

Plumbing the Depths

by [Stephen Schecter](#) (May 2019)



Freud and Herzl, Amit Shimoni/Hipstory

Ah, the depths! The lower depths of course, as though there were any other. To add the word lower is pure redundancy, but somehow it sounds right, suggesting that we are talking here about the muck that lies at the bottom. The instinctual muck, as Freud put it, the one he caught a first glimpse of the day the mobs gathered to hail the election of Vienna's anti-Semitic mayor, way back in 1895. History too, it seems, has its lower depths.

The depths were Freud's business. In fact, you might say he added depth psychology to Spinoza's masterly analysis of human passions. Not only was there the basic plane of joy, sorrow and desire combining to make us active or passive, pleasant or angry, kind or tyrannical. There was a whole dynamic at work, mobilizing libido in the service of erotic or destructive impulses, rummaging among the instinctual miasma of the id to channel the vapours of memory into the walking, talking ego of the daylight world. And thus produce a mess, a right fine mess.

Everything is sex, people said Freud said. But that is a bit flippant. What Freud did was unpack the elements that went into our emotional makeup, look at how they can combine to produce a psychological being. And he unpacked them because people until then did not really want to look at them; not head on, at any rate. They preferred them refracted in literature, recounted in jokes. Sublimated, Freud called it, working their way up from the lower depths where people preferred to keep them nicely repressed. Indeed, everything is repression is more likely what Freud said everything is.

Of course, sex is right there down in the lower depths, but not because it is slime or sludge. It is there because it crystallizes all our senses, fusing them into a feeling of bliss that hovers below the liminal threshold. But the bliss has its dark side. It can yoke itself to murder, or even to the frenzy that stops short of murder yet still exacts its pound of flesh. Eroticism gone cannibalistic. Although we walk on two legs, we once walked on four.

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My dear Herzl. You keep telling me you are tired, very tired. I do not doubt you have had a heart attack. But the tiredness you complain of is more emotional than physical. I suspect it has to do with your sense of failure, as a husband, as a playwright, as a man of letters. Even your Zionism you describe as the Sabbath of your life, as if it should give you rest, but all it does is drive you to ruin, to use your own words. I think you are selling yourself short. Yes, your sexual life has been pathetic from what you described to me. Infatuation with young nymphets who did not even know they were nymphets, then a marriage to one you knew from the get-go would be a disaster, your parents always hovering in the background and sometimes in the foreground. Did you not leave your wife on a number of occasions to return home, a home you left only at the age of twenty-nine? Even in Paris you brought your parents to live with you. To them you have consigned the care of your children upon your death. Were it not for your father I am afraid you would never have left home. I suspect he suspected all was not right with your attachment to them, an attachment that has remained as strong today as it ever was. You explain it by the death of your sister. You explain it by the warmth and encouragement they have always shown you. But you know what the Bible says: a man must leave his parents' home to cleave to his wife. Something you never did. So what did you do with that sexual energy which never found an outlet?

And Freud answered the question Herzl should have asked himself. You wrote, hoping to become the literary wunderkind that entranced your mother and captivated your wife. But your

plays lacked the roundness that the grappling with sexual life brings. You settled for the sparkling vignettes of a foreign correspondent, a posting which made sure your marriage bed would remain empty. Even then you managed to sire three children, hoping fatherhood would anchor you. But domesticity was not your entrée to philosophy. Nor was Zionism, if your recent novel about the Jewish state to be is anything to go on. Yes, I read it, Freud told Herzl, but it does not read like a novel. It too lacks the drama and pain that surely will accompany the birth of that state. But then it is an engineer's blueprint, is it not? An extension of the program you wrote to outline the Zionist project: the return of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland, but this time not against the wishes of its imperial Pharaoh. No, this time the exodus will be above board, as you explained to me you explained to Hirsch, with the agreement of the European powers, secured by international law. You will even, as you told that rabbi in Vienna, be taking the fleshpots of Egypt with you this time. Permit me to be a bit skeptical, but why not? Who can foresee the future? What interests me more right now is the past. Your past. The one you continue to lament as lost and wasted. But which is not as lost and wasted as you think.

For Zionism turned out to be the greatest play you ever wrote. And not only wrote, but directed, produced and starred in too. Of course your Viennese rectitude led you to insist you would deal with the princes and nabobs of this world, leader to leader dealing not in plagues and magic tricks but modern science and technology, and to do that you would lord it over all the Zionist underlings you attracted that drove your wife crazy because who else could do all that work? When they got together you told me all they could do was squabble over a country they did not yet have, making you think the first art form of the Jewish state would surely be light comedy. But you

yourself were deadly serious, and for once ready to throw yourself whole-heartedly into the work to which you were born and work at it until you were ruined, though it did not ruin you at all. On the contrary, it made your heart beat faster and utilized your talents to the utmost. What did you tell me that time you were about to give a speech in Whitechapel when you fell sick you almost had to withdraw? That you saw your legend being born? Few are those who get to see and feel that in a lifetime, Dr. Herzl.

