

Freud's Psychology of the Masses¹

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It cannot be our aim in this review—for space already precludes it—to portray Freud's psychological system and to give an evaluation of it, even in outline. That would require a treatise in itself—which, to be sure, would be no bad thing, since on the one hand Freudian psychology signifies a certain advance compared to common psychology, but on the other, like most modern theories, is very liable to mislead anyone not heeding the totality of social phenomena; liable to offer him one of those panaceas for explaining every phenomenon that are so popular today—without forcing him to come to terms intellectually with the real structure of society.

Every psychology so far, Freudian psychology included, suffers in having a method with a bias towards starting out from the human being artificially insulated, isolated through capitalist society and its production system. It treats his peculiarities—likewise the effect of capitalism—as permanent qualities which are peculiar to 'man' as 'Nature dictates'. Like bourgeois economics, jurisprudence and so on, it is bogged down in the superficial forms produced by capitalist society; it cannot perceive that it is merely assuming forms of capitalist society and in consequence it cannot emancipate itself from them. For this reason it is similarly incapable of solving or even understanding from this viewpoint the problems besetting psychology too. In this way, psychology turns the essence of things upside down. It attempts to explain man's social relations from his individual consciousness (or sub-consciousness) instead of exploring the social reasons for his separateness from the whole and the connected problems of his relations to his fellow-men. It must inevitably revolve helplessly in a circle of pseudo-problems of its own making.

This state of affairs appears to alter when the problem of the psychology of the masses crops up. But even one look at the manner in

which crowd psychology approaches its problems will show that the same false propositions prevail to an even greater extent. For just as the psychology of the individual fails to consider his class situation (and with it, the historical surroundings of the class itself), so here psychology comprehends the 'masses' as a congregation of human beings which, although it may vary according to the number of participants or their state of organisation, is nonetheless limited to these *formal* differences. Crowd psychology rules out the influence of economic, social and historical conditions *in its method*. Indeed it even endeavours to prove that it is of no import to phenomena of crowd psychology what the social composition of the crowd may be. It follows principally that crowd psychology attempts to explain crowds from the individual. It analyses the spiritual changes taking place individually in the crowd. It therefore makes no attempt to turn the problem the right way up. On the contrary, it contributes to its inverted position. This is not fortuitous, for *in crowd psychology, the features of the class struggle inherent in bourgeois psychology clearly emerge*. Its tendency is to lower the intellectual and moral value of the crowd, to demonstrate 'scientifically' its instability, lack of independence and so on. Leaving aside the intricate and sophisticated terminology, we may say that today, bourgeois crowd psychology is still formulating in scientific terms the same reactionary view of the masses which Shakespeare, for instance, expressed in dramatic terms in his crowd scenes.

As a researcher of integrity, Freud sees the contradictory and unscientific aspects of this view. He senses that this *systematic disparagement* of the masses not only leaves the heart of the matter unconsidered but also fails to produce anything new; yet with his positive solution he remains entangled in the same contradictions. For he too seeks

to account for crowds from the psychology of the individual soul, and in attempting to avoid *underestimating the masses* he lapses into an equally boundless *overestimation of leaders*. For Freud seeks to explain crowd phenomena from his general sexual theory. In the relation of crowd and leader—in which he claims to locate the central problem of crowd psychology—he perceives only a special case of that 'primal fact' at the root of relations between lovers, the parent-child relationship, relations between friends, professional colleagues etc.

We cannot provide a critique of this theory itself in the present review. It only needs to be remarked that Freud, in a totally uncritical way, comprehends the emotional life of man under late capitalism as a timeless 'primal fact'. Instead of undertaking to investigate the real reasons for this emotional life, he seeks to explain all the events of the past from it. The unscientific nature this method becomes most crassly evident where Freud, taking as his starting-point the (correctly or incorrectly described) manifestations of infantile sexuality in contemporaries, seeks to account for primitive society. In so doing, he arrives at the fantastic supposition of a 'primal horde' roughly corresponding to the patriarchal family. To take such a starting-point is nothing short of flying in the face of the most well-known findings of modern ethnological research (Morgan, Engels, Cunow, Grosse etc.).

But to make clear to even the scientifically least informed reader the absurd consequences of such a method, let us refer to another example, Freud's psychology of armies. This is a question which Freud discusses in great detail.

Needless to say, he does not distinguish between one army and another: in his view the peasant armies of ancient Rome, the mediaeval

armies of knights, the crudely disciplined mercenaries from the *lumpenproletariat* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the crowds mobilised in the French Revolution are exactly the same 'psychologically'; so alike that he finds it unnecessary even to raise the question of the difference in the social composition of armies. Instead, he finds the bond which holds armies together in 'eros', in love. "The army general is the father who loves all his soldiers equally, and hence they are comrades to one another... Each captain is, so to speak, the general and father of his division, each lieutenant the father of his unit." And German militarism has come to grief over its 'unpsychological methods', through the 'neglect of this libidinous factor in the army'. He even ascribes to this the effect of pacifism on the army at war's end.

We did not quote this example in order to expose an otherwise meritorious researcher to deserved ridicule. We quote it as a crass example—the more so the higher we rate Freud's learned achievements so far—of how topsy-turvy the methods are with which bourgeois learning—in this case, psychology—operates. It illustrates how bourgeois psychology neglects the most simple and basic facts of history in order to arrive at 'interesting' and 'profound' theories through fanciful generalising from superficial phenomena or even from purely invented and contrived 'spiritual facts'. Such learning is incapable of even purely academic development, for it will remain hopelessly stuck in the circle of pseudo-problems to which such false propositions give rise until it comes to perceive the *social, class-governed character of its mistakes*. But not the slightest sign of this can be seen in any bourgeois discipline; and the less so, the more its problems touch on topical questions. All 'profundity' of exposition in contrast to the 'dogmatic uniformity' of historical materialism

only panders to attempts to draw a veil over this state of affairs—attempts, of course, which are in many cases unconscious. But for that very reason it is vitally important, in each such case, to make abundantly clear not only the mistake itself, but also its social foundations.