentioned here. With the triumph of Dionysian sexual liberation in the youth movement of the 1960s and 1970s, followed by the theoretical and interpretative promiscuity of postmodernism, Bell, Philipp Rieff and others used their Apollonian reading of psychoanalysis to critique postmodernism, carefully exempting Freud the moralist from their strictures, while Fredrick Crews—a disappointed convert—later became a prominent Freud-basher. However, Ross also points out that feminist treatments of Freud, which ranged from strong criticisms by Betty Friedan and many others to more positive readings by Shulamith Firestone and Nancy Chodorow, show that not all Freud criticism since the 1970s has come from anti-postmodernists.

Louis Menand presents a brilliant analysis of the complex and not necessarily coherent linkages between psychoanalysis American-style (here the neo-Freudian work of Rollo May), Cold War anxieties and the introduction of psychopharmaca. Central to this complex in Menand's account was a redefinition of anxiety designed to avoid any relation to a real object, like the Bomb. As he shows, pharmaceutical management of anxiety with drugs like Miltown did not follow upon the widespread use of psychoanalytic and other psychotherapies, but entered American culture simultaneously with them. As we know, the drugs won, but Menand's claim toward the end of the chapter that the third diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association, published in 1980, marked the death of psychoanalysis is surely exaggerated. Elizabeth Lunbeck's chapter on Heinz Kohut and the alleged "culture" of narcissism in the 1970s presents material from her (then forthcoming) book, discussed below. In his concluding chapter, Jean-Christoph Agnew comments intelligently on the preceding essays and supplements this with remarks on the social-historical dimension of the story. Particularly insightful in this regard is his suggestion that the self-imposed constraints of orthodox Freudian analytic technique fit well with similar injunctions to self-restraint in social and intellectual style among the largely Protestant professoriate at elite American universities, which made it possible, perhaps necessary, for assimilating Jewish intellectuals like Lionel Trilling to

mobilize “Freud” as a form of cultural capital and thus write their way into the (New York) Protestant establishment.

In sum, this collection offers illuminating insights into the history of psychoanalysis in America. John Burnham’s claim in his introduction that the long-standard narrative will no longer be the same is perhaps too optimistic, but the volume will help to revise certain aspects of the story. It is in keeping with the book’s consistent focus on traditional intellectual history and thus on highbrow medical and academic writings rather than middlebrow popular culture that Erich Fromm is mentioned in it only rarely and in passing, even though his writings sold far more copies than those of all of the authors discussed here combined, excepting those of Freud himself. The situation in Lawrence Friedman’s biography of Fromm is the reverse.

* * *

Friedman is already well known in this research field for his biography of Erik Erikson and his study of the Menningers, father and son, and their clinic. Here he again addresses the life of a European psychoanalyst who came to the United States during a turbulent period of European—and American—history. In this case, however, the focus is not on a success story within the psychoanalytic establishment; as Friedman shows in detail, Erich Fromm became successful in America by espousing psychanalytical perspectives that differed from those of the Freudian establishment, and later as a public intellectual, whose works ranged far beyond psychoanalysis and often became best sellers. The fascinating story begins with Fromm’s move from efforts to reconcile Jewish tradition and modern humanism to psychoanalytic training in Munich and Berlin and the founding of the Frankfurt psychoanalytic institute in the late 1920s. Friedman then proceeds from there to Fromm’s intellectually fruitful but institutionally fraught association with the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt and New York (including his pioneering, then unpublished, study of Weimar working-class attitudes and workers’ attraction to Nazism); describes his subsequent move, following his dismissal from the institute, into dissident American analytic circles, first with Karen Horney and then with Harry Stack Sullivan; and ends with a thorough account of the more than two decades Fromm spent as an analyst in Mexico beginning in 1950 and his wildly successful parallel career as a best-selling author.

