Glenn C. Altschuler Ph.D.  This Is America

Glenn C. Altschuler, Ph.D., is the dean of the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions, and a professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

**Freud: Conservative Revolutionary**

A reassessment of Freud based on accounts of his sessions with patients.

Posted Nov 03, 2016


Source: pixabay.com
Seventy-five years after his death, Élisabeth Roudinesco reminds us, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, continues to “disturb Western consciousness” with his myths; his interpretation of dreams; his explanation of the id, the ego, and superego; his accounts of Leonardo da Vinci, the Oedipus Complex, and Moses and monotheism; and his analysis of civilization’s discontents.

Drawing on archival materials in London, Paris, Vienna, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., as well as published sources, Roudinesco, the Head of Research in History at the University of Paris Diderot (Paris 7), provides an insightful, balanced, and sympathetic portrait of Freud. As she assesses Freud’s revolutionary ideas about rationality, sexuality, and the unconscious, Roudinesco demonstrates that Freud was less a scientific thinker who uncovered universal truths than a product of his times, a genius, to be sure, but very much a bourgeois shaped by society, family, and politics in the late nineteenth century.

Roudinesco is, of course, scarcely the first person to identify flaws in the core precepts of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. But her critique has an especially persuasive force because it is grounded not only in an analysis of Freud’s books, diaries, and letters but from accounts of his sessions with patients. Roudinesco points out that Freud, a product of the Enlightenment and German Romanticism, who strove to bring to light and confront the powerful subterranean forces motivating human beings, claimed that psychoanalysis was suitable for people who were intelligent, sophisticated, relatively young, aware of their condition and committed to improving it, and not for anyone suffering from psychosis, hysteria, melancholia, narcissistic neurosis, the death drive or destructive impulses; but didn’t always abide by these strictures.

Although she does not lay out criteria for measuring success and failure, Roudinesco notes that many patients felt Freud had cured them. “Sometimes the dramatic effect is absolutely shattering,” one of them declared. “You feel dreadful things happening inside you, can’t make out what they might be,” until, following a series of questions, “the whole truth dawns upon you, the Professor rises, crosses the room to the electric bell, and shows you out the door.” On the other hand, Roudinesco notes, twenty of the 170 people treated by Freud drew no benefit at all from the sessions and another ten “ended up hating the therapist.”

Predicated on a traditional understanding of the roles assigned to each member of the nuclear family (“happy motherhood, accomplished fatherhood”) and a “psychologizing of psychic life,” Roudinesco writes, his therapeutic approach “initially represented an authentic innovation but would end up subject to ridicule.” And Freud “spent a good deal of time contradicting and combatting himself.”

At times, for example, he behaved like an “old-style paternal marriage arranger, blending the couch and conjugal counseling.” He told some patients that society forgave adultery more readily than divorce and with others favored “a good separation,” providing it was followed by another marriage. The sexuality of girls, according to Freud, “is organized around phallicism (“they want to be boys”) and an awareness that the clitoris in an inferior substitute for the penis. While this thesis was “empirically correct,” Roudinesco reminds us, it is not “universally applicable.” Anatomy is not destiny, “for, insofar as it is in phase with infantile subjectivity, it can change in response to transformations imposed by society.” The theory of freedom is inherent in psychoanalysis, she maintains: “one must recognize the existence of destiny the better to free oneself from it.”

And yet, even as she situates Freud in the milieu of bourgeois, fin de siècle Vienna, and the traditional cultural and scientific norms of the nineteenth century, Roudinesco does not lose sight
of the immense dimensions of the revolution he wrought. In the literary masterpieces he wrote, in the transatlantic psychoanalytical movement he founded, and in his professional practice, Freud identified a new, flawed, yet immensely valuable way of understanding human sexuality, defining it as “a universal psychic disposition and the very essence of human activity.” And he gave us, she writes, a cluster of concepts to represent sexuality: the drive, the source of unconscious psychic functioning; the ego, superego, and id; the libido; bi-sexuality; and “desire, a tendency, an accomplishment, an infinite quest, an ambivalent relation to others.”