

“Why Do People Accept Ideologies that Contradict their Conscious Interests?”

Pre-1939 Discussions about Analytical Social Psychology
by the Prague Historical Group and Freudo-Marxists

Florian Ruttner 

Collegium Carolinum – Prague Branch, Valentinská 91/1 110 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic; florian.ruttner@collegium-carolinum.de

Received 18 January 2024 | Accepted 1 July 2024 | Published online 16 September 2024

Abstract. For a short time in the mid-1930s, Prague turned into the hub of discussions about the role of psychology in history. Far from being a mere methodological debate, the question why masses act against their conscious interests was seen as a central point of this endeavor. The issue intrigued not only the left-leaning Czechoslovak historians who formed the *Historická skupina* (the Historical Group) and were influenced by similar attempts in Germany, namely by the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in Frankfurt am Main, but also psychoanalysts in exile, like Otto Fenichel, who conducted inquiries in a similar vein, all the more as the menace of German fascism grew stronger. The paper sketches the contacts between different groups and presents the main results of their deliberations.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, fascism, Prague, Czechoslovakia, Marxism, antisemitism, German exile, mass psychology, Historical Group, Otto Fenichel

I.

As a crucial historical turning point, the end of World War I put an end to many certainties. In its wake, not only did thrones and empires crumble, but some central assumptions of the left were also called into question. As it had become clear by around 1923 the latest, the expected worldwide revolution did not happen. Given the assumptions of traditional Marxism, the accelerated accumulation and centralization of capital in the most advanced countries should have created the necessary prerequisites for a revolution; the violent battles of industrialized warfare, in which the masses were only considered ‘human material’, should have bluntly demonstrated to them what to expect in the order of things. Even in the Soviet Union,

where the revolution succeeded in creating a new state, it soon turned out that it did not live up to expectations; the triumph of Italian fascism and later the rise of German national socialism further complicated the riddle.

Against this backdrop, attempts to reconceptualize Marxism and find an answer to the question why the expected and yearned for revolution did not happen were undertaken, which Perry Anderson later summarized under the notion of ‘Western Marxism’. This endeavor is connected to names like Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and theoreticians of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, among them Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno.

In addition, Anderson identifies another key figure whose work was studied in order to answer the haunting question of the revolution that did not happen: “Freud, above all, was a common discovery, not only of Adorno and Marcuse, but also of Althusser and Sartre—although again each adapted or interpreted his legacy in very diverse directions.”¹ The importance of this step is emphasized by Martin Jay in his classical study on Critical Theory:

“The *Institut für Sozialforschung*’s attempt to introduce psychoanalysis into its neo-Marxist Critical Theory was thus a bold and unconventional step. It was also a mark of the *Institut*’s desire to leave the traditional Marxist straitjacket behind.”²

Traditional Marxism and the greater part of the workers’ movement did not consider this step, and went as far as directly shunning it. After a fleeting interest in psychoanalysis during the revolutionary upheavals immediately after World War I, when the Hungarian soviet government planned to appoint Sándor Ferenczi to a chair at the Budapest university,³ the official communist party line quickly labelled Freud’s teachings as bourgeois and counterrevolutionary.

One of the most important institutions, to be referred to in this text as well, that followed this path was independent enough and, at the same time, did not care about being marginalized by the party, was the already mentioned institute based in Frankfurt (and later in exile). In the early 1930s, many of the articles, especially those of Erich Fromm and Max Horkheimer in the institute’s journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, were dedicated to the attempt to create an analytical social psychology.⁴

1 Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 58.

2 Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 87.

3 Dahmer, *Libido und Gesellschaft*, 256.

4 E.g. Fromm, “Über Methode und Aufgaben einer analytischen Sozialpsychologie,” 28–54; Horkheimer, “Geschichte und Psychologie,” 125–44.