In addition to his privileged access to the vast Fromm archive in Tübingen (with the blessing and cooperation of his literary executor, Rainer Funk, also a Fromm biographer), as well as extensive research in public archives, Friedman had privileged access to some of Fromm’s correspondence and interviews in private hands (much of his private correspondence was destroyed by his third

wife at his request), and conducted extensive interviews with people who knew Fromm (relatives, colleagues and analysts) in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the United States and Mexico. The assistance of a German graduate student, Anke Schreiber, is generously acknowledged, and she was no doubt helpful in understanding German-language materials. Nonetheless, the first part of the volume, which deals with Fromm's childhood and youth and his early intellectual development in the context of Weimar culture, is clearly the weakest. There is, for example, little indication of what compatriots like Walter Benjamin or Gershom Sholem thought of him or his early writings, despite their similar roots in Jewish tradition. Yet even in this section of the book previously little-known dimensions of the story emerge. Fromm's difficult family history, especially his highly ambivalent relations with his parents, is discussed here in great detail, and his key role in establishing the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research at Columbia University in the 1930s is brought out more strongly than in other accounts. The fact that he drove a hard bargain and thus obtained a huge financial settlement in the well-known conflict over his dismissal from the institute, which enabled him to restart his career and also to contribute generously to political causes and efforts to aid refugees from Nazism, is clearly reported. Genuinely new is the extensive information Friedman provides on Fromm's only partly successful efforts to support and rescue family members trapped in Nazi Germany (the extent of which was not always appreciated by close relatives). These struggles to enable his relatives to escape to freedom clearly lent a deeply personal dimension to Fromm's work on his most important and substantial book, *Escape from Freedom* (1941).

Friedman also presents important new material on Fromm's three marriages, avoiding superficial gossip and focusing on the impact of these relationships—along with his many love affairs, for example with the African American dancer Katherine Dunham—on his work. Clearly of formative significance for his early career was his first marriage with Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, cofounder of the Frankfurt psychoanalytic institute, who was ten years his senior and also his analyst at the time—a breach of professional ethics by present-day and surely also by then current standards. Equally important for different reasons was his second marriage to Henny Gurland, who had accompanied Walter Benjamin on his fatal attempt to escape from occupied France. Fromm's extraordinary efforts to care for her and her descent from bipolarity into depression, ending in suicide, are detailed with sensitivity and care from correspondence and interviews. Perhaps most important was Fromm's ecstatically successful love match with his third wife, Annis Freeman. The roots of his worldwide best seller *The Art of Loving* (1956) in the joys of this relationship are carefully laid out.

Friedman is by no means uncritical of Fromm's writings. The word "vague" is one of several (too often) repeated descriptors in his account of Fromm's

arguments (also repeated far too often is “ebullient” as a term for Fromm’s persona), and he clearly states that Fromm’s most popular American works are based on reworkings of analyses and research already developed in the 1930s. As he shows, Fromm’s central concept of “social character,” advanced as an alternative to Freud’s emphasis on instinctive drives, was enunciated, but not fully elaborated, in *Escape from Freedom*; this negatively affected the book’s reception in academic and psychoanalytic circles, but hardly inhibited his popular success. Fromm later elaborated the concept in more detail in his extensive study of “social character in a Mexican village,” carried out with Michael Maccoby and published in 1970. Fromm’s response to his exclusion from official psychoanalytic circles—and also from Karen Horney’s alternative association, after a brief affiliation with the group and an affair with Horney herself—was similar to that of other “dissidents” in the movement: he found a way to institutionalize himself elsewhere, first as a cofounder and training analyst at Harry Stack Sullivan’s William Alanson White Institute in Washington, DC from 1942, then as founding head of the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute in the mid-1950s, and still later as cofounder of the International Association of Psychoanalytic Associations. Unusual here was his decision to base himself in another country, while retaining his positions as training analyst in Washington and as visiting professor at Michigan State University.