Zionism, you told the Jews of Vienna and western Europe, is our return to Judaism. I do not know if that is the case for all of us, but it certainly holds true for you. Zionism was your return to Judaism. It made you feel alive and happy. In Sofia where the Jews greeted you as the Messiah you remembered the stories of your grandfather in Semlin whose rabbi migrated to Palestine before he died. And on the train back from Vilna you had tears in your eyes at the thought of those Jews you now considered your brothers you had to leave behind. And in Basel, when you mounted the dais of the synagogue on the eve of your first congress to recite the prayers you could barely recite at your own bar-mitzvah which was not a bar-mitzvah but a confirmation, again you were swept with emotion every bit as overwhelming as the emotion you felt when the delegates in the evening could not stop clapping. And all this because you set the Jewish masses in motion by draping the Basel Municipal Casino in theatre curtains and dressing an army of beggars and boys in white ties and tails. Quite an achievement, I should think, one you could say you had been preparing for your entire life, though it came at a price of sexual and emotional misery, misplaced pride, and denial of what it turned out you held most dear. Think of the dream you told me you had last night. You were alone with the Kaiser in a rowboat. In other words, you are now on equal terms with a man who you once thought had the power to give you what the Sultan would not.

And since your German is probably better than his, you could outduel him in a literary joust that would ridicule his anti-Semitism in his own eyes. And is this not what you still do, sick as you are, with the prelates and statemen of this world? Yes, you have come home, though the detour has been long, and home has turned out to be far older than the house in Budapest where you were born.

Herzl lies quietly on the couch in Freud's study, thinking about what Freud has explained. So you don't think Zionism is our return to Judaism? he asks. Or is it simply not so for you? You know I have a fear of the masses once they are unleashed, Freud answers. I never wanted to unleash the masses, Herzl said, but when the rabbis temporized and the Rothschilds of this world blocked my attempts to raise money I had no choice. Besides, in this day and age when we discuss everything, why not discuss as well the Jewish question? I have no objection to that, said Freud, but the release of instinctual energy condensed in the mob can be a frightful thing. Chance and good fortune put you in the right place where your instinctual conflicts found some resolution in a socially productive channel. Others may not be so lucky and their impact may not be so beneficial. Look at what happened to Moses. He led the Hebrews out of Egypt only to be turned upon time and time again; even nearly killed, if you believe the Bible. Perhaps the ancient Israelites did kill him and the Book of Deuteronomy is the cover-up. Even you wondered if you will not be shot at next, and your exodus has not even begun.

Did Moses also have instinctual conflicts to resolve? Herzl asks, changing the direction of the conversation somewhat. He did not have the mother you did, Freud says, someone who read him poetry and sent him poems of encouragement she clipped out of newspapers. Your response was to become, for quite some

time, a dandy. Moses's mother sent him sailing down a river three months after his birth and then became his wet nurse, only to give him up once again. That must have made him conflicted, half Israelite, half Egyptian, balking at the call that tore at his heart and raging when faced with betrayal. He did, after all, murder a man before he was twenty and did a lot worse in the desert. Perhaps the masses he unleashed sensed it and themselves got contaminated with his unconscious, not to mention their own, lamenting the land of their childhood he forced them to leave. The line between love and rage, life and death, is very thin, and in the distorted memory traces of our childhood can easily be crossed as adults. The child is father to the man, wrote the poet. I don't want to leave here, said Herzl, surprising Freud with this leap of his unconscious, even if you have given me my lost years back. I am glad to hear you say that, Freud told him. It makes our work here worthwhile. But my success is measured by your leaving. Interminable analysis is my luxury, not that of my patients. And so the two men parted.



I always think of Freud as a man of deep compassion. A man of courage too, though what we take for courage is usually a manifestation of strength, emotional strength, which doubtless Freud got from his mother in those early years, first in his Galician home and then in his Viennese one. Like Herzl, he had a predilection for languages and literature, and read Shakespeare his whole life long. We are such stuff as dreams are made of, he must have told Herzl when the latter told him about his postscript to his novel. Dreams and deeds, wrote Herzl, are not as different from one another as many believe. All deeds of men are dreams at first, and in the end become

dreams again. But for Freud all dreams camouflaged hopes and fears, those unstable pillars on which, Spinoza wrote, men all too often base their actions. And so Freud went about analyzing them, along with all the other manifestations of our unconscious life to which we usually remain blind, and for somewhat good reason.

