

The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis

Studies in the Psychosocial

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The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis

Diverse Perspectives on the Psychosocial

Edited by

Lynn Chancer and John Andrews

Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, USA

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Selection, introduction and editorial matter © Lynn Chancer and John Andrews 2014

Individual chapters © Respective authors 2014

Foreword © Craig Calhoun 2014

Preface © Jeffrey Alexander 2014

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2014 978-1-137-30456-8

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First published 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-137-30457-5 ISBN 978-1-137-30458-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781137304582

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

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Foreword

Psychoanalysis and sociology took shape about the same time. Both were influenced by an extraordinary late nineteenth and early twentieth century combination of intellectual ferment and consolidation of disciplines as well as by the Enlightenment and Romanticism, moral philosophy and modern science, German idealism, and much more materialistic thought. Both understood themselves as transforming previous intellectual approaches through systematic empirical inquiry.

Surely, there were also differences. Sociology developed from roots in social movements and broad, largely extra-academic intellectual currents like the intersection of evolutionary thought and progressive reform. It moved into universities during the 1890s and gained relative stability as a discipline alongside others in social science. Psychoanalysis developed in quasi-academic medical circles, with roots in a long history of clinics and hospitals for the insane as well as private treatment. But it remained mostly outside universities, maintaining its separate training and intellectual circles in autonomous institutes even after the rest of medical education was absorbed more fully into universities.

Psychoanalysis had a more individual and temporally compact origin in the work of Freud and the intellectual milieu of fin-de-siècle Vienna. Sociologists should be careful, though, not to exaggerate the myth of heroic individual invention. From Charcot and Bleuler through the range of participants in early psychoanalysis who fell outside efforts to maintain orthodoxy—Adler, Jung, and Reich—we should recognize the contributions of the wider range of thinkers, researchers, and therapists. This is not simply a matter of fairness but of grasping that powerful as was the heritage of Freud, psychoanalysis had many innovators and very quickly established roots in different settings.

Sociology had no singular inventor even if Comte coined the word. Arguably the main traditions were German, French, and American, with heroic founder figures in Weber, Durkheim, and the Chicago School. But within each national school, variations and arguments were and have remained as sharp as in psychoanalysis: Tarde against Durkheim in France; the conventional sociology of the German Sociological Association against Weber's call for value-neutrality in Germany; and Parsonian functionalism against the Chicago School in the US. And cutting across these was the Marxist tradition that influenced a variety

of schools of sociological thought, not all explicitly Marxist though. Indeed, psychoanalysis and sociology were both shaped by tensions between engagement in social change and sometimes movements and projects of establishing scientific autonomy.

Most dramatically, psychoanalysis pursued the depths of individual personality and character. Sociology commonly set itself against individualism and indeed against psychology. The contrast is real, and it is one of the reasons why the present volume is a useful effort in building bridges. But of course the disjuncture should not be overstated. Psychoanalysis examined social relations, especially in the family, as sources of individual psychology, and Freud and others extended psychoanalytic thinking to explore broad social questions. Sociology contributed to interdisciplinary social psychology and, in a few cases, tried to understand individuals not just oppose individualism. There have also been advocates for methodological individualism but this is not a matter of following leads from psychoanalysis.

Most methodological individualism in fact takes individuals to be rather simple and unitary, decision-making bundles of interests and preferences. The theorists in question do not necessarily say individuals *are* quite so simple. Rather, some acknowledge that simplifying assumptions are merely required to make the models work. But the issue is an important one for sociology more generally, well beyond methodological individualism. In its repeated efforts to demonstrate the power and quasi-autonomy of the social, sociology risks neglecting the complexity of individuals. This can take the form of what Dennis Wrong called, in the era of functionalism, an “oversocialized concept of man.” It can take the form of imagining that individual action is shaped by consistent interests rather than contradictory desires. It can take the form of forgetting that nodes in seemingly stable networks are in fact highly volatile shapers of relationships.

Psychoanalysis offers sociology one path for grasping the interior space and complexity of individuals. This is partly a matter of attending to exceptionally influential and intense social life that helps to shape individual persons in families and other close relationships. Psychoanalysis is not only an exploration of individual sources—of a purely interior life. It addresses the interaction of the internal and external in experience, affect, memory, and learning. Psychoanalytic approaches vary in their attention to the social shaping of the person—and some emphasize innate predispositions and the very earliest experiences more than others. Still ego-analysis, object-relations, and the interpersonal analysis

of Harry Stack Sullivan and Karen Horney are centrally focused on social persons; for all its differences, Lacanian approaches also stress a self forged in relation to an external world of symbols and language as well as experience—that is, a self that is not purely innate.

Still, for most of the psychoanalysts, the social world is rather simpler than for sociologists. That psychoanalytic research is so tied to individual depth-psychological therapy is one reason. Even if external sources are identified, the focus remains on intra-psychic phenomena. Psychoanalysis explores the family in enormous detail though largely through emotionally charged (or repressed) memory rather than other sorts of evidence. But society beyond the family tends to appear somewhat schematically. There is often a leap from the microsocial to culture at large. Even the important theme of how families, and thus the experience and formation of persons, are shaped by class, community, or cross-cultural variation is commonly in the background of attention. The very historical and social specificity of the notion of individual is at best unevenly taken up.