Not only did dissident Marxists become interested in Sigmund Freud's work in order to understand why the 'subjective factor', the individuals that made up the masses, was not willing to revolutionize the world when the 'objective factor', the development of the means of production, was considered ripe for it. Within the psychoanalytical movement, there was a Freudian left emerging that tried to answer the same question. Many of them gathered in the Berlin Psychoanalytical Institute, where Otto Fenichel, Wilhelm Reich, Annie Reich, and Heinrich Löwenfeld discussed the possibilities of merging Freud and Marx. Naturally, no unified and consolidated body of theory was created. The discussions, that were continued in their later exile as well, showed marked disagreement, especially between Reich and the others, as Reich's theory was becoming gradually more and more esoteric.⁵

Even if Reich's path into esotericism, unsurprisingly, led to manifest mental problems, in the beginning, he formulated questions that were perfect summaries of the problems this group of thinkers faced:

"The striking or the stealing out of hunger need no further psychological explanation. [...] In social psychology, the question is exactly the reverse: What is to be explained is not why the starving individual steals or why the exploited individual strikes, but why the majority of starving individuals do *not* steal and the majority of exploited individuals do *not* strike. Socio-economics, then, can satisfactorily explain a social phenomenon when human thinking and acting serve a rational purpose, when they serve the satisfaction of needs and directly express the economic situation. It fails, however, when human thinking and acting *contradict* the economic situation, when, in other words, they are *irrational*."⁶

The thinkers cited are internationally well known, and their theoretical endeavors have been thoroughly researched, even if interest in them seems to have waned over the past thirty years. However, contrary to what the term 'Western Marxism' suggests, thinkers in Central Europe also started posing questions in this vein. Thus, the main goal of my paper is to introduce these groups, to show how they were influenced by their Western counterparts and how their contributions influenced the further development of theory.

The two main groups that will be scrutinized, the 'Historical Group' and a group of Freud's followers, both based in Prague, have already been the object of research of their own. However, the studies conducted so far do not investigate the connections and interferences between the two groups. Let me give two brief examples of this lacuna.

5 Burian, *Sexualität, Natur, Gesellschaft*, 91.

6 Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 16.

While Bohumil Jiroušek's studies are insightful regarding many aspects of the Historical Group, for example, underscoring that in the 1930s its members belonged to the "pre-dogmatic phase"⁷ of Czechoslovak leftist thought, they mainly focus on historiographical and political questions, and only superficially touch upon the group's reception of psychoanalysis. Jiroušek notes that members of the group did work on a "social psychology as an »ancillary discipline of history«" and that they applied "a more or less Freudian interpretation"⁸ to certain phenomena. He, indeed talks of a vague "psychological approach"⁹ but does not dig deeper and does not describe this approach more closely.

The second example is Michael Šebek, the pioneer of the historiography of the psychoanalytical movement (not only) in interwar Czechoslovakia. He discusses the reception of psychoanalysis in left-leaning artists' circles,¹⁰ mainly in surrealist groups, but omits to mention the Historical Group. He also tends to minimize the Freudo-Marxist Fenichel's political intentions, stating that Fenichel "may have had in mind that psychoanalysis could be incorporated into Marxist theory."¹¹ As will be shown, this was not a vague potentiality, but Fenichel's fairly openly proclaimed goal.

In this sense, both Jiroušek's and Šebek's interpretations have their blind spots: one ignores the role of psychoanalysis, the other the role of the Marxian theory. My article hopes to diminish these blind spots. Before the analysis, the main protagonists of the two currents will be presented, followed by a discussion of some aspects of their most important texts.

II.

The question in the title concerning why "people accept ideologies that contradict their conscious interests"¹² was raised by Jan Pachta, a member of the *Historická skupina* (Historical Group). This loose association of left-leaning historians, among them Pachta, Jaroslav Charvát, and Václav Husa, may, in a sense, be seen as the Central European version of 'Western Marxism' because, in their critique of mainstream Czechoslovak positivist historiography, they looked for similar remedies for the ills they saw as did their Western counterparts. One of their attempts was to make Freudian categories productive for historical studies.

7 Jiroušek, *Historik Jaroslav Charvát*, 7. All translations are by the author.

8 Jiroušek, *Historik Jaroslav Charvát*, 87.

9 Jiroušek, "The Journals of the Historical Group," 103.

10 Šebek, "Předválečný vývoj psychoanalýzy v Čechách," 13.

11 Šebek, "Psychoanalyse in Tschechien. Äußere Realität und Verdrängung," 240.

