



Reinterpreting Psychoneurosis to Ascertain Mass Pathology in Civilized Society

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Commentary

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ABSTRACT

During the psychoanalytic discovery and investigation of Psychoneurosis, theoretical scaffoldings offered by Freudian theory were expansive and rich but still incomplete. Amongst the Neo-Freudians, Fromm began unearthing the psychopathology of the society under the heavy influence of Marx. Fromm remarked that the grown-up patient was not a child but an alienated adult who was seen as the neurotic. Feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness and inhibition occurred because the patient did not experience himself as the subject and originator of his own acts and experiences. Alienation had thus caused the neuroses to occur. Ushering in 'spiritual liberation' along with complete change of the 'economic social constellation' for Fromm were the necessary prerequisites before envisioning a cure of societal pathologies rooted in the contemporary mode of production. Freud on the other hand was sceptical about the application of psychoanalysis to civilization. He ringed in caution to the application of systems of knowledge developed at the individual level when projected to more global levels. Diagnosis of a "collective neurosis" would be tedious since no starting point associated with its development could emerge as the fixation point. Another hurdle that needed to be addressed according to Freud was that even if a substantial system of knowledge did take shape its implementation would be a herculean task. It would take great skill and courage to compel a community to become aware of its blind spots and become available to therapy. Thus, the growth and development of Psychoneurosis had charted a

trajectory from the unexplored abysmal depths of the psyche to the more gross levels of societal productions. This paper attempts to establish links between the classic concept of Psychoneurosis and the larger gamut of modern-day society's psychic reflections.

Keywords: Psychoneurosis; alienation; collective neurosis.

Classical debates on 'man and his nature' when seen from Aristotelian perspective pointed towards the 'biological' while Plato's to the 'theological'. In the same context Freud's [1] viewpoint seemed contrasting. He denied that Psychoanalysis could have any kind of "moral implications" for those domains that spread out beyond the scientific paradigms. Freud considered the normal man in maturity beyond the 'natural'. The mature man had been the outcome of complex developments, the course of which had not been determined either by the purely 'biological' or the astute 'theological'. Yet Freud further added that no source of ideal maturity existed beyond the reach of the innate capacities of man himself. This compels us to infer that Psychoanalysis then, did eventually possess the capacity to reveal mechanisms that would elevate man beyond his instinctual mechanical nature towards the ideal mature state.

The zeitgeist of Freudian times was presented by Jastrow [2] who captured the prevailing sentiment of the morally upright culture when he said "*The problem in all its magnitude was the unfortunate heritage of the complicated age in which we live – an age superficially a machine age, in deeper analysis a psycho-neurotic age or, in the pristine meaning of the word, a psychoanalytic age. The twentieth century homo has become acutely and disturbingly conscious of his internal difficulties; there is a troubled intro- direction of his psyche. In olden days religious contemplation and consolation absorbed and drained off- 'abreacted' in Freudian phrase – the troubled emotions. The management of our cerebral "souls" to attain peace of mind had made mental hygiene a worldwide interest*". It thus became evident to the Freudian society to unwillingly evaluate its own psychic failings. Psychoneurosis was being attributed a large piece of share in causing society's mental distress. Bergson [3] on the other hand raised the status of psycho neuroses when he stated that humanity's most delicately organised and important works had been furnished by those who possessed deviations in psychic pattern, most aptly addressed as Psychoneurosis. The phenomenon of

Psychoneurosis had appeared on the collective conscience of the Victorian era leaving an indelible mark, the presence of which is still felt today. The conception, development, and even integration of Psychoneurosis into other mental phenomenon presses for its detailed account.