Of greatest interest to general historians is Friedman’s detailed account of Fromm’s multifaceted political engagements during the 1950s and thereafter. It is indeed noteworthy that it was possible for him to declare public allegiance to Marx and socialism at the height of the Cold War, even joining the Socialist Party in 1959; as Friedman shows, he maintained friendly and respectful relations with the party’s leader, Norman Thomas, and even published an essay, “Let Man Prevail” (1960), that he thought would serve as the party’s platform. He subsequently became a prominent and eloquent advocate for a humanistic “third way” between capitalism and Soviet communism. Such engagements doubtless compensated Fromm for his academic rejection and his exclusion from the Freudian psychoanalytic establishment; the sales of his books, which often ran in the millions, and his evident opposition to Soviet communism appear to have insulated him from the political persecution accorded others. Perhaps his most successful involvement was in the peace and disarmament movements, especially the cofounding of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), prefigured in his book *The Sane Society* (1955) and culminating in a keynote speech to an anti-Vietnam War rally in Madison Square Garden in 1966. His long introduction to a collection of manuscripts by the young Karl Marx edited by Tom Bottomore and his book on his encounter with Marx and Freud, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (1962), helped to make the young Marx and his humanistic ideals (in Fromm’s reading) accessible to a wide readership during the détente years.

Also interesting for general historians is Friedman's account of Fromm's less public involvements with prominent liberal politicians, among them Adlai E. Stevenson and J. William Fulbright; his contacts with John F. Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis (Friedman claims that formulations from a *Daedalus* article on nuclear deterrence found their way into one of Kennedy's speeches given during the crisis); and his personal and financial engagement in the presidential campaign of Eugene McCarthy in 1968. Useful as it is to learn all this, skepticism about Fromm's policy impact is in order. Though he is well read in the literature on Cold War history, and is careful to note that Fromm was being narcissistic when he wrote long letters of advice to politicians like Stevenson or McCarthy and expected them to be read with attention, Friedman sometimes appears to accept uncritically Fromm's and his associates' self-aggrandizing interpretations of these involvements. For example, he often repeats the claim that Fromm was of value to politicians and the president's foreign-policy advisers because he had access through friends to German documents about Soviet policy that were not available to the State Department; unfortunately he neither names the German friends, describes the documents in question nor provides any evidence whatever for the claim that the documents were otherwise unavailable to the government.

Friedman provides straightforward accounts of most of Fromm's many books. Perhaps he exaggerates somewhat when he terms *Escape from Freedom* a classic, due to its impact on him when he read it as a student. The book was surely important at the time as a pioneering analysis of the reasons for mass adherence to totalitarian dictatorships, but is not so widely read now, because its examples are dated, though the psychological analysis in it, particularly Fromm's emphasis on the anxiety and wishes for order and security evoked by human freedom, may still be relevant today. With respect to psychoanalysis proper, Friedman notes the close relation between Fromm's "biophilia" versus "necrophilia" binary and Freud's Eros and Thanatos. He also pays due attention to Fromm's polemic against Konrad Lorenz's biologicistic account of human aggression in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), which can also be interpreted as a critique of Freud's similarly biologicistic account of the death instinct. Friedman also describes with a mix of approval and appropriate critical distance Fromm's psychobiographical analyses of Himmler and Hitler in the same book; as he shows, these drew in part upon interviews Fromm conducted with Albert Speer, whom he liked, trusted and relied upon far too much.

