

## MARXIST DESPONDENCY

*Eugene Victor Wolfenstein*

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Richard Lichtman, *The Production of Desire: The Integration of Psychoanalysis in Marxist Theory* (New York: The Free Press, 1982).

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In Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* one of the characters writes a novel in which a member of the F.L.N. is having a discussion with a French prisoner, whom he has tortured. The Frenchman "complained he was in an intellectual prison-house. He recognised, had recognised for years, that he never had a thought, or an emotion, that didn't instantly fall into pigeonholes, one marked 'Marx' and one marked 'Freud'."<sup>1</sup> He envied the Algerian his freedom from the dictates of "Grandfathers Freud and Marx."<sup>2</sup> The Algerian, on the other hand, recognised in himself the lack of such expectations. He was free to feel what he wished. But he felt nothing.

The torturer was overheard talking with his prisoner. Both men were executed.

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The project of joining psychoanalysis and Marxism is uneasily suspended between obscurity and orthodoxy. In the former regard, the project is not of interest to most Marxists or most psychoanalysts, and certainly not to liberal social scientists. It is not even the central preoccupation of critical theorists, structuralists, deconstructionists, and the like. In the latter regard, we have lived so long with both Marxism and psychoanalysis that they no longer frighten or excite us. They appear to be integrated components of the existing world order, not a threat to it. It hardly seems worth the effort to attempt to join them or, for that matter, to keep them apart.

Of course, these circumstances do not effect the purely intellectual dimension of the project. But precisely for these two theories, intellectual engagement is not enough. Each in its own way falls under the aegis of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."<sup>3</sup> Marxism is distinguished from academic social theories — including Marxological ones — by its commitment to political practice. In parallel fashion, what separates psychoanalysis from a host of academic psychologies is its claim to clinical efficacy. Moreover, when it is properly practiced, clinical psychoanalysis is a

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process of self-transformation, not just transformation on the self. Just as self-activity is the essential element in the struggle for social emancipation, so it is the *sine qua non* of the struggle for liberation from personal (intra-psychic) domination. If, therefore, a Marxist psychoanalytic theory does not join the emancipatory practices of each theory, or at least add to the practical efficacy of one or the other of them taken independently, then its possibility or impossibility is a purely scholastic question. No Marxist or psychoanalyst need be concerned with it. Obscurity is its rightful fate. Conversely, if such a theory does have practical consequences for one or both of the initial positions, then Marxists and/or psychoanalysts ought to be interested in it. Their disinterest might then be interpreted as a defensive orthodoxy, a resistance to learning something about themselves they prefer not to know.

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I presume that Richard Lichtman would accept some such statement of the problem and project of Marxist psychoanalytic theory. His starting point in *The Production of Desire* is the "stultification of the dialectic (of progressive historical transformation) in contemporary capitalist society,"<sup>4</sup> a stasis he attributes to the presumed fact that "people come to want what is destructive to their need."<sup>5</sup> This fact results in "Marxist despondency" and so a "turn to Freud."<sup>6</sup> Freud provides a possible explanation for such a self-destructive tendency, hence also a possible remedy for Marxist despondency. But the relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis is problematical. Various questions would have to be resolved before the Marxist patient can take the Freudian cure. Of these, the "most important" has to do with the "political dimension": if "we cannot answer this . . . question, the others are of little consequence."<sup>7</sup> Hence his subtitle, "the integration of psychoanalysis into Marxist theory." One could take exception to this formulation. It precludes *a priori* the integration of Marxism into psychoanalysis, or the aim of a unified theory that transcends its opposing moments. But in its scientific aspect, psychoanalysis is not a political theory, while in its ideological aspect it falls within the liberal *weltanschauung*. The only reason for integrating Marxism into psychoanalysis would thus be to de-politicize it, to transform it into just another manifest content for which psychoanalysis provides the latent meaning and the appropriate therapeutic response. And if one identifies the project of human emancipation with Marxism, then any attempt to transcend it must be interpreted as an escape from the political struggle. I think Lichtman makes this identification. It establishes the boundaries of his inquiry.

