

## Freud in the Present<sup>1</sup>

Theodor W. Adorno

Translated by Nan-Nan Lee

### Translator's Introduction

Of the 21 volumes of *Frankfurt Contributions to Sociology* which Adorno and Walter Dirks edited, and published in Adorno's lifetime, he signed or co-signed prefaces for 17 volumes. "Freud in the Present" written in 1957 is the introduction remark to Volume 6 in which Adorno and Horkheimer asserted the relevance of orthodox Freudian theories to the Institute for Social Research, and at the same time offered critique of what Adorno called psychoanalytic revisionism and social psychology of their time. "Freud in the Present" is a snapshot of the relation between Freud and critical theory.

—Nan-Nan Lee

Freud in the Present. A lecture-cycle for the one-hundredth birthday of University of Frankfurt and University of Heidelberg. With introduction by Franz Alexander, Frankfurt on Maine, 1957.<sup>2</sup>

The Institute for Social Research, other than Alexander Mitscherlich in Heidelberg, was essentially involved in the establishment of the Freud lectures at University of Frankfurt and University of Heidelberg in the summer semester of 1956 in Frankfurt. The organization of the lectures was carried out in collaboration with the dean of the philosophical faculty of the Institute, Gottfried Weber. In Heidelberg, the medical faculty was invited.

Since its creation in 1933, the Institute included strictly Freudian psychoanalysis in its research. From the beginning, a psychoanalytic department was affiliated with the Institute, which was managed by Karl Landauer, the now deceased student of Freud in Bergen-Belsen. The "*Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung (Journal of Social Research)*" in its first publication contained a programmatic essay on the tasks of an analytic social psychology. At that time, in the shadow of the impending threat of Hitler dictatorship, we witnessed the contradiction between the interests of the masses and fascist politics, by which they enthusiastically allow themselves be harnessed. We saw that the economic pressure carried forward into the social-psychological unconscious process, while people still bring this pressure to bear in conducting their own business and accepting the loss of freedom. Numerous theoretical works of the Institute were attempts to pursue the interaction of society and psychology further. As always, we viewed the social pressure, what Freud himself called "life-affliction" (*Lebensnot*), as the primary.

The subject matter of the interplay between social authority and psychic repression played an essential role also in the empirical research of the Institute over the years. The 1935 volume *Authority and Family* published in Paris in theoretical blueprint, in collections and in

monographs came to grip with the internalization of authority in the Protestant ethics of the bourgeois era, in terms of both the analytic description and explanation of the authority-bound character and the knowledge of socially determining social-psychological categories. Later, during the emigration, in collaboration with the Berkeley Public Opinion Study Group, the Institute carried out researches, which were published in the volume *The Authoritarian Personality* in 1950 in New York, viewpoints and categories from the earlier works were related to a broad empirical material and above all, applied to elucidation of one of the darkest mass phenomena of the present, the persecution obsession directed at minorities. These studies are not thinkable without the impulse of the Freudian psychology and making use of diverse Freudian concepts.

When Freud admittedly raised the claim that sociology was by and large nothing but applied psychology, it appears to us that the laws of society as such are not the pure interiority of human beings was overlooked. These laws have reified themselves. They oppose human beings and individual psyche independently and contradict them in crucial factors. The more this turns out to be, the more the function of what the term “social-psychology” covers up. It was our intention twenty-five years ago to track how the social coercion reaches deep into the subtle psychic ramifications of the individual who imagines himself as being-for-itself and belonging to himself, so today the reflection on social psychological mechanisms in many cases is used exactly to deflect the violence of society. Difficulties and conflicts of the present condition are played down, as soon as one immediately reduces them to the person, to internal processes only.

Therefore it appears to us that there is less a synthesis of sociology and psychology at this time, than insistent but separate work in both areas. Thus certain theories of Freud also do not remain unaffected. He tended to absolutize the psychic nature of human being vis-à-vis the conditions of their existence. The “reality principle” which he advocated positively can lead to endorsing the adaptation to the blind social pressure rigorously and in the end justify the continuity of the pressure. Admittedly, this intention accounts for only one side of the Freudian thoughts. It is not to be separated from the other, his deadly serious experience of the burden, under which the mankind labor along, —just that experience which confers the Freudian theory its uncompromising depth and substantiality.