Nicely ironic is Friedman's reading of Fromm's most popular book by far, *The Art of Loving* (1956). As he shows, Fromm denied that it was a self-help book, but followed the how-to conventions of the genre precisely. Though Friedman frequently exposes Fromm's superficial, distorted or self-serving readings of the intellectual traditions and thinkers with which he engaged, he also repeats without criticism Fromm's false claim that Christianity opposes self-love; Bernhard of

Clairvaux wrote in the twelfth century that one must love oneself in order to love others. Nonetheless, Friedman gives due weight to the spiritual—or, as he repetitiously terms it, “prophetic”—dimension of Fromm’s writings and thought, beginning with his early absorption in Jewish spirituality and Hasidism, continuing with *Man for Himself* (1947) and *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (written with D. T. Zusuki, 1960) and returning to Jewish perspectives in *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (1974) and *To Have and to Be* (1976) toward the end of his life. Although Fromm did not claim prophetic status for himself, he surely wrote often in that voice and presented himself, and was received by millions of readers, as a humanistic spiritual guide in a secular age.

* * *

Elizabeth Lunbeck mentions Erich Fromm in her book only in passing, but the combination of the appearance of profound learning, humanistic sentiments and well-dressed banalities characteristic of Fromm’s later writings connects quite nicely with her handling of the concept of narcissism in America. A central concept since it was first discussed in writings by Ernest Jones in 1913 and by Freud himself in 1914, narcissism in orthodox psychoanalysis, as Lunbeck shows, was never limited to self-love or self-absorption and was always understood to have both normal and pathological manifestations. Lunbeck carefully follows the vicissitudes of the concept from its original elaboration by Freud and Jones to its radical reworking by Otto Kernberg and in the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut. Most illuminating and original here, though perhaps overly detailed, is her account of early critiques of Freud’s formulations, in particular that of Joan Riviere, one of the earliest translators of Freud into English. Riviere appears to have exhibited strong symptoms of pathological narcissism, and was analysed spectacularly unsuccessfully by both Jones and Freud in the early 1920s; Freud acknowledged that her case revealed limitations in psychoanalytic technique. In a paper published in 1936 and later rediscovered by feminist theorist Judith Butler, Riviere advanced cogent arguments, surely based in part on her own case, for the claim that there is no essential difference between “male” and “female” versions of narcissism. Lunbeck gives a clear and quite illuminating account of her and other psychoanalysts’ discussions of vanity, fashion addiction and the like. Interesting as it may be to learn all this, it is unclear for long stretches in the text what all of this has to do with the “Americanization” of narcissism.

In contrast, Lunbeck places her nuanced and thoughtful accounts of Kernberg’s and especially Kohut’s transformations of the concept of narcissism and of psychoanalytic technique in connection with the treatment of its pathological manifestations in the context of developments in American culture in the 1960s and 1970s, and of American social and cultural criticism since the

1950s. As she writes, both writers reworked orthodox Freudian conceptions of narcissism that had overly emphasized its pathological side and reminded their colleagues that Freud himself had acknowledged the positive value of infantile narcissism (“his majesty the baby”). Kohut in particular overturned in his self-psychology the claim that the persistence of infantile narcissism into adulthood was necessarily pathological, thus helping to give intellectual support for the emphasis on strengthening self-esteem that has since become a central moment in psychotherapy, education and social work, as well as in political movements for minority rights. In her chapter on identity, Lunbeck also points to the significant contribution of Erik Erikson to this debate, in the sense that he, too, placed a positive connotation on “primary” narcissism in infants as the foundation of healthy psychological development.

The fulcrum of Lunbeck’s study is her effective rendering of the contrast between this fundamental reconceptualization and reevaluation of narcissism and of the psychoanalytic therapy of narcissistic personality disorders on the one hand, and, on the other, the handling of the term itself in popular culture in the writings of numerous authors, most notably Christopher Lasch in his best-selling *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978) during the very same period—which Tom Wolfe christened “The ‘Me’ decade”. In her introduction Lunbeck makes the strong claim that the term “narcissism” itself would not have entered popular discourse had it not been for its previous reworkings by Kernberg, Kohut and others. All the more ironic, then, is her account of Lasch’s mobilization of Kernberg’s and especially Kohut’s ideas in support of an account of narcissism far more moralistic and critical of American mores, particularly of the self-indulgence and sexual freedom of contemporary youth culture, than theirs had been. It is clear enough whose side Lunbeck is on when she writes that Lasch may not have even realized that his rendering of his alleged allies’ ideas had turned them into their opposites.

