



# *Journal of Arts & Humanities*

## Freud and Historical Thought

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### **ABSTRACT**

Historians constantly seek to understand what motivates those in positions of power to make the decisions that they do. By adopting the principles of a specific psychological approach into our analysis, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of our subjects and the motivations that drive them. The application of Freud's psychoanalytic theories seems uniquely placed to assist the historian in developing a richer interpretation of the whole person, as opposed to just one facet of an individual's life. In addition, Freud's insistence that we cannot progress as a civilization if we cannot recall the repressed past, seems particularly relevant today as marginalized and formerly disposed peoples struggle to reclaim their own history misrepresented in biographies written by former rulers and administrators.

**Keywords:** Freud, Humanity, Kairos, Leader, Unilinear, Verstehen.

Available Online: 21<sup>st</sup> September, 2015.

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As historians have frequently, and freely, indulged in psychological interpretations when reviewing material, the adoption of a Freudian approach could assist in making more uniform assumptions and hypotheses. Such an application may also prove constructive considering historians already employ the method of *Verstehen* (attempting to share "states of mind"); therefore, psychoanalytic techniques may present a logical mechanism in which to gain a more comprehensive appreciation of historical subjects (Mazlish, 1963). Freud's assumptions could prove particularly pertinent

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in biography, in analyzing the motivations of powerful figures that Freud believed ruled naturally over the horde (Mazlish, 1963).

Freud held his methods as quite applicable to historical problems as “psychoanalysis is characterized by the methods with which it works, not by the subject matter with which it deals” (Mazlish, 1963). In applying his methodology to the study of the past, Freud saw himself as following the practice of Hecataeus in blending history and medical research (Mazlish, 1966). In history, Freud preferred to analyze the motivations of “the leader and the led,” the leader because he represented the father figure and the masses because they carried the tradition (Mazlish, 1966). Unlike Karl Marx, Freud largely ignored factors relating to class, caste, or elites. G.F.W. Hegel and Marx both supposed the psychological profile of an individual as secondary to economic conditions. Holding the opposing position, Freud asserted that “private psychological mechanisms” assumed primary responsible for social actions (Mazlish, 1963).

Sigmund Freud viewed the history of man as a unilinear progression from barbarism (killer-man) to humanist man. This progression only succeeds by forfeiting happiness as man acknowledges his guilt (Freud, 1950). Primal guilt relates back to the killing of the father, either a literal killing that occurred during the early days of human existence or a fantasy in which the son kills the father figure, familial or spiritual (Mazlish, 1966). Man’s inherited culpability further complicates the guilt associated with the repression of sexual drives in childhood and the shame of wanting to kill one’s parents (Langer, 1963). The vast majority of religions view patricide as a sin, thereby, escalating the already significant sense of guilt in man. Guilt can have positive results, for example, the determination not to repeat the same mistakes. To achieve mental health, a community must experience guilt, for according to Freud; the absence of historical consciousness (and thus guilt) reflects a sign of a deep depression (Mazlish, 1966).

Psychoanalysts deem that examining the pivotal events of childhood will result in a more thorough understanding of the motivations of the adult. This crucial time in the past (*Kairos*) determines man’s reactions to events or situations as an adult. Freud understood memory as *kairotic* and that events in childhood would dominate or overwhelm vast stretches of later chronological time (Rieff, 1971). Man lives in a continual state of torment attempting to repress the guilt stemming from childhood experience. This repression takes the form of forgetting, which requires an action. Therefore history can contain no new surprises, as the known does not arise from new experience, but the remembered (Rieff, 1971). Freud suggested that like pre-history, the unknown simply means the forgotten and that knowledge constitutes re-call and history involves re-enactment (Rieff, 1971). The past never absolutely dies if it lives in the mind of the present. The past contains guilt so man’s neuroses are based on his failure to escape from the past. Each generation adds a new layer of guilt to society. Only by remembering positive and negative events can civilization progress even though remembrance takes away from man’s happiness, and responsibility of the past plagues his present. Freud recognized the good in man but believed that society dwells upon evil because some men deny the existence of evil (e.g., those who would deny the holocaust).

Reviewing historical events, although essential for the progression of civilization, does not increase a sense of well being in man, rather, such reflections exacerbate the level of confusion and loss (Freud, 1963). Although painful, society must draw together as a body to learn the lessons of history as man has evolved from where his ties extended, “from the group of the family to the group of humanity.” (Langer, 1963). Paradoxically, the implications of progress are reactionary. Progress remains impossible without leaving the present to recall the repressed past, leading to the eternal return to the repressed (Rieff, 1971). Man has failed to live up to the impossible command to “love thy neighbor as thyself”; and as a consequence, the history of society has reflected the ongoing struggle between Eros and the destructive instinct (West, 1986). This struggle between the desire for life and the desire for destruction simply illustrates the evolution of civilization (Freud, 1930).

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