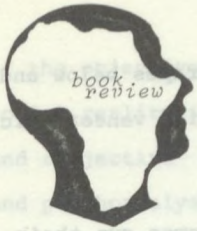

Russell Jacoby's Social Amnesia.

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Jacoby's Social Amnesia is to date one of the very few attempts in the English language to investigate psychology from within a historical materialist framework. That it is an attempt made by an historian rather than a psychologist, and further, by an author writing within the European tradition of the Frankfurt School,[1] bears sad testimony not only to psychology's poor record as far as historical materialism is concerned, but more particularly to the poverty of Anglo-American Marxist and neo-Marxist psychological writing.

The underlying influence of the Frankfurt School is crucial to Social Amnesia. Against a background of the failure of post-first world war European Marxism, the rise of fascism and the complex and changing nature of contemporary capitalism, Critical Theory has realised the limitations of a purely objective Marxism, and recognised the need for inclusion of subjective factors in the understanding of contemporary social formations and revolutionary conditions. The need to retain this dialectic may be seen to constitute the theoretical backbone of (as well as an important motivation for) the book.

Psychology, particularly psychoanalysis, has much to offer

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[1] The Frankfurt School "is an informal term for the collective thought of a group of Marxist thinkers who, in Frankfurt, Germany, prior to the rise of Hitler, and later in exile, formulated a theory known as critical theory." (Jacoby, 1975, p. xix). Other prominent members of this school include Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas, and to some extent, Walter Benjamin.

Marxism in this regard - if one digs and scrapes below and before the a-theoretical, a-historical apologist veneer which has become its face.

Explicating this central project, numerous themes run their interwoven course throughout the work. A major theme explores the "revolutionary potential" of Freud and then traces its subsequent and systematic "perversion" in the work of the neo-Freudians (Adler, Horney, Thompson, Sullivan), the post-Freudians (humanistic-existential psychologists such as Rogers, Maslow, Allport), and the radical psychology of Laing and Cooper. These schools essentially fall foul of a psychologism whereby both the causes and cures of contemporary misery are reduced to the realm of the private individual. This both reflects and perpetuates not only a reactionary psychology, but the oppressive and repressive order from which these schools and the discipline itself arise. Jacoby frequently returns to the thesis that the emergence and popularity of psychology is no accident; "In boldest terms the individual psyche commands attention exactly because it is undergoing fragmentation and petrification ..." (Jacoby, 1975, p. xvii) under the total onslaught (sic) of contemporary capitalism. The subjective reductionism of psychology is not exceptional. The non-Marxist political or radical left (the hippie movement, student politics, bourgeois feminism, and the like) has, in its mindless affirmation - if not pursuit - of the lost subject (feelings, autonomy, private rights) ended up in either a "rampant narcissism" or an individualism where everyone is entitled equally to alienation, and the choosing of it. On the other hand, Marxism can be accused of a more or less exclusive pursuit

of the objective (i.e., the individual as agent and creator of social reality is ignored). And attempts to combine objective and subjective - the relationship for example between Marxism and psychoanalysis - have generally taken the form of sectarian attacks and counter-attacks, and usually succumbed to reductionistic distortions of both poles of the dialectic.

The failure of psychology, Marxism and the political left to hold simultaneously the subjective and objective moments, derives from a more general failure on the part of each to retain the tension between theory and practice. The consequences of a loss of theory in particular, weaves its way through Jacoby's arguments. At the heart of it all lies the notion of social amnesia. Social amnesia is the tendency, derived from loss of theory, to replace past (and present) thought which is critical with "apologetic half-truths under the sway of fashion". It is the phenomenon whereby the new, no matter how vacuous, under the banner of progress, not only displaces and distorts what is worth remembering, but atrophies even the desire to remember. The concept underlies every theme of the book. Critical Freudian insights give way to a new and sparkling conformist psychology of liberation; the political left, from its "liberated" backyard, enjoys a rapid turnover of slogans, and departments of sociology, politics and economics frequently even manage to leave Marx out of their syllabuses.