During the winter of 1885, Freud's [4] short Paris sojourn would mark the beginning of the odyssey of a concept. It was then that Charcot demonstrated to Freud that intangible ideas could be causal agents of organic diseases of the central nervous system. Freud understood that in order to reach to the underpinnings of hysteria, psychology had greener pastures to offer than neurology. Hypnosis was successfully employed for the treatment of neurotic patients till [5]. Joseph Breuer, Freud's friend and colleague offered valuable insights into using catharsis as a means of investigating the symptoms of hysteria. Anthony Storr [5] remarked that "Freud and Breuer came to hope that all neurotic symptoms could be abolished in this laborious though essentially simple way of Catharsis". A joint proclamation by Freud and Breuer in 'Studies on Hysteria', [6] suggested their own surprise discovery of removal of hysterical symptoms by "*Bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and had put the affect into words*". The analogy of a "blind" boil or abscess within the psyche most aptly described the dynamics of neurosis. Freud's medical background served as a backdrop for his creative conceptualization of "neurosis". The defence mechanisms of "repression" acquired centre stage while scripting the aetiology of psychoneurosis. Neurosis resulted due to a conflict between a repelling emotion trying to penetrate consciousness and part of the mind engaged in trying to hold it back. In conversion hysteria, physical symptoms were a converted manifestation of the affect. 'Actual neurosis' from the German word 'aktuelle' meaning 'current' were directly caused by unsatisfactory or incomplete discharge of the sexual impulse. In Freud's own words "*Neurotic symptoms were not related directly to actual events but to wishful fantasies and that as far as neurosis were concerned psychical reality was of more*

importance than material reality". The subject matter for repression were not only memories of actual traumatic events but instinctual impulses (sexual in nature) manifesting themselves as fantasies. A hypothesis was formulated that all neurosis were based on sexual instinctual forces. This hypothesis was heavily suggestive of the so-called Freudian "Pan sexuality" interpretation by the lay public. Replying to these attacks Freud in a letter to Professor Edohard Clapaiede of Geneva (1921) wrote, "*From me you borrow the sexual nature of the libido and from Jung its generalized meaning. And it is thus there is created in the imagination of the critics of pan sexualism which exists neither in my views nor in Jung's.... The wider public however are ignorant of this...*"

A shift in focus had occurred from analysing traumatic events in a neurotic's life to his sexual emotional development as a child. Freud stated "*A formula begins to take shape which lays it down that the sexuality of neurotics has remained in, or been brought back to, an infantile state*". Sexuality was nevertheless fundamental to psychoanalysis because of its antiquity, imperiousness, plasticity and proneness to mal-development or ability to fixate everything else in a person's life. Sexuality served as an exemplar for all other forms of cognitive and emotional functioning. As Freud [7] himself puts it "*Attitude in sexual things has the force of a model to which the rest of his reactions tend to confirm. A man who doubts his own love...may or rather must, doubt every lesser thing. Since sexuality was attributed a long and complex evolution, it peculiarly was opened to distortions along the path.*"

Three essays in the theory of sexuality [8] that underwent systematic intervention as well as amendment over six editions spanning twenty years had a richness, complexity and elegance which Wolheim [9] claims obscured popularization. In context of understanding neuroses, issues of plasticity and proneness to mal development became essentially more relevant than the other two. Plasticity of sexuality directly reflected the capacity of many aspects of our functioning to become sexualised i.e., simply put many aspects of our life can become attached to a sexual impulse along a line of association. Evidence in this regard was presented in a paper entitled 'The Psychogenic disturbance of vision' [10]. The paper very effectively described how psychogenic disturbances in vision could occur when the

sexual component of looking became oppressively assertive leading to its repression. The term assigned to this phenomenon was.....wherein the repressed instincts in all attempts to reassert themselves incapacitate the ego and blot normal vision. The eye amusingly, Freud states "*Behaves like a maid servant who refuses to go on a cooking because her master has started a love affair with her*". The residual character of neurosis i.e., what remained to the neurosis over and above the symptoms was the missing link that helped establish a new technique in treating neurosis. Eventually Freud believed that it was important to lay hands on the main symptoms which ranged over the other symptoms, and whose identification and genesis would become the sole aim of analysis.