Nonetheless, hers is not only a conventional story of the denaturing of scientific concepts once they enter the public sphere; she considers the productions of popular culture—newspapers like the *New York Times* and magazines such as *Psychology Today*, among many others—in their own right and reports them straightforwardly as indications of the widespread public perception of narcissism as a social problem during this period. Yet precisely this detailed, nuanced account makes it all too clear that cultural critics in the end did little more than mobilize high-sounding terms like “narcissism” in order to give the appearance of scientific authority to moralistic views that they already held. The value of this part of Lunbeck’s analysis would surely have been higher if she had incorporated media theory or discourse analysis into her account in order to ask in more theoretical terms what enabled this cultural transfer (or rather, circulation) and how well it worked with which audiences. But she makes the reversal of meaning in transit

clear enough. Whether the result can be described as scientific progress, or rather as yet another episode in the history of American psychobabble, remains unclear. Lunbeck herself is clearly at pains to present a story of the accumulation of varied meanings over time in a relatively nonjudgmental manner, rather than a narrative of decline.

* * *

What is the broader relevance of all this for American or general intellectual history? I return here to the question raised in the title of this review. Psychologism has been a central feature of American highbrow intellectual and middlebrow popular culture for decades now, and the trend shows no signs of abating. The careers of words like “depression” and “stress,” like that of “narcissism,” “identity crisis” or even “self,” show that the circulation of terminology from the clinical into the popular realm and then back into science or medicine has never been limited to psychoanalysis. The relocation of social problems to individual character diagnoses seemingly coincides rather too well with supposedly “American” individualism. However, the fact that such relocations have since taken hold in Europe as well suggests that the common tendency among American intellectual and cultural historians, rather like their counterparts elsewhere, to assume rather than to prove the uniqueness of their own culture requires revision. Fortunately, this process could also have a humorous side; the comic strip “The Far Side” once depicted a headstone with the epitaph “I knew it was about me.”

Nicolas Rose went beyond this simplistic sort of linkage some time ago with his suggestion that the heyday of psychologisms of this sort forms an extended episode in the history of high and late modernity itself. In his account, instrumental reason became most effective when people were “motivated” or subtly required by managers, with an assist from the ubiquitous self-help literature, to apply it to themselves, in the workplace or in other relationships. Fromm’s notion of a “marketing self,” already elaborated in *Escape from Freedom*, acquires unexpected currency in this context. Today, younger Americans appear to have few problems with the idea of “branding” themselves, but none of this is peculiar to the United States any longer, if it ever was, since globalization has spread such reflexive self-marketing strategies throughout the world. What remains, then, of the high hopes, or grandiose claims, of psychoanalytic or other forms of psychotherapy, if not actually to heal mental disorders, then at least to help needy individuals achieve self-awareness and perhaps even a degree of self-acceptance, and thus to fulfill the Enlightenment injunction *sapere aude*? None of the books under review addresses this issue directly.

Surely it is well known that the shift to the psychopharmaceutical management of mental illness or even less serious problems like attention deficit disorder (ADD) has had a profound and problematic impact on a wide range of psychological therapies, and not least on psychoanalysis itself. Freud-bashing has gotten extensive media attention over the past twenty years, but there has also been resistance to this. Psychoanalysis has been through quite a lot and, as these books show, has undergone multiple changes during its American sojourn. But, contrary to Louis Menand's premature obituary, it is not dead yet, as its frequent mobilization in feminist theory (albeit in non-Freudian versions) or the renaissance of trauma theory since the 1990s attest. Nor has the status of terms from the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, like "anxiety," "trauma," or "narcissism," as tropes with protean meanings entirely played out. Whether what passes for psychoanalysis in current public discourse has much to do with what professionals say or do is another matter.