Always historicize?

Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, eds, *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2013. 347 pp., £57.50 hb., 978 0 23011 336 7.

'Always historicize!' has been a fashionable rallying call in recent times. Yet only a minority of those who scrutinize the workings of mind or body have paid much heed to the summons. As the cultural historian Anthony Ashplant comments in this anthology, even sympathetic critics of Freud's insights have regretted the characteristic disengagement of psychoanalysis

from wider social and political issues, usually focusing all their attention upon the putatively universal characteristics of individuals' 'internal worlds'. Resisting the most rigorous rulings of post-structuralism, however, most of the writers in this collection agree that there may indeed be universal aspects to the desiring or defensive mechanisms of psychic functioning, but they also, inevitably, have a significant historical dimension. 'How are we to grasp the irreducibly human dimensions of historical reality?' is the critical question asked by another cultural historian, Bill Schwarz, in a different collection pondering the relations between history, memory and time. However, on the other side of that divide separating those two muses, Psyche and Clio, only a minority of historians have shown any interest in answering that question, or even addressing the all-too-human forces entangled with the historical enterprise. It is the continuing distance between history and psychology that is the trigger for this collection, with its two editors, the feminist historians Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, affirming: 'Human history is intrinsically psychological, even if those who research and write history are often reluctant to acknowledge this truism.'

In particular, as the editors emphasize, British historians have, in general, largely disdained psychoanalytic reflections as undermining their stress on firm objective evidence. This includes those influential left historians once clustered around the Communist Party Historians Group that flourished in the decade after 1945. Unsurprisingly, despite his immense significance as a historian, the work of the late Eric Hobsbawm therefore makes no appearance in this collection. More surprisingly, nor does that of Raphael Samuel, one of Hobsbawm's eager young followers, who wrote so movingly about the structures of feeling motivating Party members, such as Hobsbawm himself. Samuel was the initial driving force behind History Workshop, the movement dedicated to exploring 'history from below', which blossomed in Britain and elsewhere from the late 1960s and was responsible for launching the *History Workshop Journal*, in 1976, for a while proudly proclaiming itself *A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians*. This journal was soon instrumental in introducing psychoanalytic perspectives into historical research, and it is from this background that the editors convened the Psychoanalysis and History seminar – running now for almost twenty years – to which most of the authors in this collection have contributed.

In so far as the ties between history and psyche are discussed nowadays, it is overwhelmingly the legacies of historical 'trauma' that are most prominent in such research, with the enduring impact of the Holocaust on generations of Jewish 'survivors' its imprimatur. It is therefore interesting that collective trauma is hardly touched upon in this collection. Instead, the main focus is on historicizing the development of psychoanalysis itself, exploring how the thoughts of particular psychoanalytic innovators – Freud himself, W.H.R. Rivers, Donald Winnicott, Wilfred Bion and others – were shaped by their historical moment. Much has already been written, for instance, on the significance of Jewish identity, with its distinct fears, attachments and horrors, on Freud's own thought and the growth of psychoanalysis more generally. In this volume, Timothy Ashplant tackles this theme in various ways. He suggests that it was the impact of intensifying anti-Semitism in Freud's life, with its discourses of Jewish men as effeminate or homosexual, Jewish women as oversexed and seductive, which led Freud to reject Charcot's insistence on the hereditary character of hysteria, seeing its potential imbrication with racist belief. It was also anti-Semitism, Ashplant notes, which not only entailed Freud's turn away from direct engagement in politics, but also encouraged his shift into self-analysis. This move, he argues, not only enabled Freud to work through his hostility to his father, but also furthered his refiguring of political rebellion in terms of its putative roots in personal rebellion. Ashplant largely endorses Carl Schorske's account of the way in which Freud's writing serves to neutralize politics in its turn to mythic familial dynamics: 'Patricide replaces regicide, psychoanalysis overcomes history.'