The very nature of the wish is such that it sets into effect the occurrence of another wish which is diametrically opposite in nature. In other words, neuroses originated from the ego's refusal to acknowledge a substantially powerful instinctual interest existing in its id and deny its unconscious access or dispute the object towards which it was assigned. The ego wards off threat from the impinging instinct by repressing it. Counter-intuitively the repressed impulse struggles against a destiny forced on it by the ego by creating for itself substitutive gratification (a symptom). Accepting the symptom is a compromise the ego has to make putting at stake its own unity in order to continue repressing the original impulse. Repression pushes the ego at a lower power status than its super-ego which now dictates its terms. The final clinical picture of its neuroses is the subjugation of ego at the hands of its super ego and reality and a direct conflict with its id. What the analyst has to decode is the symbolic manifestation of the impulse in the form of a wish. Freud clearly explains that the concept of a wish was reasonably different from the concept of instinct. A 'wish' was thus a representation of an instinct and not the instinct itself. The distinguishing feature between instinct and wish appears in the domain they occur. Articulation in language is possible for a wish but not of an instinct. All other forms of life have been left bereft of this quality by nature i.e. the unique ability in humans to state their wishes. Caution needs to be observed though while interpreting the repressed wish for it no longer ceases to be identified in the syntactical laws of grammar. It finds expression in the language of imagery, myth, simile and metaphor. Miri, M. [11] describes language of a wish as, "*Although the*

language doesn't contain affirmation, denial, contradiction etc, it is translatable- a better word is "paraphrase able"- in to the language of self consciousness or even better said- self knowledge".

The core of an individual's being remained on the level of the earliest stages of psychological functioning for Freud. In consonance with this idea, ego functioning, thinking and behavioural contact with real world can be reduced to secondary formations. According to Freudian theory the primary processes and the earliest stages of development are never really transcended in an individual. The core of the being remains inaccessible to the understanding and inhibition of the secondary processes only. The role of redirecting the instincts along the most expedient paths falls in the lap of the secondary processes. This restriction on the range of dynamics of the secondary processes arises by virtue of its late arrival in contrast to primary processes in the psychical evolution of man. Neuroses than could be understood as a disguised attempt of forcing the patient out of real life, of alienating him from reality.

Freud [12] observed "*The neurotic turns away from reality because he finds it unbearable*". 'Reality' here denotes the inner world of organic needs, instincts and wishes as opposed to the popular connotation of the external world. The intolerable reality spans the dark world of the repressed instincts. The domino effect is set in action i.e. the repression now blocks the normal perception of external reality. Repression, Freud argues "*Can create mechanisms in the mental apparatus which cut off the stream of stimulation from outside prohibiting the inner dynamic contents of the mind consequently lead to the banning of those parts of the outside world which are related to the repressed parts*". Anna Freud [13] has most aptly called this mechanism as "*Restriction of the ego*". Neuroses according to Wolheims' [9] interpretation of Freudian writings "*Depended causally on a triad of factors: frustration, fixation of the libido and the tendency for conflict*". Frustration was a direct consequence of the inability of the wish to be expressed in its original version. Setting out on a path of diverting the representation of instinct towards more socially acceptable forms results in sublimation. Since there are limits exercised on the capacity of ego to tolerate dissatisfaction and libidinal mobility, a backward path is chosen. This regression and seeking solace in an earlier stage of libidinal development becomes the next

obvious outcome. Either or both sexual aim and sexual object can be chosen points for fixation. In this regard the aetiology of perversion surfaces up with clarity. Securing satisfaction in the more primitive mode belies the modus operandi of perversion. Transformation of perversion to neuroses requires forbiddance of the individual by himself or a part of his personality. Then the only route left for expression of the libido lies in the creation of the symptom. The triad earlier suggested thus is complete with conflict fusing in with frustration and fixation. "*Freud had created a half way house between the earliest conflicts and later neurosis*" as per Wolheim [9]. Freud [14] was quoted as saying "*Every neurosis in an adult is built upon a neurosis which has occurred in his childhood but has not invariably been severe enough to strike the eye and be recognized as such*".

The specific aetiology of each of the other Psychoneurosis is drawn on a large canvas as distinct shapes coloured in the different shades of the same hues. As previously discussed, hysteria resulted from an associative chain between a repressed idea and a bodily symptom. Freud [8] in his 'metapsychological papers' talks of substitutive formation in which a conscious or pre-conscious idea becomes substituted by a repressed idea. The repressed idea transformed as a symbol becomes core of the neurosis. In Paranoia, the original repressed idea is referred away and considered a reflection of the external reality. Reaction- formation is the chosen path of substitution wherein an idea contradictory to the chosen idea is intensified. In Schizophrenia the idea passes through a system of Symbolic equation termed "*organ speech*". It leads to affective hebetudes i.e., a total loss of interest in the outer world. A commonality that arises in the aetiology both of the Psychoneurosis and the psychoses is the factor of frustration- i.e., a deep-rooted lack of fulfilment of persistent uncontrollable childhood wishes, which have been long imprinted in our composition. The pathogenic effect as Reiff [15] proclaims "*Depends on whether, in the tension of such a conflict, the ego remains true in its allegiance to the outer world and endeavours to subjugate the id or whether it allows itself to be overwhelmed by the id and thus torn away from reality*". Classical psychoanalysis postulates the genesis of neurosis and psychoses in ego's conflicts with the various powers ruling it, Transference neuroses results from a conflict between ego and id, a narcissistic neurosis