12 Pachta, "Sociální psychologie a dějepyt," 61.

In 1937, in the foreword to the first issue of the group's journal bearing the programmatic title *Dějiny a přítomnost* (Past and Present), the group sketched their critique of what they saw as the historiographical mainstream:

“The historian who does not want to see the unity of the antitheses of past and present and who limits his interest only to one of these two inseparable moments becomes a conservative, who hoards loads of petrified facts but will in no way touch the true nature of historical development. Without encompassing knowledge of the social development of the present, one cannot penetrate the deeper connections of historical phenomena.”¹³

This focus on the critical function of historiography naturally drove the Historical Group close to the Institute of Social Research's endeavor and led them to the conclusion:

“Out of these assumptions emerges the Historical Group working collective, which sees the encompassing study of modern social history as its first task. Obviously, also methodological questions of a fundamental nature and problems of the organization of scientific work in general fall into this area of interest.”¹⁴

The inquiry into the connections between history and psychology played a major role among these methodological questions:

“The programmatic announcements underscored the possibilities of social psychology within historiography, and some of the articles tried to apply the methods of the psychoanalytical social psychology of the then current Freudo-Marxism to historical interpretation.”¹⁵

III.

In addition to the Historical Group, which stemmed directly from Czechoslovak society, for a short time in the mid-1930s, another group helped to turn Prague into a central hub of discussions on analytical social psychology. Some of the researchers from the Berlin Psychoanalytical Institute, namely Otto Fenichel, Annie Reich, and Heinrich Löwenfeld, sought refuge from German national socialism in Prague, trying to continue their work there before being forced into a new exile after the 1938 fall of the Czechoslovak Republic. Their main goal was twofold: on the one

13 Historická skupina, “Dějiny a přítomnost,” 1.

14 Historická skupina, “Dějiny a přítomnost,” 3.

15 Petráň, “Historická skupiná (Komentář k vzpomínkám jejich členů),” 23.

hand, they wanted to work as a left-wing opposition within the international psychoanalytical movement, which they saw in danger of leaving Freud's scientific approach and becoming a more mystical endeavor, losing the movement's progressive content, as these "Political Freudians", as Russel Jacoby called them, saw themselves "as dissenters, pioneers, and cosmopolitan humanitarians", who "viewed psychoanalysis not only as a therapy but also as part of a larger social project."¹⁶ Closely connected to this was their second goal, as they aspired to understand the contemporary society by merging Marx and Freud. These two goals were not separate, as Otto Fenichel's rather pessimistic reflection shows. He said in his farewell speech before he left for the United States:

"We should not forget that Fascism did not come to power anywhere without the revolutionary energies of the masses, which it understood to invert in the sense it desired. All that is also reflected in the minds of the analysts who lose their ability to think logically and become mystics."¹⁷

In the mid-1930s, the Prague group was the most important of the Freud-Marxists within the International Psychoanalytical Association. Fenichel communicated via circular letters (nowadays one might say 'newsletters') with other members all around the world. These newsletters constitute the central source for their activities.

IV.

It is not surprising that at some point all the groups interested in social psychology became aware of each other's activities. As will be shown, members of the Historical Group were avid readers of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* of the Institute of Social Research, and their journal even presented a short portrayal of the institute and its work.¹⁸ In turn, the institute, already working in exile, was informed that their articles had found sympathetic readers in the Czechoslovak Republic. Josef Doppler, a Bratislava-born social philosopher who, in the early 1930s, had studied with Horkheimer in Frankfurt and, following his return to Prague after January 1933, stayed in contact with his professor in exile, wrote in a 1938 letter that he had attended the discussions "of the young Czech historians of the *Dějiny a přítomnost* circle, which also explicitly appreciated the pursuits of the institute and the *Zeitschrift*."¹⁹ However, Horkheimer does not seem to have followed up this information, as no further signs of contact have been found.

16 Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, 6.

17 Fenichel, "Rundbrief 48," 930.

18 Pachta, "Institut für Sozialforschung," 98–100.

19 AUF, Nachlass Max Horkheimer, I 6, 184–311, letter Doppler to Horkheimer, November 1938.

In summer 1937, the group around Fenichel established contact with the Historical Group via Thomas Rubinstein. Rubinstein was married to Annie Reich and had been a functionary within the Communist International before breaking with the party over Stalinism and psychoanalysis catching his interest.²⁰ Fenichel, who had been looking for trained Marxists interested in psychoanalysis, was enthusiastic and wrote in a circular letter:

“A group of young Czech historians who work at the historical seminar of the Czech university in Prague and one of whom is in analysis met Thomas [Rubinstein], and later met me as well, in order to get in touch and to present their work. They are convinced of the validity of historical materialism, are trained in its application, and aim to integrate psychoanalysis, which they obviously understand in essence, into a materialist study of history.”²¹