Ashplant's essay makes good use of various cultural theorists and Freudian scholars in its account of the possible strengths and limitations of Freud's Jewishness on his theoretical outlook. Surprisingly, however, he makes no reference to the writing of Britain's keenest observer of the significance of the Jewish origins of psychoanalysis, Stephen Frosh. It seems a pity that Frosh, a contributor to the Psychoanalysis and History seminars, was not included in this volume, when his own long-term project has been exploring both the historically diverse and conflicting impact of psychoanalytic thought on conceptions of subjectivity as well as the saturation of the social terrain with the effects of personal desires and the orchestration of fantasies in the construction of imaginary 'realities'. Moreover, his book *Hate and the Jewish Science* (2005) not only tackles Freud's conflicted feelings about his Jewishness, and the ways in which anti-Semitism fostered his mistrustful outlook and need for

theoretical loyalty, but – altogether less defensively, if more controversially – Frosh celebrates what he sees as the roots of psychoanalysis in Jewish identity and culture. As the 'universal stranger' for two millennia of Western society, Jews became, he argues, not merely convenient scapegoats, but the paradigm of 'otherness', both without and 'within' (in the form of the unconscious). Hence Freud's stress on the incommensurability between the psychic and the social (a stricture he sometimes himself ignored), and his offering of a psychology that potentially encourages a critical rather than a conformist outlook on historical and social change. However, one would have to admit, it has surely been a potential more honoured in the breach than the observance, an occurrence we can't simply blame on its later Christian followers, when some of the founders of the more conformist American ego psychology were themselves Jewish.

Further essays exploring the significance of time and place on psychoanalytic reflection and practice include John Forrester's account of W.H.R. Rivers and Michael Roper's revisiting of Wilfred Bion, both practitioners whose work is seen here as moulded by their wartime experience. Moving beyond the clinic to consider the effects of psychoanalysis on government policy, Sally Alexander's fascinating essay on Donald Winnicott highlights the enduring, and indeed, as is clear from this collection alone, growing impact of his work. Many feminists may have worried, rightly, about Winnicott's insistent identification of women with motherhood (despite his own two wives not becoming mothers). However, Alexander highlights Winnicott's significant contributions to welfare reform, alongside the extraordinarily compassionate and creative work he did with working-class women and children in his clinics for forty years.

The second theme in this book addresses shifting notions of 'subjectivity'. In what turns out to be the most passionate and provocative of the essays, Barbara Taylor surveys and critiques the impact of post-structuralism in launching conceptions of selfhood as fluctuating and fragmentary, seen as discursive artefacts, devoid of that genuine interiority (or deep structure) thought to constitute the 'inner world' of psychoanalysis. While welcoming some of the creative energy released by this theoretical turn, Taylor is especially critical of British Foucauldians, such as Nikolas Rose and Patrick Joyce, for whom all concern with subjectivity disappears into explorations of ubiquitous mechanisms of compulsion, described as regimes of 'governmentality'. This explains why there is only passing reference to Foucault's 'complicatedly hostile' attitude to psychoanalysis. It is a lost opportunity, some might think, when reflections on the intriguing silences and mysteries of Foucault's private life, including his destruction of all personal documents that might provide clues to it, might add a certain richness to speculations about his presentation of what others have called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and the sense of 'panoptic surveillance' characterizing the theoretical outlook of Foucault and his dedicated followers, from the 1980s onwards.

All historians do operate with some notion of the human psyche and its presumed motivations and emotions, however implicitly, Taylor argues convincingly; just as desires and feelings inevitably mediate historians' relationship with their object of study, however unwittingly. Empathy or dislike, projection and fantasies of various kinds, thus enter into the historian's research, which means that it is never free from the dangers of misreading the past in terms of public or personal dispositions of the present. Yet this subjective engagement is just what Taylor uses to reject any anti-humanist argument, replacing it by a belief in 'our common humanity', thereby anchoring research into the past in the overlapping terrain of historical and psychoanalytic reflection:

> Of course we can never experience life as it was lived by past individuals. But what is achievable, indeed unavoidable, is what Starobonski describes as the 'critical relation' between the historian and her subjects, produced by the 'ceaseless movement' between 'intuitive identification' and a 'panoramic view of the context and cultural patterns' in which these subjects were embedded.