Lichtman approaches his task in both a critical and a constructive fashion. In the latter respect, he attempts a reformulation of psychoanalytic concepts upon the foundation of a Marxist anthropology and theory of history. I will briefly describe this attempt in a moment. In the former respect, Lichtman's method is to subject each essential component of psychoanalytic theory and practice to critical scrutiny. He does not try to swallow psychoanalysis whole. That would result in Marxist indigestion. Nor does he try to pick out useful pieces of psychoanalysis, thinking that they can be attached with hooks and

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wires to a mechanical version of Marxist theory. Instead he views psychoanalysis as a unified structure of concepts and practices, which must be worked through in the manner of Marx's critique of bourgeois political economy. Thus the object of his critique is not Freud's metapsychology or his approach to clinical practice or his conception of social reality. It is the unity or totality of these three parts. Some of his most effective criticisms are directed at those writers who are desirous of "saving the good Freud,"<sup>8</sup> e.g., preserving the practice while discarding the metapsychology. In Lichtman's opinion, such writers ignore the ideological unity of Freud's project: the "relationship between Freud's metapsychology and his clinical practice was mediated by his sociopolitical assumptions regarding human nature."<sup>9</sup> But these assumptions are not without value. Once we establish the "social meaning" of these apparently "natural" categories, they help us to understand the pathological, individualist individuals of our society.<sup>10</sup> Consequently it is only a systematic critique that can preserve what is of value in psychoanalysis.

What does Freud's individual look like? In the beginning s/he is all id, an accumulation of blind sexual and aggressive drives (instincts or tendencies) seeking satisfaction through discharge. The life of the organism is regulated by the pleasure principle. In time the ego is differentiated from the id, and the super-ego from the ego. The ego must then mediate the contradictory demands of the id, external reality, and the super-ego. For this purposes it employs various defenses, of which repression is the most notable. Through its employment the ego wards off any conscious awareness of specific drive derivatives or their ideational representatives. It frees itself from unbearable anxiety and conscious conflict, but at the expense of losing the use of some of its own energies. Moreover, repression is both natural and necessary. It is virtually the defining feature of the human species. Human beings are neurotic animals.

By contrast Lichtman argues that "our distinguishing characteristic as human beings is our capacity to give ourselves specific determinations in social time"<sup>11</sup> Human beings are self-productive animals. Collectively self-productive: it is not meaningful to speak of the human individual, but only of "human beings in specific social relations transforming the natural environment through historically determinate technology."<sup>12</sup> In transforming the world, we transform ourselves. Even our instincts and defenses are social products".

An aspect of mental life becomes a defense to the extent that the inclination it is employed to structure is defined as socially prohibitory. And an originally amorphous inclination becomes a determinate unconscious motive, drive, or "instinct" to the extent that it is defined as "censorable," and so forced away from the self-consciousness of the self and into the literally alien province of the id-unconscious.<sup>13</sup>

Where Freud views the self as formed from the inside to the outside, and society in turn from the self, Lichtman views the self as formed by society, and the interior of the self as a derivative of the socially formed self. The individual is

divided and self-contradictory because it mirrors social reality. "The repressed unconscious is the repository of the irreconcilable conflicts between . . . capitalist reality and bourgeois appearance," between what Lichtman terms the "structural unconscious" and the forms of consciousness characteristic of bourgeois society.<sup>14</sup> The structural unconscious is (more or less) a way of denoting the fetishism of commodities, i.e., the inversion of the roles of people and things in capitalism. In the capitalist mode of production, "individual, private independence 'frees' the social process to exercise its distinct autonomy as a system of alienated structures independent of individual control; . . . the phenomenal form of freedom maintains the structure of domination which makes individual freedom impotent except as a means to the reproduction of domination."<sup>15</sup> Domination has a long history. What is unique to capitalism is domination in the phenomenal form of freedom and equality, "the belief that individuals freely select their own social status."<sup>16</sup> Psychoanalysis ontologizes these self-deceived individuals, and provides them with a "cure" that leaves their self-deception intact. Therapy facilitates the process through which individuals take personal responsibility for social ailments. "That is why psychoanalysis is so crucial a form of social control, and why it is so appropriate to the bourgeois order."<sup>17</sup> It even controls the clinicians who practice it. They take personal responsibility for therapeutic failures, even when these outcomes demonstrably result from social causes.<sup>18</sup>

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My critical reactions to *The Production of Desire* are of two, opposing kinds. On the one hand, Lichtman's inquiry is framed in a clear and politically self-conscious manner; it is not only rich in insight, but also systematic in both its critical and reconstructive dimensions; and it results in a Marxist conception of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, I do not believe Lichtman's integration of psychoanalysis into Marxist theory solves the psycho-political problem with which he began: his turn to Freud does not produce a satisfactory response to Marxist despondency.

Lichtman's argument is based upon the Marxist premise that "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual," but instead "is the ensemble of the social relations."<sup>19</sup> The strength and originality of his analysis proceeds from his uncompromising adherence to this notion. Drives and defenses, the essence of the Freudian individual, are treated as social products. He rejects as "mistaken at its root" the idea that "different societies provide different channels for the expression" of "inborn human needs and drives."<sup>20</sup> Society and human nature cannot be treated as if they were independent, externally related variables. Society is not the manifestation of an essence existing outside of and before it. We are social and political to the core.