Fenichel also mentioned the group’s journal *Past and Present* and reported that in the first issue not only was there an article by Löwenfeld (under the pseudonym Jiří Benda) on mass psychology of fascism (which will be discussed below), but that they also “requested my piece on antisemitism for the next issue; furthermore they invited Thomas to give their circle a talk on ‘class consciousness.’”²² However, these plans came to naught: there are mentions of the article on antisemitism in the correspondence between the journal’s editors and the publishing house, but it never appeared before the journal was shut down with the republic’s fall and the beginning of German occupation in 1938.²³ Neither does Rubinstein’s announced lecture appear in the list of the Historical Group’s events.²⁴ But in a later circular letter, Fenichel notes that he and Rubinstein planned a seminar on the method of historical materialism in fall 1937 and that they “will most likely invite to these sessions the Czech historians mentioned before.”²⁵

Fenichel went on to offer the readers of the circular letter a short overview of the contents of the first issue of *Past and Present*. The fact that he had to rely on a third person’s report, as he did not understand the Czech language, already hints at a central problem in the communication between the groups that hampered deeper discussion: the language barrier. While most Czechoslovak historians

20 Retzlaw, *Spartakus*, 219.

21 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 36,” 588. Reichmayer and Mühlleitner suppose that the member of the group who underwent an analysis was Jan Pachtá.

22 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 36,” 588.

23 PNP, Fond Druženství práce, Historická skupina ke sborníku Dějiny a přítomnost, letter of Jaroslav Charvát to the editorial board, February 12, 1938.

24 Petrán, “Historická skupiná (Komentář k vzpomínkám jejich členů),” 41–42.

25 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 40,” 627.

were fairly fluent in German, their *émigré* counterparts lacked any knowledge of Czech. However, based on the information Fenichel received through his source, he noted that the “most important piece in the issue is Pachtá’s article entitled »Social Psychology and Historiography«.”²⁶

V.

What were the main points of Pachtá’s article? Before going into detail, it should be noted that Pachtá’s text is, in terms of content, drawing heavily on Max Horkheimer’s article *Geschichte und Psychologie*,²⁷ published a few years earlier. Of course, Pachtá refers to Horkheimer’s text, as well as to the works of Erich Fromm, which represent another central source.

As Horkheimer, Pachtá argues that historiography can profit from introducing psychological aspects:

“Thus, the purpose of social psychology as an ancillary discipline of history is to realize how human psychological forces and dispositions interrelate with historical conditions and which psychological factors contribute to the change of historical events.”²⁸

But, as Pachtá argues (again in line with Horkheimer), previous psychological theories had been inadequate for this task, and the situation only changed with Freud’s discovery of the subconscious:

“The main flaw of today’s currents of social psychology is that the standpoint of a psychology of conscience is adhered to, thus missing the unconscious and irrational motives of human behavior and, with it, the entire dynamic of psychic life. It is not possible for them to explain, for example, why people accept ideologies that contradict their conscious interests, why they adhere to traditional economic structures, although their labor power and their needs have changed, or why, in the case of revolutions, tremendous anxiety is accumulated within the masses. [...] Where previous social-psychological systems end, social-psychological study begins on the basis of a psychology of the unconscious, called psychoanalysis.”²⁹

Pachtá notes (again in accordance with Horkheimer) that the use of social psychology has its historical moment of its own; that “the more historical actions are

26 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 36,” 589.

27 Horkheimer, “Geschichte und Psychologie,” 125–44.

28 Pachtá, “Sociální psychologie a dějepyt,” 59.

29 Pachtá, “Sociální psychologie a dějepyt,” 61–62.

determined by conscious and rational motives, the less psychological explanation is needed.”³⁰ Thus, social psychology is an instrument to understand one’s motives that, in the long run, should make itself superfluous. As long as social psychology is still needed, it should help the historian to understand the unconscious motives of individuals and groups. Each society influences the individual and brings forth a character structure that conforms to the needs of society. Echoing Fromm (and Reich), Pachta emphasizes the role of the family in this process:

“The family is the medium through which society imprints its specific structure upon the children and, by this, upon the grownups, as well.”³¹

But the needs of society do not harmonize with the needs and drives of the individual, as the latter has to repress some of the drives, which is never fully successful, and the repressed drives come back into the consciousness in a rationalized form. For Pachta, this is how ideologies are produced:

“According to psychoanalysis, ideologies are manifestations of impulses of drives, wishes, interests, and needs, whose motives are partly unconscious; thus, ideologies are the rationalized forms of unconscious needs.”³²

For Pachta, religion is a central ideology in history that can be further analyzed by psychoanalytical means:

“If we search for the foundations of religious convictions, we realize that the ‘religious idea’ is not the last motive of human action that cannot be further analyzed, but a symbolic form of real desires and of drives.”³³

As has been said, as a first step, Pachta synthesizes the works of the Freudian critique of religion with Fromm’s and Horkheimer’s ideas for an analytical social psychology. In a next step however, Pachta tries to apply this new approach to obtaining a better understanding of an epoch that was in the focus of a heated historiographical debate in the Czechoslovak Republic: the role of the Hussite movement.³⁴ In the young republic, the Hussite movement was not only a topic of history but also one of national identity. Left-leaning historians tried to stress the social revolutionary tendencies within the movement. Armed with the tools of social psychology, Pachta wanted to explain the connections of the Hussites’ religious beliefs with their revolutionary thrust:

30 Pachta, “Sociální psychologie a dějepyt,” 61.

31 Pachta, “Sociální psychologie a dějepyt,” 65.

32 Pachta, “Sociální psychologie a dějepyt,” 68.

33 Pachta, “Sociální psychologie a dějepyt,” 69.

34 For an overview on the debate see Čornej, “Jan Slavík v kontextu české Husitologie první poloviny 20. století,” 59–84.

“The fantasies and illusions, that are recognized by all, turn into something objective, something perceptible for them. The correctness of Freud’s notion of religion is clearly shown by the chiliastic fantasies of the poor peasants in the times of the Hussites. [...] What people could not get in reality was satisfied in their chiliastic expectations. These chiliastic fantasies, however, express hatred of the rich and the exploiters or are the people’s unconscious aggressive and revolutionary tendencies.”³⁵

Pachta then tries to link these tendencies to the family and the feudal system:

“As the child in his father, the servant saw in the master, in the priest a wise and omnipotent figure; he respected and feared them at the same time and wanted their goodwill. [...] The Taborite’s agitation against confession, against sinecures and bells, processions, candles, against the ornate and all ecclesial formalism actually derives from the hatred against the fatherly position of the clergy, against the deceitful means by which the priest attributes authority to himself and by which he elevates himself above the layman. [...] [C]losely connected to the Taborite’s hatred, which is the hatred of the brothers against the father and against authority, is a peculiar trait of the social and psychological structure of the Hussite movement: its democratic, brotherly character.”³⁶

It is not without reason that, in his presentation of Pachta’s article, Fenichel noted that the “following deliberations are not really clear.”³⁷ In his attempt to turn the critique of the individual’s tendencies to act against its interests in a positive theory of revolution, Pachta substituted the analysis of the individual directly with the analysis of collectives, something that Fenichel criticized elsewhere as “the old construal analysis,”³⁸ which attributed to the masses the same psychological mechanisms as to the individual, thus underestimating the role of sociology and distorting reality.

Furthermore, one could argue that later studies of the authoritarian personality showed that hatred of the fatherly authority will by no means guarantee a democratic development. In their research on the subject, Adorno and others pointed out that there is a type of authoritarian character who pretends to be rebellious, who highlights the “blind hatred of *all* authority, with strong destructive connotations, accompanied by a secret readiness to ‘capitulate’ and to join hands with the

35 Pachta, “Sociální psychologie a dějezpyt,” 70.

36 Pachta, “Sociální psychologie a dějezpyt,” 71.

37 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 36,” 590.

38 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 20,” 286.

‘hated’ strong.”³⁹ Fenichel’s critique, however, shows how experimental and open for discussion these psychological attempts were, even within the groups discussed in this article.

VI.