Nonetheless, if the emphases of sociology and psychoanalysis seem poles apart, fruitful connections and integrations have occurred. Early analytic approaches to “character” shaped a whole field of research on personality and socialization that grew in an era when social psychology was a stronger bridge between the disciplines of sociology and psychology than at present. This bridging produced work that not only influenced each academic field but fed back into psychoanalytic thinking. The same can be said about work on culture and personality though anthropologists were more at the center than sociologists. Studies of small groups were another area of strong and fruitful interaction, though again somewhat faded from the center of sociological attention today. Some of this work was linked to London’s Tavistock Institute that became a center not only for the object-relations approach to psychoanalysis but for new and partially analytically inspired approaches to bureaucracy and organizations from Elliot Jacques to Eric Miller and A.K. Rice. Critical theorists drew not only on psychoanalysis but also contributed studies like *The Authoritarian Personality*. Talcott Parsons published in *Psychiatry*, the journal of the William Alonson White Institute that was at the center of the “interpersonal” movement in psychoanalysis. The influence of Lacan on poststructuralism was enormous. And feminist theory became a central zone where psychoanalysis and sociology influenced each other and new thought influenced both in diverse perspectives from Luce Irigaray to Nancy Chodorow to Juliet Mitchell.

Still, as the editors of the present book suggest, there is something of an unfulfilled promise in the relationship—a much greater potential than actually realized one. The book brings together accounts of the relationship, each finding a different balance among past success and underexplored possibilities. It also contains helpful discussions of directions the relationship might take now—in life-history research, for example, or the study of violence. It explores topics that demand attention to both social and personal levels of complexity from social movements to race and racism and the affective issues of immigration politics. It is appropriate and helpful that chapters explore their authors' personal experience of engaging in both sociology and psychoanalysis. This is all the more interesting where contributors are both sociologists and analysts (since, to paraphrase Gardner Lindzey, some of the best interdisciplinary relationships are formed in individual minds). But, of course, Lindzey also encouraged interdisciplinary teams and collaborations, and it would be nice to see more of each.

Some of the authors in this book are more optimistic about future relations between psychoanalysis and sociology than others; some see a renewal underway. If this is so, it may be ironically because psychoanalysis has moved more into universities (often into humanities fields) at the same time that it has seen its influence in psychiatry and psychotherapy decline in much of the world. To be really optimistic perhaps we should look to settings like Argentina where psychoanalysis has not only thrived but became woven into the very fabric of public life and culture as did both social science and psychiatry. But as this volume makes clear, we can also look to some impressive historical precedents, and some very interesting contemporary examples. Psychoanalysis and sociology made sharply distinct claims on the modern sensibility but they take up common interests nevertheless, offering each other sources of new insight and inspiration.

Craig Calhoun
Professor, London School of Economics

Preface

This volume explores the marginalization of psychoanalytic thinking in contemporary sociology, a problem well known but badly understood and deeply incongruous. Sigmund Freud was one of the most original and compelling social thinkers of the twentieth century. He opened up the emotional dynamics and cultural strains of modern life as brilliantly as Max Weber, explored symbolism and solidarity as ingeniously as Emile Durkheim, and in his capacity for conceptual elaboration and theoretical complexity surpassed them. No modern social thinker has created theory at once as systematic or as dynamic as Freud.

For contemporary sociology to have marginalized such work of genius, not to mention the century of psychoanalytic theorizing that followed in its wake, represents a grievous mistake. Some essays in this volume represent felicitous efforts at remediation. Others provide explanations of why this intellectual impoverishment has occurred.

Sociology understands itself as an aggregative science, moving downward from collective social fact to individual explanation. Psychoanalysis is disaggregating, moving upward from individual motives to collective action. Efforts from either tradition to gain access to the fruits of the other have often been reductive, sociologists awkwardly professing to explain individual motives via social structures, psychoanalysts interpreting social forces via individual emotions and drives.

To provide conceptual integration across this great divide would require a second Freud or another Weber, following up on the pioneering initial steps Parsons took half a century ago. The best efforts to cross the chasm, exemplified in many of the following contributions, have built bridges in more modest and piecemeal ways. Placing this part of the psychoanalytic edifice with that piece of sociological architecture, many deeply original and counter-intuitive sociological insights have emerged. Eric Fromm, Theodor Adorno, Eric Erickson, Neil Smelser, and Nancy Chodorow (and Parsons in his empirical model)—each of these psychoanalytic-cum-sociological thinkers produced problem-oriented investigations and theories that proved highly persuasive to contemporary colleagues.

Such brilliant chasm crossings have been the exception not the rule. The reason is that sociologists have tended to conflate supra-individual, collective patterning with objective and impersonal social force. To

correct this mistake, sociology needs to recognize not only the social in the individual but the individual in the social. Patterns and structures can be collective, deeply emotional, and subjectively meaningful all at the same time.

