



Dawson, M. (2018) Revisiting Freud as a social theorist - but which Freud? *Sociology*, 52(5), pp. 1103-1109. (doi:[10.1177/0038038517730220](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517730220))[Book Review]

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/144576/>

Deposited on: 08 August 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Revisiting Freud as a Social Theorist – But Which ‘Freud’?

- Matt Dawson, *University of Glasgow*

Joel Whitebook

Freud: An Intellectual Biography

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, £30 hbk, (ISBN: 9780521864183), 494pp

Todd Dufresne

The Late Sigmund Freud: Or, the Last Word on Psychoanalysis, Society, and All the Riddles of Life

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, £24.99 pbk, (ISBN: 9781316631027), 294pp.

Dagmar Herzog

Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, £24.99 hbk, (ISBN: 9781107072398), 320pp.

It has been argued that the relationship between psychoanalysis and sociology is one of the repeated opening and closing of the latter to the former (Cavalletto and Silver 2014). In the current conjuncture, while work inspired by Freud continues to be produced in the realm of psychosocial studies (see Frosh 2010) it might be possible to suggest Craib’s claim that Freud has an ‘important message for sociology’ (Craib

1998:61) on the importance of the psychosocial has not fully been accepted. In light of this, it seems an opportune time for sociology to revisit Freud's work. But, revisiting or remembering a theorist is no easy task. Inevitably their work is open to reinterpretation, critique and appropriation; in short who is the 'Freud' we would be revisiting? Each of these books presents a different 'Freud' and, in doing so, demonstrate to us that the means of representing theorists are often as important as the content of the theories.

The Freud of the Break with Tradition and the Missing Mother

Whitebook's intellectual biography claims to identify a 'new' Freud. This Freud is shaped by developments in the field of psychoanalysis and has two key elements. Firstly, Whitebook confronts the figure of the 'missing mother' in Freud's thought and life. In doing so he is building upon two changes within psychoanalysis: the success of the feminist critique of the 60s and 70s and the increased importance of pre-oedipal (i.e. roughly prior to the age of four) approaches to development from Melanie Klein onwards. The second element of Whitebook's Freud is 'the break with tradition'. He places Freud in the lineage of 'Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Durkheim and Weber' (p. 17), all of whom saw modernity as involving this break. Freud however takes a slightly different approach to these thinkers. Rather than emphasising the rational, his work often emphasised the irrational by centring the psyche and its attendant drives. Therefore, reflecting the claim of Roudinesco (2016:215-232) in her recent outstanding biography of Freud, Whitebook sees Freud as part of the 'dark enlightenment' which in attempting to 'enlist the critique of reason and of the subject to formulate an "expanded" conception of rationality and subjectivity that is broader'

than the pure Enlightenment version also intended to do ‘justice to the truth content of the irrational’ (p. 12, 236).

Chapters 1 and 2 concern Freud’s early life, in the course of which Whitebook centres Freud’s otherwise ‘missing mother’. Seeking to dispel the myth of Amalie Freud lavishing her ‘Golden Sigi’ with praise and attention Whitebook suggests Freud experienced significant trauma due to the sudden absence of both his mother and nanny during his pre-Oedipal stage. Meanwhile, Freud experienced an ambivalent relationship to his father. While Jacob inducted Sigmund into the break of tradition by abandoning Orthodox Judaism in favour of the emerging *Haskalah* enlightenment movement he also, for Whitebook, failed in his position as an oedipal figure due to his lack of success as a merchant.

These claims concerning Freud’s development then shape the explanation Whitebook offers for Freud’s intellectual development. Paraphrasing Weber, he suggests in Chapter 3 that Freud follows science as a ‘vocation’ in the sense of allowing for the self-sufficiency he developed early as an ‘abandoned’ child. Meanwhile, nearly a third of the book, chapters 6-9, is spent discussing how Freud’s relationships with Wilhelm Fliess and Carl Jung provided sources of redirection for both Freud’s homosexual passions and his unresolved quest for a parental figure. Such discussions indicate Whitebook’s attempt to effectively psychoanalyse the father of psychoanalysis.

Whitebook’s discussion of Freud’s theorisation of modernity and the later cultural works also seeks to explain Freud’s work by individual psychological factors. It is suggested in Chapter 10 that while Freud reflected the jingoism of intellectuals at the

start of World War I, this is due to his abhorrence of femininity, represented by his absent mother and inadequate father, in favour of the masculinity of his idealised oedipal figure. Chapter 11 dismisses the value of the text in which Freud begins his cultural turn, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, due to its problematic ‘abstract terminology of metabiological theory’ (p. 362). Instead, the text is presented a means for Freud to grieve for his daughter.