The discussion of the Hussite movement with its contemporaneous importance mainly within Czechoslovak historiography was, however, not the central focus of the application of psychoanalysis. As already mentioned, Heinrich Löwenfeld (under the pseudonym Jiří Benda), one of the psychoanalysts exiled from Berlin, published a study on the psychological analysis of German fascism in the same issue of *Past and Present*.⁴⁰ This article was not the only forum for Löwenfeld to propagate his views: in 1935, he also gave a talk on the topic in the adult education center ‘Urania’ in Prague, as well as in the meetings of psychoanalysts. Löwenfeld even managed to publish a shortened and popularized version of his text in the most important magazine in the First Czechoslovak Republic, the renowned *Přítomnost* (Present), this time under the pseudonym Jindřich Lev. These endeavors show how important it was for Löwenfeld and his group to be heard and to make their theories known, in the hope that they might turn the tide against rising fascism. As the article sums up most of the arguments of Löwenfeld’s article in *Past and Present*, we will discuss its main points.

Under the title *Psychologie diktátora. Muž, který se skrývá*⁴¹ (A Dictator’s Psychology. The Man Who Hides Himself), Löwenfeld emphasizes that the success of the dictator or agitator stems from the fact that he fulfills a psychological need in the psyche of the individuals who make up the mass: “The figure of the dictator who successfully hides behind its legend betrays himself in the face of the masses whose selected hero he is. In the mirror of the masses, we see the image of the ‘Führer’ in crude but clear traits.”⁴² Based on Freud’s analysis of mass psychology, Löwenfeld emphasizes that the central mechanism that enables this relation and explains the tendency towards irrationalism in contemporaneous Germany is regression, i.e., a more developed stage of the subject is abandoned, as the fulfillment of the drives is frustrated: “The whole nation abandons at some point a frustrating reality towards a world of mysticism; the nation abandons the critical approach of a grownup who decides on his acts for the *behavior of a child*: she needs someone who leads her. She needs a ‘Führer.’”⁴³

39 Adorno et. al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 762.

40 Benda, “K psychologii německého fašismu,” 74–85.

41 Lev, “Psychologie diktátora,” 127.

42 Lev, “Psychologie diktátora,” 127.

43 Lev, “Psychologie diktátora,” 127.

This should not lead to the conclusion that the masses are ‘seduced’ or should be relieved from their responsibility. Löwenfeld stresses that there is no automatism, no ‘manipulation’ in the strict sense. The leader uses the unreflected needs of the mass individuals but does not create them:

“The »Führer« and the guided are made of the same material and stem from the same experience. *One day*, after all the disappointments by everyday matters, this »Führer« also managed to *rediscover his belief in miracles*. This belief is of a similar type and is as unfathomable and as absurd as the belief of the guided. Because so far, he has always lost and has not been successful, his *belief in miracles has to be justified*. Because he, in the same way as the masses, lost faith in a reasonable solution. Here especially, his personal fate meets the fate of the nation.”⁴⁴

The regression and the identification with the leader take irrationality to new heights.

Again, in discussing Löwenfeld’s contribution, Fenichel raised some critical points. He was aware that Löwenfeld’s work did “not contain much of its own, but was in essence a repetition of the thoughts in Fromm’s programmatic piece, [...] which were applied to the content of fascist ideology, which again was largely taken from the sound passages of Reich’s booklet, [...] but it shows a great understanding of these texts and the relevant problems, and the contribution is very welcome, given the lack of even halfway correct psychoanalytical »applications«.”⁴⁵ So, while seeing many shortcomings in Löwenfeld’s essay, Fenichel applauded the general thrust of the piece. Mainly, he criticized the old problem of mixing the analysis on an individual and a collective level. But these critical points aside, when Löwenfeld gave a talk on the same topic in the working group of the Prague psychoanalysts, Fenichel welcomed this contribution in his opening remarks and underscored why Prague was such an important hub for psychoanalytical research:

“The application [of psychoanalysis] to mass psychology and sociological questions certainly carries special weight. When it comes to mass psychology and contemporaneous sociology, the difficulties become much bigger, but the problem’s ‘scientific character’ does not dwindle. Unscientific reasons are to blame for the fact that several analytical associations have obstacles standing in their way. I am glad that colleagues in this academic field have the unrestricted possibility to do so in our study group in Prague.”⁴⁶

44 Lev, “Psychologie diktátora,” 128.

45 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 20,” 286.

46 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 23,” 349.

The Czechoslovak Republic was one of the last countries in Central Europe with a society and a political climate open enough to enable the new science of psychoanalysis, always eyed with suspicion, to at least try to develop its ideas.

VII.