Culture is patterned emotion. Emotion is culture experienced. Sociology examines emotions writ large. Psychoanalysis studies societies writ small. If the social is subjective, then a meaning-centered sociologist must learn to speak with the listening voice of the psychoanalyst, to employ the same hermeneutic method of deep interpretation, and to read structures of social feeling as imaginatively as psychotherapists read individual-feeling texts.

Jeffrey C. Alexander
Professor, Yale University

Acknowledgments

Not unlike its subject matter, this book has a long and varied genealogy. It emerges from and gives concretized form to the workings of a small reading group started over 20 years ago by Catherine Silver and Lynn Chancer, and is still “in business.” The purpose of “our little group,” as we have fondly referred to it, has been to bring together people interested in, and doing research on, both the social/sociological and psychic/psychoanalytic dimensions of diverse topics. In common, we gave each other intellectual and emotional support since the larger field we value in many important respects (sociology) has for decades not encouraged, but tended to marginalize, explicitly psychosocial endeavors. Although the people in our psychosocial reading group changed and evolved over the years, it has fulfilled this purpose admirably, amply, for and beyond its “core” participants. Years ago, we met at the West Village apartment of Columbia-trained sociologist and psychoanalyst Suzanne Schad-Somers, whose hospitality before she sadly and prematurely passed away has continued on the Upper West Side in George Cavalletto’s apartment. For people who attend regularly, and even for those who drop in and out, George’s generous provision of food and his fantastic (“renowned,” at least for us) cappuccinos have contributed to memorable afternoons and evenings of readings and excellent conversation, laughter, and a more open-minded, genuinely wide-ranging sense of intellectuality and theoretical sophistication than many of us were encountering elsewhere. Without Catherine’s and George’s inspiring intelligence and warmth—key “psychosocial” elements of the group’s longevity—this book would not be possible.

And, thus, we dedicate *The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis* not only to George and Catherine but to “our little group” as a whole. For whether long-time members or one-time “guests” (including a few clinicians, Catherine among them, and now Patricia Clough in-training), this meeting place has consistently provided a meaningful forum for exchange and debate traversing disciplinary boundaries. We apologize in advance for anyone this brief list omits to mention, but collective credit for this volume’s existence simultaneously belongs with both usual and “dropping in” scholars too: with Arlene Stein, Tom DeGloma, Joshua Klein, Dena Smith, Micki McGee, Vikash Singh, Alan Roland, Ilgin Yorukoglu, Tony Jefferson

(sometimes, when in from the UK), Doyle McCarthy (when in from Fordham), Stanley Aronowitz and Christina Nadler, among others.

Members of our group have also assisted in organizing and participating in one-day mini-conferences on Psychoanalysis and Sociology now approaching quasi-institutionalized status themselves: 2014 marks the fifth pre-ASA mini-conference on this theme. Organized by Lynn Chancer and Lauren Langman, the mini-conferences provide a wider, national space for sociologists to discuss the social-and-psychic character of culture in and outside the US. To Lauren, too, special and sincere thanks for his major intellectual and organizational help in making these at once intellectual, political, and sociological mini-conferences happen and grow. Thanks, too, to ongoing participants in the mini-conferences including Harried Fraad, David Smith, Neil McLaughlin, Fred Alford, sometimes Gary Alan Fine—among many others not named whose participation is nonetheless greatly valued—for bringing these mini-conferences alive with their psychosocial passions and interesting contributions.

Others merit equally grateful acknowledging. Hardly can we leave out the sociologists and analysts from a range of subfields—from graduate students to senior professors—whose essays in this collection make the volume, we believe, a unique contribution. Enormous thanks to the series editors, Wendy Hollway, Peter Redman, and Stephen Frosh, for putting together a psychosocial book series and for your interest in including a volume primarily (though not exclusively) US-oriented. Your comments and support have been invaluable. To Sasha Roseneil, thank you for your role, along with Wendy and Peter, in building intellectual and institutional support in the UK about the significance and persuasiveness of psychosocial endeavors (as we have been trying, analogously, to do in the US). At Palgrave Macmillan, Libby Forrest and Nicola Jones have been wonderfully patient, intelligent, and helpful—both efficient, and enjoyable—to work with throughout the book's evolution into print. Hardly least, many thanks also to Graduate Center research assistant extraordinaire Kevin Moran. Kevin's careful and extremely smart editorial and administrative assistance have been invaluable in the last stages of this book's completion (and through the psychosocial ASA mini-conferences as well), as has been his willingness to work long hours and committedly stick with the many ups-and-downs of keeping track of over twenty varied contributions at all stages of the production process. He has assisted with the book intellectually as well, and we are very grateful for his support and clear understanding of this volume's underlying motivations.

For, when all is said and done, the purpose of this volume—and the superb group of original essays it contains—is to have an effect, to legitimize diverse modes and applications of psychosocial analyses both theoretically and methodologically, and to nudge the US field into giving multi-dimensionality the consideration it, too, deserves. If we succeed in getting sociology to give psychoanalysis another look, and a better chance, we will feel the effort to have been worthwhile indeed.

Notes on Contributors

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