corresponded to a conflict between ego and super ego and a psychosis to that between ego and outer world.

Psychoneurosis were built around an actual neurotic core whereas in actual neuroses, biological energy was misdirected i.e., blocked from access to consciousness and motility. The vegetative symptomatology of actual neuroses got nourishment from undercharged sexual energy. Freud's methodology was questioned and accusations were targeted at whether psychoanalysis was within the realm of natural science at all. Differently put could psychoanalysis be a part of scientific psychology in the strict sense of the word.

Jaspers [16] a leading psychopathologist of his time attacked psychoanalysis to be interpretation of meaning thus falling out of the realm of natural science. On the other hand, a Viennese philosopher and physiologist Allers [17] critically denounced the unconscious as '*A priori erroneous from a philosophical point of view*'. Jastrow too held the Freudians guilty of a strange indifference harboured by the clinical profession of neurotic affections. Citing example, he posed a question as to why with similar infantile experiences, some people never succumb to neuroses. In the hysterical cluster of typical symptoms how does the "*Air-swallowing*" and choking symptom become a substitute for a phase of emotional conflict in women was another attack flung at the psychoanalysts. The verdict was pronounced as a failure of the Freudian formula to account for the total range of neurotic symptoms. Only those symptoms were picked by the Freudians to which their theory could apply overwriting largely the rest of the symptomatology which came across their way in a lighter vein. Jastrow [2] remarks "*That in the course of many thousand pages, Freud refers to so many doctrines as 'pillars' of his system that his house becomes a colonnade*". This comment was levelled at Freud's creative fertility and an all-inclusive temper. Hartmann [18] in his critical analysis of classical psychoanalysis remarked "*The ability to renounce immediate pleasure gain in order to secure a greater one in the future cannot be derived from the pleasure-principle alone; not even memories of pain experiences suffice to explain it*". Understanding the function of secondary processes only in terms of cathecting and means of discharge of energy meant refuting the basis tendency in human for the need to explore and actualize its potentialities. It is not possible to rule out the

ego-character of the instinctual impulse while comprehending human motivation and conflict. Conflict between an impersonal energy or an id and ego was not the real basis of neurosis, for the Freudian critic. Emphasis needed to be put on the non-accepted or non-integrated ego-character of both conflicting forces. Sarason [19] says "*Personality was hurt and disturbed because both forces are "mine" and yet cannot be integrated in the same ego*". The theoretical scaffolding offered by physical laws to explain organismic behaviour were left unresolved in the course of development of Freudian theory of human mind and their presence undisputedly remains.

Shifting focus to macro level of human understanding, the hullabaloo of Psychoneurosis can symbolically be projected on the larger gamut of modern-day society's psychic reflections. Searching for solutions we delve again into the realm of psychoanalysis but now looking towards the neo-Freudians especially Erik Fromm. It is in his works that we are able to capture the other domain of individual functioning i.e., as an integral unit of society. Unearthing the psychopathology of our societies as laid down in the works of Marx [20] became a stand point of contention for Fromm's psychoanalytic venturing.