Perhaps the most important contribution of an analytical social psychology in the understanding of and the attempt to counter the rise of fascism and German national socialism was the study of antisemitism. In 1946, the psychoanalyst Ernst Simmel published an edited volume on the topic, bringing together contributions by Fenichel, Horkheimer, Adorno, and others. The gravity of the topic as well as the central role Fenichel played in its understanding is emphasized by Horkheimer:

“Even now that the Allied troops have victoriously crushed Fascism, the scientist must continue to study anti-Semitism, lest the ultimate victory slump into horrible defeat. It is certainly not too much to assert that Allied troops have fought for the self-same civilization which is most vitally threatened by anti-Semitism. Despite the importance of the problem of anti-Semitism as a social phenomenon, not much has as yet been achieved toward its solution by sociology or philosophy. Interestingly enough, there is no study in the field of sociology or of social philosophy comparable to the lucid discussion in Freud’s *Moses* or to the psychoanalytic papers on anti-Semitism such as that of Fenichel.”⁴⁷

While this volume, which is dedicated to Fenichel, who passed away unexpectedly during the printing process, is still considered a central source for discussions on antisemitism, it is little known that some early versions of Fenichel’s contribution had their origins in Prague.

The ideas that Fenichel developed in the paper Horkheimer is referring to and which follows Horkheimer’s thoughts in the book⁴⁸ is based on a talk that Fenichel gave in 1937 “before a Prague Zionist group.”⁴⁹ As the plans of publishing an article in *Past and Present* did not come to fruition, a first written version of Fenichel’s deliberations was published as late as 1940, when he was already in exile in the United States. This latter piece is the closest to the Prague lecture, and so we will discuss its main points in order to give an impression of Fenichel’s thoughts in Prague. The text in the 1946 volume differs from the earlier versions, as it has been revised

47 Horkheimer, “Sociological Background of the Psychoanalytic Approach,” 1–2.

48 Fenichel, “Elements of a Psychoanalytic Theory of Anti-Semitism,” 11–32.

49 Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, 113.

and the results of Freud's last book, *Mann Moses* (Moses and Monotheism), are incorporated.

It is typical of Fenichel, albeit surprising for a psychoanalyst, that he prudently shows the limits of psychoanalysis and its application to social phenomena right at the beginning of his article on antisemitism. We saw examples of his critique of a 'psychologism' and a 'construal analysis' in Pacht's and Löwenfeld's works, which simply transfer the analysis of the individual to the collective, trying to explain social phenomena through individual-psychological categories. This is a danger Fenichel aims to evade when he emphasizes in his paper:

"The psychological mass basis for antisemitism, whatever that may be, existed in 1925 too, but antisemitism was not a political force then. If one wishes to understand its rise during these ten years in Germany, one must ask what happened during these ten years, not about the comparatively unaltered unconscious."⁵⁰

Fenichel then narrows down the problem to the question "why did the propaganda work"⁵¹ and raises the question about the "advantage that antisemitism brings to the average man."⁵² Similarly to Löwenfeld, he wants to know what psychological need is satisfied by antisemitism, and here psychoanalysis has its place for him. Fenichel identifies the function of antisemitism as a sort of authoritarian rebellion, in which bogus authorities are attacked while still conforming to social norms:

"The advantage that antisemitism gave to the average person was different from that of a prospect of a job. They were in conflict between the rebellious tendency and the respect for authority, in which they had been trained. Antisemitism gave them the means of satisfying both these contradictory tendencies at the same time; the rebellious tendency by destructive actions against defenseless people, and the respectful one by the clear conscience, which they had, as these actions had been carried out at the command of the ruling powers."⁵³

This way, the contradictions that modernity has caused could be blamed on the Jews, without having to criticize social institutions or social relations. But Fenichel goes further:

"There must be something in the mass mind which meets antisemitism half way, the Jew must be the 'born scapegoat' for their hosts."⁵⁴

50 Fenichel, "Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism," 25.

51 Fenichel, "Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism," 26.

52 Fenichel, "Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism," 26.

53 Fenichel, "Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism," 26.

54 Fenichel, "Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism," 27.

Here Fenichel points out that, along with the traditional religious ‘foreignness’ of Jews, the connection to the circulation sphere, the economic sphere of exchange, into which the Jews were traditionally forced, made them the preferred victim.