Surely Lichtman is on firm methodological ground in not granting the individual, much less the essence of the individual, an *a priori* existence. Except in theological fantasies, the world did not begin with just one of us. But he slips into the converse error: society exists in advance of the individual. Individuals are viewed as determined from the outside in, so that their inner lives are never more than mediations of external forces. If we wished to conceptualize the

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matter in a more complete dialectical fashion, however, we would have to begin with the definitional identity, society = a collectivity of individuals. Neither side of the initial position could be granted priority or privilege. Then, in developing the opposition of the two sides, we would have to say that the drives of the individuals and the requirements of social action are both mutually determining and mutually exclusive. Drives are socially constituted and resist social determination. Society is constituted by individual drives and stands in opposition to them. The outcome of this two-fold opposition might then be stated: the *defenses* of individuals = the inward expression of social *demands*, while social *demands* = the outward expression of the defenses of individuals. Social laws and character structure (taking character structure to be a totality of defenses) cohere as the joint product of external and internal determination.

Lichtman might reject my reformulation of his methodological position by saying that I am slipping the essence of the individual in through a back door. I am not arguing for an individual essence, however, but rather for a notion of sensuous and psychological attributes common to all human individuals. Lichtman accepts, as did Marx, that all human individuals have certain things in common: we are sensuous beings who are potentially capable of self-conscious activity; we develop this potential through the labor-process ("the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence"<sup>21</sup>); and in working upon nature we are simultaneously transforming ourselves — for better or for worse. But (a) we also have certain things in common with other sensuous, especially animate, beings and (b) this is not all we have in common as human beings. Freud's conception of sexual and aggressive drives, along with the pleasure and reality principles, brings us into contact with these other elements. To be sure, as Lichtman justly contends, Freud's views require reformulation. But his own reformulation throws out the baby with the bathwater. He wages such successful war upon the essence of the Freudian individual that nothing remains of it. Consequently the psychoanalysis he integrates into Marxism has form but no content. We are offered notions of drive, defense, and unconscious conflict *sans* psychic pain, love, hate, or the Oedipus complex. When human drives are thus emptied of their content, however, it becomes possible to picture individuals so permeated by oppressive social meanings that they are completely one-dimensionalized. The project of the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society then comes to an end. Lichtman does not want to accept this possible implication of his own premises. He contends that capitalism cannot "succeed in gratifying the needs it has itself brought into existence."<sup>22</sup> No matter how "strangled in its self-reflection, the desire for communal recognition is ineradicable."<sup>23</sup> But the ineradicable quality of this desire cannot be derived from Lichtman's anthropology. He can maintain his anthropology and surrender the notion that such a desire is necessary; or he can revise his anthropology and maintain the notion. He cannot have it both ways.

It might be rejoined that there is a polemical advantage to be gained from the rejection of the conventional content of psychoanalytic notions. It was Freud himself, after all, who initiated the ideological attack of psychoanalysis upon

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Marxism in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In that essay he argued that in "abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, through certainly not the strongest; but we have in no way altered anything in its nature."<sup>24</sup> Lichtman's position precludes this ideological misuse of psychoanalytic concepts. It effectively turns away the Freudian attack — but at the expense of defending Marxism from a reality it needs to confront. Although we do not have a "love of aggression" of the kind postulated by Freud, we do have an inherent propensity to react to pain by fighting it or fleeing from it. This simple anthropological point has two important historical and political implications. First, not all pain is the product of social domination. Even in a socialist society there would be human suffering and aggression. Along with suffering and aggression comes some repression and some division of the self. Recognizing this fact counters the tendency towards Marxist naivete. But surrendering the naive hope for a world without pain or hatred is no reason for despair. For — this is my second point — the fight-flight response to actual or threatened pain is the emotional well-spring of rebellion. A working class revolutionary movement proceeds, in the first instance, from objective circumstances, i.e., from the negation of working class interests in capitalist society. But interests without motives are as abstract as motives without interests. Revolutionary motives are, on the one hand, a feeling of solidarity (aim-inhibited sexual feelings, Freud would say) with members of one's own class or group and, on the other, an antipathy towards or hatred of the oppressing class. Identification with the oppressor inverts these rational political motives. Oppressed individuals hate themselves instead of their class enemies. Breaking the identification with the oppressor, inverting the inversion of emotional values, is a necessary condition for revolutionary action.<sup>25</sup>

I might add this further point. Lichtman follows the predominant Freudian-Marxist tendency in viewing psychoanalysis as an individual psychology. There are certainly reasons for so doing, but these are not pressing from a Marxist standpoint. Marxism does require a psychology. It does not particularly need a theory of the individual. Which is to say, a psychology and a theory of individual activity are not the same thing. The latter can be (a) anthropology — answering the question, what do all human individuals have in common; (b) biography — analysis of the lives of specific, actual people; or (c) critique of, e.g., bourgeois individualism. Marx's Marxism is quite adequate in each of these regards, so long as individuals are considered objectively, that is, solely in relationship to their productive activity. It is not adequate with respect to human subjectivity, i.e., our emotional lives and desires. More specifically, it lacks a theory of *collective* emotional activity. Freud provides the starting point for such a theory in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Properly developed it provides the subjective complement to class analysis, explains in particular the falsification of class interests in collective consciousness, and makes possible a simultaneously objective and subjective analysis of mass movements.<sup>26</sup> It thus has implications for practice at the level of action characteristic of Marxist politics.