Somewhat more cautiously, in an area she has been researching for many years, Katharine Hodgkin queries the new historicist Stephen Greenblatt's assertion that psychoanalysis is not applicable to early modern subjects. Historical research, she agrees, certainly highlights very differing presentations of selfhood, as in the pious autobiographies of the early modern period that exhibit little interest in childhood or even familial ties in their accounts of the life's journey towards spiritual salvation. Nevertheless, Hodgkin points to certain enduring psychic structures, alongside great diversities, as she explores the extensive confessional writing of Elizabeth Isham (from the early seventeenth century), in which her account of an apparently dispersed self, constituted through its long pathway to the divine, also contains numerous passages evoking sibling rivalries and other dynamics more familiar to us from modern autobiography. It is this interest in the continuities of subjectivity, as much as the distance and strangeness

that emerge in viewing the past, even our own pasts, which these psychoanalytically versed historians all choose to emphasize. The early and celebrated Italian practitioner of this genre Luisa Passerini sums up the shared outlook in the final essay in this volume:

> The main contribution of psychoanalysis to historical studies … has been to make subjectivity – including its unconscious dimension and its internal fissures – into an object of history, and in particular to make memory itself analysable as a form of subjectivity.

Ironically, though, especially as we rethink the past forty years in the wake of Thatcher's demise, it was the sole contribution in this collection that barely touched upon actual psychic states that I found especially useful in reflecting upon the recent past and historical shifts in our understandings of personal malaise. More Foucauldian in outlook, Rhodri Hayward's essay, 'The Pursuit of Serenity', addresses the creation of the postwar welfare state. For metaphysicians such as Heidegger we are never at home in the world we are hurled into, with 'angst' ('dread' or 'anxiety') seen as intrinsic to existence. For Freud, anxiety states could be traced back to accumulated sexual excitation. In contrast, Hayward maps out the political background to cultural understandings of 'anxiety', shorn of metaphysical or classic psychoanalytic associations, used to spread the message that anxiety is a social condition, whose roots lie largely in poverty and economic insecurities. The reforms and nationalizations inaugurating the British welfare system were therefore presented as necessary for the construction of a healthy society, post-1945, premissed on a belief in the role of the state in the elimination of personal misery: 'many of the maladjustments and neuroses of modern society', as Bevan explained when minister of health, arose directly from poverty and insecurity. The overriding and enduring success of Margaret Thatcher, as she rode the high tide of corporate capital's determination to increase profits by rolling back all the popular gains of the postwar settlement, was precisely to overturn that consensus. Supported at every turn by much of the British media, Rupert Murdoch and Paul Dacre in particular, she successfully associated any notion of state or pubic control with harmful constraint on individual freedom; notions of the private and privatized with personal happiness premissed upon the pleasures of choice. This consensus holds such sway today that few dare challenge it.

Some readers may be relieved to find that this collection is one of the very few critical texts edited by two contemporary feminists in which the thoughts of Judith Butler are entirely absent, let alone the queer theorists who have danced behind her. However, I missed her, and them, thinking that the feminist content of the book would have been strengthened by a stronger challenge to normative readings of gender and sexuality, when only one contribution, by Elizabeth Lunbeck, addresses this issue: she highlights the lack of substance in Freud's account of the 'narcissistic homosexual', which remained virtually uncontested for half a century. Lacanians will also be ruffled by their fleeting appearance in these essays. However, one volume cannot hope to be exhaustive, and this rich and interesting collection will provide an essential resource for those wanting to explore creative encounters between psychoanalysis and history. As Joan Scott argues in a recent essay, these encounters can be all the more productive not despite, but precisely because of, the need to reflect upon the incommensurability between the differing temporalities and contexts for understanding each domain. Psychoanalysis forces historians to question the way accounts of the past are contaminated by the effects of fantasy and unconscious motivation, while history just might contribute to our understanding of the specific content of prevailing fantasies at any particular time.

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Neoliberal art history

David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ and Oxford, 2012. 136 pp., £13.95 pb., 978 0 69115 044 4.

In his new book David Joselit makes a clear case for a progressive art-politics of the future. He asks us to 'take image diplomacy seriously and attempt to imagine how art can function as currency without falling into monetization'. This profitless mode of currency, a power 'as real as it gets', describes the latest forms of image production, the 'emergent image … that arises out of [pure] circulation'. The emergent image is 'located on a spectrum between the absolute status of native site specificity on the one hand, and the absolute freedom of neoliberal markets on the other'. The nativist or 'fundamentalist' tendency speaks to traditional modes of artistic production and reception, the work of art tied to site and place. The migrant or 'neoliberal' work is severed from its original site in order to release the work into 'free and unfettered markets'. And if the 'dialectic … between the "native" and the "neoliberal"' were the central terms of both modern and postmodern