This is not to say that Whitebook does not offer us some valuable points concerning what Freud may have to tell us as a social theorist. For example, in Chapter 12, drawing upon the work of Peter Berger, he is critical of Freud’s implicit elitism concerning secularisation in *The Future of an Illusion*. Furthermore, his *Moses and Monotheism* can, as outlined in Chapter 13, be seen as an attempt to bring the break with tradition biographically full circle. By emphasising the Judaic critique of idolatry and the *Haskalah* emphasis on reason, Freud is able to suggest that ‘psychoanalysis constitutes the culmination of the Mosaic tradition’ (p. 444).

However, there is a danger with exercises in intellectual biography of the type practised here by Whitebook. In short, by seeking to explain the value of intellectual work as illuminating something about that author’s life, it reduces their value as explanatory pieces of social theory *beyond what they tell us about one life, at one point in time*. The Freud which emerges from Whitebook is a fascinating portrait of a dedicated and complex man who wrote books which sought to solve his own psychological issues. In this sense, if one is interested in an attempt to apply psychoanalysis to the founder of the field this is a valuable book. If, however, one is seeking a justification for Freud’s work as telling us something about the world today

and an inspiration to return to the original texts, it is much less valuable, beyond Freud's place as a thinker of the dark Enlightenment.

The Late Biological Freud as an Intellectual Example

Dufresne's book on the late Freud confronts the question of his relevance as a social theorist head on. His answer does not seem encouraging:

Freud's incredibly complex answers to all the riddles of life are wrong...it is incontestable that psychoanalysis is literally unbelievable, can no longer be accepted as even passably correct or scientific, is fatally unreliable as a means for uncovering individual or collective histories, and is peppered with results that are fantastical Frankenstein monsters (p. 256)

Yet, despite this, Dufresne recommends Freud as an example of a 'philosopher doing sociology' (p. xvi) since:

For all of his foibles and faults, Freud demonstrates over and over again how it's done...So while the results are not repeatable, not universal, and finally not applicable to anyone but Sigmund Freud, the colossal effort of it all is still exemplary...Freud, in short, still teaches us to speculate and dream big – however wrong he was about all the riddles of life' (p. 256)

To make his case, Dufresne discusses the three key works of Freud's cultural turn – *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents* and *Moses and Monotheism* – bookended by a preface, introduction, conclusion and coda which places them in the context of Freud's work more broadly. In doing so Dufresne makes two claims about

Freud. Firstly, while the cultural works have often been dismissed by those seeking to claim the scientific status of psychoanalysis – partly on the basis of Freud’s own classification of them as ‘speculation’ – they in fact are ‘the revelation of everything Freud held dear to the theory and practice of psychoanalysis’ (p. xvi). In doing so, they also demonstrate Freud’s intellectual underpinnings. Rather than, like Whitebook, seeing Freud as a member of the counter-enlightenment, Dufresne sees him as a fundamentally romantic thinker, part of a tradition which ‘embraces the irrational facts of human suffering, masochism, and overwrought conscience’ and ‘understood that the diabolical discourses of the unconscious challenged...the presumed supremacy of reason’ (pp. 27-28). The Freud emerging from Dufresne’s book is closer to a critic of modernity than the broadly liberal supporter found in Whitebook. The second element is Freud’s biologism. Dufresne sees the speculative nature of the late Freud’s work as ‘a play with and through biology’ (p. 24). In particular, he is part of a Lamarckian tradition which emphasises the inheritance of acquired characteristics. This means that the death drive/instinct, central to the cultural works, should not be seen as a metaphor or a contingent element of our psyche but as a fundamental biological element of personhood, produced by human evolution.

