Psychology in society, 1990, 14, 89-92

Rescuing psychoanalytic tragedy from ideological romanticism

Book review

Richards, B (1989) **Images of Freud: Cultural responses to psychoanalysis.** London: JM Dent & Sons - ISBN 0460024906.

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Since its inception a century ago psychoanalysis has radically transformed our collective psychological life, in spite of the fact that very few people have undergone psychoanalytic treatment. This is testimony, not only to the impact of intellectual theory on a culture's self-understanding, but also to the specific mode of critical self-awareness with which Freud infected contemporary first-world society. No area of our cultural life, whether it be literature, art, film, education or history has escaped the psychoanalytic influence. Like it or not, we work, love and dream in Freud's shadow even though few of us have lain on his couch. Given this fact, one might assume that the way in which Freud's ideas have been received and interpreted by the discipline of psychology would provide us with insight into contemporary psychology's own unconscious and, by extension the unconscious of modern culture generally. It is this thesis which informs Barry Richards' latest book, **Images of Freud.** Richards, clearly influenced by American historian Christopher Lasch's extraordinary seminal 1979 work **The culture of narcissism,** extended Lasch's original insights by editing an important book of essays in 1984. Titled **Capitalism and infancy,** it concerned the psychoanalytic critique of various aspects of late capitalist society.

With his recent book he is back at the familiar jagged interface of psychoanalysis and critical social theory. This time, however, his focus is more precise as he seeks to "trace some of the mutations undergone by psychoanalytic ideas as they have been received and passed on in various fields of psychology, and have thus been funnelled out into our everyday thinking about ourselves". He considers the reception of psychoanalysis within the three fields of academic psychology, humanistic psychology and the theories of the radical left. Underlying his project of using the hermeneutic tools of object relations psychoanalysis to interpret the cultural psychodynamics of Freud's reception by the psychological community is Richards'commitment to Freud's essentially tragic vision of human nature. This tragic vision stems from the profound ontogenic consequences of our protracted and total dependency on primary care-givers during infancy and childhood. This dependency has major psychological implications. The infant's gradual awareness of being separate from the maternal object is experienced as anxiety- and aggression-provoking because it ruptures the infant's original narcissistic fantasies of union with and control over the external world. The birth of selfhood is thus based on the experience of loss of our union with an omnipotent caring mother and our helpless vulnerability and dependence on a large, terrifying and unpredictable adult world which may or may not meet our basic needs. The fact that selfhood is predicated on narcissistic injury, infantile loss and dependency on others means that, even as adult individuals, these issues will play themselves out in our psychological and sociological dynamics, unavoidably entering the arena of political, economic and cultural activity. Richards proceeds to argue that how individuals and groups deal with this tragic insight and the resulting psychic pain will influence their interpretation of and response to psychoanalysis. Two broad individual and collective strategies may be adopted in the face of our tragic subjectivity: mature resignation or narcissistic illusion. The first strategy characterises normal healthy development. Insightful emotional recognition of the loss, dependence and conflict at the heart of our selfhood enables us to mourn the loss constitutive of our subjectivity, to experience mature dependence on others, to temper our infantile aggression and actualize our reparative concern for others in the form of civic commitments. For a number of reasons, however, this creative adaption to the tragic invariants of the human condition is not possible for many people. Instead, they cling to infantile narcissistic illusions and phantasies of perfect wholeness, happiness, omnipotence and independence. At an individual level such

unconscious phantasies underlie much psychopathology. However, when externalized collectively they influence the ideologies, aims and actions of social groups, organizations and institutions. We can thus speak about the pathological phantasy structure of social action in psychoanalytic terms. Richards goes on to say that contemporary responses to psychoanalytic theory have been refracted through the two prevailing and closely related ideologies of psychological utilitarianism and romanticism. The former he defines as "the doctrine that individuals are fundamentally motivated by the need to maximise their pleasures and minimize their pains ... " (p11). Romanticism is similarly concerned with the hedonistic maximization of happiness, added to which is the belief that the transcendence of everyday unhappiness into a realm of absolute fulfillment is not only desirable but entirely possible given appropriate courses of thought and action. Richards goes on to locate these ideologies in historically specific socioeconomic junctures where capitalist market relations foster a consumerist ethic and fragmented, alienated experience of self and others. Richards then contends that academic, humanistic and radical psychology have all been strongly influenced by these ideologies and that this in turn has influenced their response to psychoanalysis with its unwelcome counterposing spirit of tragedy and mature acceptance of our human limitations. He uses many examples to illustrate how academic psychology has systematically misinterpreted and banalized Freud's work by viewing it through the ideological filter of its own unconscious utilitarianism. Turning to humanistic psychology he contends that the humanist paradigm is predicated on the belief that "truth and salvation could be found in some organismic inwardness of the individual, and that the presence in our emotional make-up of introjected values was a pathology from which we needed to be delivered." (p112). The notion of the psychoanalytic subject structured upon the internalization of external others is anathema to the humanistic vision, founded as it is upon regressive phantasies of narcissistic self-sufficiency, internal harmony and the projection of all internal imperfections onto a world of "bad" authority figures who represent the world of social relations and our dependency on others. Freud is ostracized and rejected because psychoanalysis' demonstration of the social constitution of the individual subject through the processes of internalization and identification threatens the defensive humanistic illusion of self-sufficiency and its accompanying narcissistic phantasies of internal perfection. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic goal of transforming neurotic misery into common unhappiness falls far short of the manic "peak" experiences that the humanists reach towards.

Having exposed the narcissistic pathology underpinning humanistic psychology's critique of Freud, Richards now tackles the far more complex relationship between psychoanalysis and left social theory. Freud is no longer seen in radical social theory as the bourgeois embodiment of patriarchal authority. Critical theory, in various areas of application, has recognized that psychoanalysis' sophisticated formulation of socially mediated subjectivity provides insight into the operation and reproduction of oppressive ideologies. Furthermore, it can thus be recruited, at least at the level of theory, to the cause of emancipatory praxis. However, says Richards, the same narcissistic phantasies at work in humanistic psychology find expression in radical theory's incorporation of psychoanalysis into a revolutionary discourse of unattainable social perfection, free of alienation, constraint or contradiction. Here the pursuit of social justice through the destruction of capitalist society is perceived romantically as the necessary and sufficient condition for the establishment of a new order free of human suffering. Beneath the rational critique of bourgeois society one may often discern the narcissistic yearning for the lost infantile paradise, resurrected and projected in phantasy as a post-capitalist utopia. The conscription of psychoanalysis to this project in various Freudo-Marxist hybrids is a betrayal, says Richards, of the former's tragically realistic essence. He hastens to add that he is not promoting political quietism or apathy but rather situating political objectives and practices within the mature realization that pain, loss and conflict are ahistorical givens which cannot be transcended. He thus makes no apologies for the fact that his book has strong moral overtones, repeatedly emphasising that a precondition for authentic social action is the courageous embrace of the tragic sensibility and the capacity to resist the lure of ideological illusions which, whether reactionary or revolutionary, promise redemption from the pain of human subjectivity.

While certain chapters of the book could have been more rigorously developed one is left with the impression that Richards has not only made an important contribution to contemporary ideological analysis, but also that he has successfully demonstrated that modern psychoanalytic thought can be productively employed in comprehending social phenomena.