

Psychoanalysis: Disunited Kingdoms

Some revolutionaries fervently wish that there were some deep connection between Marx and Freud, and the publication of [a letter from Marx to Freud](#) could be the [Rosetta Stone](#) to decode the relationship between political economy and psychic economies, finally perhaps settling the question of the real political allegiances of psychoanalysis.

The letter exists, republished in a Mexican psychoanalytic journal in 2008, and there has been much discussion among leftist psychoanalysts about it. There are versions in French, Italian and German, where a detailed analysis of the history of the text in archives in Amsterdam and Frankfurt weighs up what its significance might be. The letter is undated, but appears to have been sent by Marx in 1882 via Freud's then close friend and mentor Wilhelm Fliess in Berlin. The letter refers to then unpublished writings on hysteria that Freud had prepared with Joseph Breuer, and it tries to engage Freud in a correspondence about critical and materialist science, Marx offering to send over a copy of Capital for him to read.

Another letter from Marx to Engels has a smudged postmark which cues us into the 1882 date, and claims that Freud had sent him some papers on 'metapsychology' that would be the early workings on what would become psychoanalytic theory. Here Marx describes to Engels two key questions Freud is exploring; the existence of mental activities that are not conscious, which would indicate that the different classes are not fully aware of what they make, of the consequences of their actions, and the existence of a 'sexual economy' which appears as the result of investigations into the sexual lives of the bourgeoisie (which would fit neatly with their analysis of [bourgeois marriage](#) as a disguised form of prostitution, though Marx does not spell this out here).

If the dates are right then this would mean that this was old Marx, he died the following year, and was sent to a Freud in his mid-twenties, who Marx refers to in the letter twice as 'young doctor', that is well before Freud actually invented psychoanalysis. Much of the debate about the letters in the accompanying article, originally published in German in 1979, is about their journey and place in different archives, and this draws attention to a similarity between the histories of Marxism and psychoanalysis, which is that there are repeated returns to the founding texts, to interpretations and readings of those texts for clues about how things might develop. In both cases there is a contradiction between the privilege given to that writing and the practice, which in psychoanalysis would be through oral transmission of technique and in Marxism would be through class struggle.

The word 'correspondence' is a bit misleading, for there is no evidence of a reply from Freud to Marx, and the word is a bit of a giveaway of what the later Marxist readers might be hoping for, that there is some kind of correspondence between the two theories. Another little giveaway is in the link to the journal '[Subjetividad y Cultura](#)', where the web-link gives it as '[correspondencia-marx-feud](#)'. Another similarity between Marxism and psychoanalysis is the degree of censorship and rewriting of history that marks both, and makes it more understandable that there should be such energy put into deciphering who wrote to whom.

In Marxism, of course, we know that the rise of Stalin and the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union meant that the production of the Marx-Engels complete works – the '[MEGA](#)' – was not in safe hands. So, when David Riazanov in charge of the Moscow archives said he was doubtful about the authenticity of the letters and was purged shortly afterwards (something

[Trotsky commented](#) on in 1931), this could be taken as further evidence that there was something to hide. Trotsky was favourable to psychoanalysis, sending his own daughter [Zina](#) to an analyst in Berlin, and Stalin saw it as a decadent bourgeois fake-science opposed to dialectical materialism. In this light it makes perfect sense that a future president of the International Psychoanalytical Association, [Joseph Sandler](#), would once have been a revolutionary Marxist and member of the [Fourth International](#).

In psychoanalysis there is much controversy over the way its own history is written, squabbles over the omissions and ambiguities in the first major biography of Freud by [Ernest Jones](#), who was always anxious about links between psychoanalysis and the Left, and who opted for keeping the psychoanalytic associations in Germany under the Nazis going even when they expelled the Jewish analysts. One embarrassing episode Jones glossed over in his biography was the death of Victor Tausk who committed suicide in 1919 the day after ending his analysis with Helene Deutsch following Freud's own suggestion to Deutsch that she end it. So the suggestion that the Marx-Freud letter found its way to the archives via the Tausk family could be further evidence that something was being hidden which should now be brought to light.

So, there is [doubt that the letter is genuine](#), but is that really the point? Clustered around the letter are the activities of adherents of two theoretical frameworks turned into kingdoms carefully guarded by followers so that we should know what lies at the authentic origin of each one. But the keyword here is 'lies'. This '[invention of tradition](#)' is crafted much in the same way as the invention of the tradition of separate nations is patched together, usually from external sources, and certainly well after the founding events they pretend to describe.

That is, we all live in a world that is divided into little fiefdoms called nation states, and so it makes all the more sense that we should think of our own individual selves as some kind of sovereign territories. Freud explored the image of the self as like a fortress which guards itself against outsiders and which makes sure to suppress any internal division that might cue the enemy into a weakness, and the invention of tradition in Marxist work is designed to show how the [colonial centres and their offspring](#) are fabricated and then turn vicious if there is a questioning of how real they are.

What psychoanalysis and Marxism both show is that these supposedly unified and separate entities, the self and the nation, are fictional, and that often they serve to obscure conflict; these stories we tell ourselves cause more emotional pain rather than less as our little fortress of the self is shored up against internal threat, particularly against desires of others and for others; and these stories are bound up with practices of exclusion and policing of boundaries as the fantasy of a United Kingdom or Fortress Europe operates as more of a prison state than a paradise.

Some Marxists forget this invention of tradition when they appeal to a fictional unity of the British working class as an argument for keeping [Scotland](#) in their disunited kingdom, and they risk falling into the trap of little England when they get ready to say no to [Europe](#). Psychoanalysis reminds us that there is no such thing as 'unity', that a wholesome harmonious society of any kind is just as much a fantasy as a wholesome harmonious self. Psychoanalysis reminds us that unconscious desire pulls in different directions, tears us apart as individuals or groups, even at the same moment that it glues us together in our collective struggle to make different forms of civilization. And it reminds us of the importance of memory, both of what did and what did not actually happen in the past.

Psychoanalysis is quite Marxist, something the ‘correspondence’ between Marx and Freud actually diverts attention from. Freud called in 1918 in a speech in Budapest for public free provision of psychoanalysis for workers, actively supported the development of a welfare service and education in Berlin and Budapest and in Vienna through the [Sex-Pol](#) clinics of Wilhelm Reich (who was expelled from the Stalinized Communist Third International for being a psychoanalyst and from the International Psychoanalytical Association for being a revolutionary Marxist working with, among others, activists of the Fourth International). The imposition of fees and the intense bureaucratic regulation of psychoanalytic treatment was actually instituted by the Nazis when they took power in Germany and Austria, and it is that model of privatised treatment that we live with today.

The debates over the implementation of Freud’s Budapest speech were international, and internationalist, calling on local state resources to be put into psychoanalytic education and treatment while dissolving national state boundaries. The rise of fascism imposed private and nationalist agendas on psychoanalysis while breaking the link between psychoanalysts, who were mainly on the Left, and Marxist politics. The connection between psychoanalysis and Marxism will be forged again through our commitment to disunity of each, diversity of debate and practice and a critical perspective on the operations of the State or the orthodoxy of tradition. Contradiction is what we listen for in our psychotherapeutic work, and contradiction rather than unity is what enables an articulation of the unconscious life of individuals and politics today.