This kind of consideration is carried out in some contributions to the first volume of our edition, the “*Sociologica*.” However these contributions greatly opposed a psychologization of theory of society, by the same token they thought very little of sociologization of psychology. The psychoanalytic revisionism of a different school,<sup>3</sup> which advocates greater significance of so-called social factors versus the alleged Freudian exaggerations, does not have Freud’s most brilliant discoveries—the role of the early childhood, and that of the repression, since it softens the central concept of the unconscious, it allies itself with social conformism, furthermore, with trivial common sense, and forfeits the critical acuity. The degeneration of Freudian theory into an all-around psychology is also passed as an advancement.<sup>4</sup> After the old resistances to the psychoanalysis are apparently overcome, Freud is ousted by fiat for the second time, whereby the mythologized obscurantism and the positivism, which is contented with superficial phenomena of ego-psychology, easily come to an understanding.

In contrast, it is necessary to make the obvious attempt to re-establish the living consciousness of Freud in Germany, to show how little out of date his theories are, as the prevailing view has made of them. To this end, the insight was to introduce aspects of the work of major modern psychologists, specifically to connect them with Freud. Not only Freud's theory as such should be recapitulated, but also its strength on specific questions mostly related to the social issues should be the focal point. This strength does not limit itself only to the contributions of dedicated followers of his school, but also bring to light, in certain respect, those different from him.

This approximately pertains to the understanding of the publication of lectures on Freud. We thank all authors heartedly for their contributions. It is evident that motifs of these texts are also found in other works of the mentioned authors respectively. Nowhere a uniform, consistent coherence was produced by forcible editing in place of a multiplicity of doctrines over often-controversial subjects. Also overlaps could not be deleted consistently.

Thanks to Klostermann Publishing Company for printing the texts of the "opening ceremony." As Helmut Coing in his speech has pointed out, credits are due to the federal states Württemberg Baden and Hessen, the city of Frankfurt, and the Ford foundation for the sponsoring the publication of the lecture-cycle of Freud. I would like to repeat the same gratitude on this occasion.

The editing of the lectures and presentations which is without exception on the basis of tape-recording is the handiwork of a group of colleagues, who also contributed magnificently to the organization of the events: Otti Bode, Norbert Altwicker, Hermann Schweppenhäuser.

Spring 1957

*Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) was a leading theorist of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. His influential and well-known works are Negative Dialectic, Dialectic of Enlightenment, Authoritarian Personality (of which he is a contributor and an editor). His Gesammelte Schriften consists of 22 volumes with topics ranging from philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology to music, and literature. He first encountered Freud's psychoanalytic theory in early 1920s, and ever since Freud remained influential to Adorno's critical theory throughout his life.*

*Nan-Nan Lee is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. Her recent publication is a translation of "Die revidierte Psychoanalyse" and an introduction to the translation entitled "Sublimated or Castrated Psychoanalysis: Adorno's Critique of Revisionist Psychoanalysis," Philosophy Social Criticism (March 2014), vol. 40, no. 3, 309-338. Currently she is working on a translation of T. W. Adorno's Der Begriff des Unbewussten in der transzendentalen Seelenlehre.*

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Collected Writings* 20.2: Miscellaneous Writing I / II: Forewords, Prefaces and Introductory Remarks to *Frankfurt Contributions to Sociology*, p. 646-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Frankfurt Introduction to Sociology*, 6. Undersigned by Max Horkheimer and Adorno.

<sup>3</sup> The main figure representing this school is Karen Horney. In “*Die revidierte Psychoanalyse*” (“Revisionist Psychoanalysis”), Adorno criticizes her two books *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (New York: Norton, 1937) and *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1939) severely as reactionary.

<sup>4</sup> See T. W. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” translated by Nan-Nan Lee, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 40, no. 3 (2014): 326-338.