Marx talked of 'alienation' or estrangement. Influenced by Hegel, Marx [20] declared that the world (nature, things, others and himself) have become alienated from man. Fromm [21] remarks "*He (man) does not experience himself as the subject of his own acts, as a thinking, feeling, loving person, but he experiences himself only in the things he has created, as the object of the externalised manifestations of his powers. He is in touch with himself only by surrendering himself to the products of his creation*". Marx provided a continuum from the phenomenon of "*religious alienation*" to that of "*alienation of labour*" in his Economic-Philosophical manuscripts of 1844". Marx explained alienation of man from nature himself and his fellow man. The spirit of man for Marx is "*Free, conscious activity*" and labour was best described as "*Life activity, productive life*". A direct consequence of alienated labour is the corresponding curtailing of man's free spirit, thus '*Life itself appears only as a means of life*'. This idea is expressed in the following words, "*Thus alienated labour turns the species life of man, and also nature as his mental species-property, into an alien being and into a means for his*

individual existence. It alienates from man his own body, external nature, his mental life and his human life. A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labour from his life activity and from the species life is that man is alienated from other men. When man confronts himself, he also confronts other men".

Perversion of all human values according to Marx occurred due to alienation. The supreme values of life like '*riches of a good conscience and virtue*' fail to develop since the values inherent in economic activities such as "*Gain, work, thrift and sobriety*" dominate conscious activity. Man is becoming poorer as he is becoming rich. The quantity of money becomes the only needed quality in money itself. The potentiality of providing secure, healthy future becomes subsidiary to the value associated with earning money. Coming back to Freudian transference neurosis, alienation reveals an extended version of the same but the domain has shifted from the psyche to the social. Freud [22] revealed that the patient undergoing psychoanalysis many times tended to love, hate or even became scared of therapist without any true regard to the psychoanalyst's personality. A theoretical explanation thus provided by Freud said that the patient transferred the feelings of love, hate and fear experienced in childhood towards the parents on the therapist. During transference the patient relates to the therapist as he would to his father or mother. Fromm adds under the heavy influence of Marx that the grown-up patient is not a child and does no justice to the complexity of phenomenon under study. It is the alienated grown-up patient who is seen as the neurotic. Feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness and inhibition occur because the patient does not experience himself as the subject and originator of his own acts and experiences. Alienation has caused the neuroses to occur. Projecting his inner feelings of emptiness and impotence on the available object i.e., the therapist becomes the obvious next step for the patient in therapy. By submission to the object, the patient himself feels relatively stronger, secure, and courageous. Loss of the object would mean self loss. This fundamental dynamic of the idolatry worship of the object due to alienation experienced by the patient becomes the central mechanism of transference neurosis. At a more global level every neurosis can be subsumed under the category of alienation since it is most characterised by the fact that our passion (for instance, money, power, lust etc.) becomes

dominant and detached from the unity of personality, and becomes its inevitable ruler. Glancing over the dynamics of modern-day industrial societies, a new form and intensity of idolatry can be grasped. Man has become the object of blind economic forces that inadvertently rule his life. Worshiping the products of his self creation, he himself is converted into a mechanical object. It is not only the skilled worker but the socially most recognized and visible class of people i.e., those who manipulate men and symbols have become alienated according to Marx. Fromm remarks [23] "*Alienation has reached a point wherein it borders on insanity in the whole industrialized world, undermining and destroying its religious, spiritual and political traditions and threatening general destruction through nuclear war*". Ushering in 'spiritual liberation' along with complete change of the 'economic social constellation' for Fromm were the necessary prerequisites before envisioning a cure of societal pathologies expressed as contemporary idolatry rooted in the contemporary mode of production. In this regard an overlooked fact that requires special attention is that Freud by no means thought exclusively in terms of individual pathology. Freud did write of a "social neurosis". In words of Freud [24] *The evolution of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity with the development of an individual, and if the same methods are employed in both would not the diagnosis be justified that many systems of civilizations – or epochs of it- possibly even the whole humanity- have become 'neurotic' under the pressure of civilizing trends?*". Freud further speculated that the application of psychoanalysis to civilization could meet either a successful or tragic fate. He ringed in caution to the application of systems of knowledge developed at the individual level when projected to more global levels would engender sufficient difficulty [25,26]. Diagnosis of a "*collective neurosis*" would be tedious since no starting point associated with its development could emerge as the fixation point. Another hurdle that needed to be addressed according to Freud was that even if a substantial system of knowledge did take shape its implementation would be a herculean task.

CONCLUSION

It would take great skill and courage to compel a community to become aware of its blind spots and become available to therapy. Nevertheless, Freud was hopeful when he says "*In spite of all these difficulties, we may expect that one day*

someone will venture upon the research into the pathology of civilized communities”.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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