People were skeptical of the picture he painted. Many still are. Too much emphasis on sex and aggression, they say. Too pessimistic say others. Too much a Victorian, say yet others, his sexual theories too enraptured with the male member. A degenerate then and a prude now; but I say kudos! The man looked into the abyss and came up with a picture that makes sense to me. Everywhere I look I see it confirmed. Lovers who think intimacy is a license for tyranny. Jews who think Israel is not democratic enough because their parents were socialists in their youth. Pundits apoplectic over Trump because his very sitting in the White House is an affront to their narcissism. On and on it goes, the unresolved conflicts of our childhood popping up as the chatter of talking heads and sometimes worse.

For what is man, said Freud, psychologically speaking, but a battleground of instinctual drives, the life-affirming ones condensed in the happiness of coitus, the death-affirming ones crystallized in the happiness of homicide. Whatever way an individual knits them together, the way itself is at war with the claims of the social order that insists on their subjugation. Repression is the order of the day. So says society for both sex and murder, and so says the individual when it comes to the pain he or she has inflicted on the self to accommodate its passions to life in the real world. But the passions are not easily dammed and surface in dreams, becoming deeds and then becoming dreams again, as Herzl, having paid

the price, himself understood. What then? sang Plato's ghost.
What then?

Then is the picture Freud bequeathed us. To understand ourselves we need to look inward, to the elements that make up our psyche, the same and different for each of us in how we react to the irritations we received from the world outside us. But the key lies not in society; it lies in the psychological configuration we have come up with to deal with society. And to understand that requires second order observation, the regard of someone on our side who will be as cruel and as kind as necessary to peel back the layers of the deal we concocted with ourselves. For who wants to upset the emotional pact he or she made with their pain?

It is the same picture the late and much under-appreciated Luhmann bequeathed us for society, which is made up not of people but of the communications that circulate within it and of the ways of organizing difference that structure that circulation. People are the internal environment of society the way society is the external environment of individuals. But to understand how any system works, individual or society, we need to look at its internal components, not its environment. For it is the internal components that make the selections leading to action. In a modern society, where more and more people have access to the resources that circulate within it, problems understandably increase exponentially. People becomes problems for society and society becomes a problem for people as more and more decisions have to be made. That's what we mean when we say things have gotten more complex. To understand how society works also requires second order observation, but since no society takes itself to the couch of an analyst, the task falls to sociology. Unfortunately, most sociologists fail at the task. They are

still in thrall to a picture that holds some individual or group of individuals is to blame for the state we are in. In their search for the guilty party, they of course ignore the basic axiom of the enterprise which sociology ever since Luhmann shares with psychology ever since Freud. But ever since Luhmann means roughly seventy years after Freud last saw Herzl, hardly time enough for society to catch up to history.

Herzl died shortly after he left Freud's cabinet for the last time. I wonder if Freud went to his funeral. Jews came from all over Europe. Six thousand people followed the hearse. The funeral went on for hours. I imagine Freud instead sat in his cabinet and smoked a cigar in Herzl's honor. He never liked crowds. They always had the potential to get out of hand. Certainly he would live long enough to see his worst fears in that respect come to pass. But for now he could admire the fortuitous way Herzl's psychic constellation produced a mass movement that did not unleash the furies. Had Freud lived ten years longer than he did he would have seen the birth of the Jewish state fifty years to the day Herzl had predicted it would be born. Had he lived even longer than that he would have seen that the state which the unleashed Jewish masses brought into being turned out to be the only successful national liberation movement of the century; liberal and democratic though beset on all sides by enemies seeking its destruction, and of course as cantankerous as the Jewish exodus was after the Jews left Egypt. He could not, however, have lived long enough to see the western world gang up on Israel once it became a thriving, modern society. That future he left to me.

I am glad he did not live to see Israel turned into a never-ending Dreyfus Affair, the Jewish question still unresolved, the West transmogrified back into the Viennese sunset of Franz

Joseph and the Radetzky March. If I could talk to him I would tell him the really interesting part of this situation is the way the Jews deal with the return of the repressed, just as he laid out in his theory. They cannot throw their enemies out of the land, I would tell him, because they still have not assumed the mantle of national sovereignty. Instead they keep looking for a two-state solution that would give half their land to the Muslims who even without it set fire to their country. But this is an old story, I would remind him, the two-state option an idea they cooked up at Sinai when panic directed their dream of the Promised Land back to Egypt and its gods. A new tweak on Moses and monotheism, I would tell him. You have only to read the Bible through to the end. As for plumbing its depths, the possibilities are endless; and like your analysis, it has become my luxury.

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