If we shift our focus from the individual to class struggle and mass

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movement, we can put forward an alternative explanation for "Marxist despondency." This mood, and the theory proceeding from it, are attributes of the radical intellectual who has been isolated by the ebb-tide of the revolutionary movement. At such times and at such moments, there is a tendency to construct an image of human nature mirroring the temporary absence of manifest class struggle. The workers of the world are seen as so penetrated by false consciousness that their desire for freedom and will to revolutionary action have been destroyed. Feelings of hopelessness and defeat are thereby given a theoretical rationalization. Conversely, when the mass movement is at high tide and the left intellectual is swept along by its currents, a kind of Marxist euphoria is projected into the anthropological foundations of social theory. Thus Marx, immersed in and enamoured with the worker's movement in Paris in the 1840's, identified human nature with creativity and self-production. The riddle of human history seemed already to have been solved.<sup>27</sup> Subsequent events demonstrated that the solution was more difficult of achievement than it at first appeared.

A Marxist psychoanalysis must stand within and in a critical relationship to these swings of political mood. As Max Weber correctly observed, politics is "a strong and slow boring of hard boards."<sup>28</sup> It shares this quality with clinical psychoanalysis. To be sure, the sense of duration is relative to social history in the one case, individual life history in the other. But each enterprise involves a disciplining of character, the ability to interpret processes of transformation from within, and patience. The psychoanalytic experience, moreover, can be of heuristic value for the vocation of politics. Whether one is in the role of analyst or patient, it teaches one to bear the anxiety attendant upon the uncertain process of self-liberation; and it develops in each participant the willingness to recognize and struggle with one's own resistance to learning from experience. These qualities are vital for the rationality of, especially, revolutionary action. For as Marx observes, just when people are "engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language."<sup>29</sup> Marx intended this description of psychical defense against political anxiety for the bourgeois leaders of the French revolution of 1789. But it is equally applicable to working class revolutionaries.

In sum: *The Production of Desire* is a significant contribution to the project of unifying Marxist and psychoanalytic theories. It requires a more psychoanalytic psychoanalysis, however, to counter the tendency toward Marxist despondency with which Lichtman is concerned.

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In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad kills a deputy who murdered his friend Preacher Casey. By that act he becomes an outlaw, but a self-conscious one. He plans to follow Casey's example by joining in the struggle to organize migrant workers against large-scale farm owners. His mother is afraid he also will be murdered. He tells her:

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"Well, maybe like Casey says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one — an' then (maybe one man's death) don' matter. Then I'll be aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where — wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there . . ."30

Political Science  
Univ. of California,  
Los Angeles

### Notes

1. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 549.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 550.
3. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), p. 145.
4. Richard Lichtman, *The Production of Desire: The Integration of Psychoanalysis into Marxist Theory* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 222-223.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 282-283.
19. Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
20. Lichtman, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
21. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), I, 290.
22. Lichtman, *op. cit.*, p. 287.
23. *Ibid.*

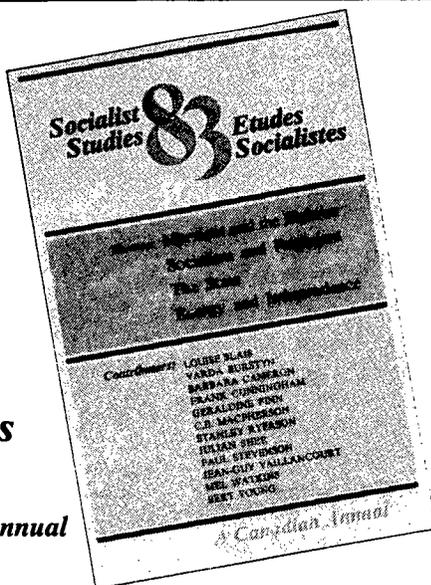
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24. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), XXI, p. 113.
25. I explore this theme in some detail and in the context of a Marxist psychoanalytic theory of collective action in *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1981).
26. See Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in *The Standard Edition . . .*, Volume XVIII; W. R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); and Chapter 2 of *The Victims of Democracy*.
27. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 66 ff.
28. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 128.
29. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 595.
30. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 570.

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*Contact:*

**Society for Socialist Studies**  
471 University College, University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2M8