With these elements in place, Dufresne’s exploration of the key cultural texts mixes a critical reading, intellectual history and biography. In the course of which he attempts to highlight hitherto under emphasised elements of the late Freud. For example, in Chapter 1 he discusses how *Future of an Illusion*, Freud’s critique of religion, is not only a continuation of the romantic engagement with this topic but also an implicit attempt to separate psychoanalysis from Marxism. This separation was more explicit

in *Civilization and its Discontents* with its critique of the ‘baseless illusion’ of materialist psychology (Freud 1930:63). Also, in Chapter 3, Dufresne complicates the relationship of Freud’s Judaism with *Moses and Monotheism*. As explored by Edmundson (2007), we should not forget how controversial this book was. One of the most prominent Jewish intellectuals of his time, at the time of the rise of the Nazis and during his own exile, wrote a book which not only started with the premise that there is something about Jewish people which means they are hated but also claimed Moses was not actually Jewish. So, in somewhat of an understatement, Dufresne highlights the ‘political insensitivity’ (p. 156) of the text but, having explored Freud’s late work as a whole, he is able to highlight how Freud’s hypothesis of the killing of Moses by his Jewish followers had created a form of historical guilt among the Jewish people. This sense of guilt, removed among gentiles whose idolatry meant that their sins were absolved in the figure of the sacrificed Jesus, was for Freud, the fundamental means of socialisation in *Civilization and its Discontents*. This led to Freud’s conclusion that since Jewish people ‘are the most guilty of all...they are also the most civilised’ (p. 159). Dufresne’s reading of *Moses and Monotheism* shows Freud’s more complicated relationship to Judaism; while he valued the tenets of the *haskalah* tradition his goal was always to reject the *religion* of Judaism in order to save what, in Freud’s view, made the *worldview* so valuable.

This returns us to Dufresne’s claims of Freud’s ‘wrongness’ and his value as an example of how to think. A very particular view of social theory is presented here, of a ‘philosopher doing sociology’ and in which, unlike the dismissive view of Whitebook, ‘one understands nothing of Freud’s so-called sociology without an appreciation of his scientific framework’ (p. 202), in this case his Lamarckian

biology. Therefore, the example of Dufresne's Freud should be followed not in the claims of his theory, but rather in the way his theory, by attempting to discuss 'all the riddles of life', requires sociologists to be aware of biological, psychological, sociological, philosophical and theological matters (if not more) as part of a critique of modernity. This Freud is not only a psychosocial thinker, but could also be seen to overcome the 'positive injunction to ignore biological processes' which advocates of the biosocial are so critical of, albeit in a Lamarckian fashion which might now be rejected (Meloni et al. 2016:8).

The Freud of Multiple Interpretations and Politics

Whitebook and Dufresne's texts, as intellectual biography and theoretical analysis respectively, inevitably seek to present an image of a 'Freud'. Herzog's magnificent book, as an intellectual history of psychoanalysis in the postwar period, faces no such requirement. Instead Herzog demonstrates the 'extraordinary plasticity to the thought-system that evolved under the aegis of the name of Freud' (p. 220).

Part One, 'Leaving the World Outside', concerns the postwar period in America and the role of sexuality. As Herzog notes, following the instigation of Ernest Jones for psychoanalysts to steer clear of 'sociological factors' (p. 3) the American Psychoanalytic Association sought to turn its practitioners' focus inwards. In doing so however, they faced public censure in the McCarthy environment for their excessive focus on sex. Psychoanalysis accommodated itself to this situation in two ways. Firstly, analysts emphasised psychoanalysis' affinity with religion by claiming they did not intend to remove the guilt from sexual desires, but to ensure guilt was experienced in the 'right' circumstances, in relation to 'problematic' sexual desires.

Secondly, homosexuality was seen as part of these ‘problematic’ sexual desires. For Herzog, homophobia was a consistent feature of postwar American psychoanalysis, ‘reinvented’ in each generation. When Kinsey challenged the oedipal explanation of homosexuality, psychoanalysis responded by developing the ‘love doctrine’ (p. 65) whereby homosexual sex was seen as problematic because it was (supposedly) shorn of the love found in heterosexual sex. When the sexual revolution of the 60s/70s undermined the connection of love and sex, psychoanalysis adapted by arguing homosexuality emerged from the inability to develop a clear gender identity in childhood. Indeed, homophobia was so inherent in psychoanalysis – and, as Herzog notes, was not simply the preserve of particular schools or political positions – that it was not until 2002 that the International Psychoanalytical Association adopted a non-discrimination policy towards it (p. 82).