Social Amnesia, then, in the words of its author himself, is "an effort to remember what is perpetually lost under the pressure of society; it bucks at the planned obsolescence of thought. (At the same time) it does not ... intend to be an archeology, the mere uncovering of what is lost." (Ibid, p.xviii).

Not only does Jacoby offer a critique of both past and present thought, but he shuns what he calls the "collecting of antiques" - that is, the blind repitition of the old and past without its continual reworking so as to remain adequate to historical reality. Within this context, Jacoby describes the more progressive line of thought traced from within the Freudian ranks (Freud, Federn, Reich, Fenichel) to the Critical Theory of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and others. He dwells particularly on the latter school. Critical theory retains both subject and object by pursuing subjectivity until it devolves into objectivity (i.e., until it issues into the social and historical events that determine the subject). More particularly, while in contemporary bourgeois society it is capital rather than the living person that has individuality, critical theory pursues subjectivity "till, so to speak, it disappears" (Ibid., p. 80). This is negative psychoanalysis, a study of subjectivity that does not exist. If this contributes to an explanation of the failure of revolutionary consciousness, it also gives the struggle for liberation direction.

> "The overpowering of the subject by the object, which hinders it from becoming a subject hinders it just so from knowledge of the object."
>
> (Adorno, 1970, p. 171)

> "Before the individual can exist, before it can become an individual, it must recognize to what extent it does not yet exist. It must shed the illusion of the individual before becoming one. Subjectivity must be brought to objectivity so it can be realized. This is the nub of the matter."
>
> (Jacoby, 1975, p. 81)

My summary thus far does little justice to the immense richness

of Social Amnesia. Within and between the major themes are many less developed ideas; ideology and false consciousness, the relationship between appearance and reality, a critique of positivism, the reformist nature of many struggles for equality, these and more are invoked. But it is not merely the wealth of ideas nor even their explicit and implicit cross-referencing which gives the work its richness. It is also the continual movement back and forth across the conventional boundaries between academic disciplines, an inseparability of ideas and values - thought and feeling - a vivid, dense and finely hewn writing style, and not least Jacoby's awareness, continually manifest, of the overdeterminations and detailed mediations of a reality in which things are no longer called by name. These characteristics, of course, make Social Amnesia a complex and difficult work. While some might consider this a failing, Jacoby's intention is not to be abstruse or to confuse, merely that he, like Freud, has "a strong dislike of simplifying things at the expense of truthfulness" (Freud, 1974, p. 332). Moreover, his work, like that of other critical theorists, informs by demanding active participation of the reader.

This is not to say that Social Amnesia is without problems. As careful and complex as he can be, as remarkable as his capacity is to pierce appearances and reveal the essence of things, there are areas in which Jacoby is guilty of sweeping generalisations and surface analysis. Humanistic-Existential Psychology, for example, is thrust aside with global rancour; no heed is paid to its historical context and progressive elements. Similarly, his discussion of the political left and of Critical Theory is suggestive and patchy, and, in the latter case, uncritical. And

Freud is heralded, somewhat too optimistically and unreservedly, as (in the wry words of a colleague of mine) "more of a Marxist than Marx himself".

To be overcritical in these ways would, however, be to expect too much. Jacoby explicitly states that his work is polemical, and he does not pretend, or aim, to give an exhaustive account. All in all, I would say that the book is exciting, stimulating, provocative, and intellectually and emotionally demanding. It is without doubt an immensely important work for any serious student of psychology and for any progressive thinker. In the words of Jacoby himself:

> "It would be brash to claim that there is nothing more urgent than to work out a relationship between psychology and social theory; similarly it would be exaggerated but not false to state that without a psychological component Marxism degenerates into abstractions and irrelevant dogma; or that without a theoretical and social content psychology erodes into a technique. There are many urgent things to do, and many more urgent than this. Yet the pursuit of these issues is an integral part of the theory and praxis of liberation; social and human transformation."
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> (Jacoby, 1975, p. xxiii)

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