Part Two, ‘Nazism’s Legacies’, brings the discussion to Europe and, in particular, West Germany. Herzog details the role of psychoanalysis in the diagnosis of PTSD via the policy of the West German government to give a pension to Holocaust survivors whose ability to work has been impacted by 25% or more as assessed by psychiatrists. Quickly a school of ‘rejecters’ emerged who denied almost all applications for the pension. Drawing on Freudian theory they argued that trauma was a consequence of childhood. Therefore, either well-adjusted individuals would ‘get over’ their experiences of the camps in time or, if they were experiencing trauma, this pre-dated their time in the camps. It was only through the efforts of the ‘sympathisers’, many of whom were psychoanalysts from outside Germany, along with international organisations representing Jewish survivors, that these views were challenged. However, as Herzog goes on to note, psychoanalysis’ role in discovering

PTSD is then criticised by radical psychoanalysts for creating a moral equivalency – the survivor of Auschwitz and the soldier fighting in Vietnam suffer the same trauma. These critics also suggested that such psychoanalytical understanding of PTSD, and potentially trauma more generally, are only episodic, rather than endemic to situations of colonialism or capitalism, with a ready cure to be found, meaning ‘trauma work had become a business’ (p. 121).

The emergence of this radical psychoanalytical critique leads us into Part Three of the text, ‘Radical Freud’. For Herzog, the New Left was ‘*the* major motor for the restoration and cultural consolidation of psychoanalysis in Western and Central Europe and for the further development of psychoanalysis in Latin America’ (p. 7). This new radical Freud could be found in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* but had an especial impact via the work of ethnopsychanalysts Paul Parin, Goldy Parin-Matthéy and Fritz Morgenthaler, authors of *Whites Think Too Much*. Rather than replicating the colonial relationship of seeking to ‘correct’ ego development in the Global South, this ethnography sought to explore how the ego developed in Mali. In doing so, the book’s critique of both colonialism and capitalism proved especially influential for the emerging New Left. However, its reception also redrew the focus of Freudian theory. As Herzog notes, many on the New Left, ‘although powerfully interested in Freud...did not care especially about the details of debates on the universality of the Oedipus complex’ (p. 208), therefore, they were not interested in the medical role of psychoanalysis. What these readers did take from *Whites Think Too Much* was that ‘it seemed to offer another model for how human community could be organised’ with the idea that ‘*different cultures produce different kinds of selves*’ (pp. 208-209). As also discussed by Zaretsky (2015) it was these kinds of

themes which were central to the development of a ‘radical’ Freud in a variety of struggles around the world. In this sense, Freud survived by his ideas moving away from the clinical, scientific setting he preferred and towards the forms of cultural speculation, of the ‘philosophical anthropology’ he practised, though still spoke dismissively of, in his late years. It is a figure closer to Dufresne’s, rather than Whitebook’s, Freud who emerges victorious in Herzog’s account.

Returning to my opening question, the Freud of Herzog’s text is, to repeat her term, a fundamentally ‘plastic’ one, open to multiple interpretations and able to be attached to varied political agendas. This is the value of the rich intellectual history produced here. By focusing on how Freud has been used, we can see that the question of ‘which Freud’ is an ongoing one, which responds to different intellectual, social and political contexts.

The Context of ‘Freud’

As Dufresne puts it: ‘theory always has a context’ (p. 14), I would add that context is multifaceted. For Whitebook, it is primarily personal, how the lives of theorists impact the shape of the theory they offer. For Dufresne, while personal factors are important, we also need to consider the intellectual debates and exchanges of which they are part. Meanwhile, for Herzog, it is the intellectual and political context in which theory is received which shapes its outcome. All of these are, of course, not mutually exclusive and each text reveals to us a different facet of the body of theory we attach to ‘Sigmund Freud’. What ‘Freud’ we choose to revisit may depend on the grounds upon which this revisiting is done.

References

Calvetto, G. and Silver, C. (2014) 'Opening/Closing the Sociological Mind to Psychoanalysis' in Chancer, L. and Andrews, J. (eds) *The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis: Diverse Perspectives on the Psychosocial*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 17-52.

Craib, I. (1998) 'Sigmund Freud', in R. Stones (ed.) *Key Sociological Thinkers*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 59-70

Edmundson, M. (2007) *The Death of Sigmund Freud: Fascism, Psychoanalysis and the Rise of Fundamentalism*. London: Bloomsbury.

Freud, S. (1930) *Civilization and its Discontents*. London: Penguin.

Frosh, S. (2010) *Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic: Interventions in Psychosocial Studies*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Meloni, M. Williams, S. and Martin, P. (2016) 'The Biosocial: Sociological Themes and Issues', *Sociological Review Monographs*, 64:1, 7-25.

Roudinesco, É. (2016) *Freud: In His Time and Ours*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Zaretsky, E. (2015) *Political Freud: A History*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.