But Fenichel’s central idea in this article, which has influenced the following discussions on antisemitism perhaps the most, is the discovery of the projective nature of antisemitism. He takes a look at the antisemitic ramblings which impute the worst crimes to Jews and takes them seriously—in the psychoanalytical sense, that “even the most senseless neurotic phenomenon has a hidden meaning for those who understand how to read it, that even the maddest obsession of a lunatic contains a bit of truth if it is not taken literally but in its latent meaning, and that in order to find this latent meaning one must take seriously everything that is said.”⁵⁵

On this basis, Fenichel argues that the antisemite projects on the Jews his own repressed urges that he cannot allow into his consciousness, thereby making antisemitism an especially toxic and dangerous phenomenon:

“The Jew not only unconsciously represents for the rioters the authorities whom they do not dare to attack, but also their own repressed instincts which they themselves hate and which are forbidden by the authorities against which they are directed. Antisemitism is indeed a condensation of the most contradictory tendencies: the instinctual rebellion, directed against the authorities, and the cruel suppression and punishment of this instinctual rebellion, directed against oneself.”⁵⁶

The projective and irrational character of antisemitism makes it very hard to dispel, since in many cases, real experiences with Jews do not change anything:

“It is well known that every antisemite knows one Jew who is free of all abominable Jewish qualities, and yet this makes no difference in his antisemitism.”⁵⁷

Consequently, and also in line with the limits of the psychoanalytical approach, Fenichel sees little merit in classical therapeutical interventions and reminds of the social roots of the problem, hinting that the solution might be found in the change of social relations:

“The full utilization of the psychological facts which we have studied so that they become a real and politically effective power is only possible under certain economic and political circumstances.”⁵⁸

55 Fenichel, “Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism,” 30.

56 Fenichel, “Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism,” 31.

57 Fenichel, “Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism,” 31.

58 Fenichel, “Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism,” 39.

While most of Fenichel's deliberations were taken over and further developed in his later theoretical analyses of antisemitism, at the end of his 1940 article he argues somewhat simplistically, when he states that antisemitism is a "weapon in the class-warfare dominating the present civilized world."⁵⁹ In the later version of the paper, this passage is missing, as it goes back to a problematic, instrumental notion of ideology: it supposes the existence of a subject that wields this ideological weapon in a conscient way. However, these discussions are part of the further development of a critique of antisemitism, whose details are outside the scope of the present paper.

VIII.

The rather pessimistic view of the chance to prevent the destructive avalanche of fascism and antisemitism, and the rapid deterioration of the international position of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1938 forced Otto Fenichel to plan his exile in the United States. In his farewell speech in spring 1938, he summarized the situation:

"A few years ago, a friend, a chemical scientist, who was from the outside, but very much interested in psychoanalysis as a natural science, asked me: 'What questions represent the most important research topic for psychoanalysis right now?' I answered: 'The question whether the Nazis will get into government in Vienna.'—Now they got there. [...] The fate of psychoanalysis will depend on the fate of the world and of science in general."⁶⁰

The innovative hub that Prague formed for some years in the discussions on an analytical social psychology ceased to exist, as the participants in the discussions fled, were murdered, or silenced.

Pachta and other central members of the Historical Group survived the occupation, some having contacts to the resistance movement. However, Pachta's interest in psychoanalysis was not rekindled after the war. Following the communist coup d'état in 1948, he became one of the leading Stalinist historians.

Fenichel, Löwenfeld, Annie Reich, and Rubinstein managed to escape in time, along with other members of the psychoanalytic group in the Czechoslovak Republic. Of those who remained, only Theodor Dosužkov survived the war and Shoah. Others, like Steff Bornstein, were not so lucky.⁶¹

Perhaps it was his critique of antisemitism that made Fenichel aware of the stark reality and grim danger they faced without rationalization, as in his farewell speech he uttered prophetic words:

59 Fenichel, "Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism," 39.

60 Fenichel, "Rundbrief 48," 931.

61 Giefer, "Entwicklung der Psychoanalyse in der Tschechoslowakei," 24–25.

“We should not overestimate psychoanalysis. Even if it was not impeded, it still would not cause a revolution.—If psychoanalysis is menaced by physical extermination today, it is not because the enemy directly fears it as a high, latent revolutionary threat, but it is more complicated, as an indirect route via antisemitism is taken [...]. Psychoanalysis is persecuted mainly as a Jewish science.”⁶²

With the destruction of the Prague hub, the last bastion of the project of psychoanalysis fell as a social transformative force that Fenichel and others had propagated, and the project came to an end. The hope that the answer to the question why people act against their conscious interests could yield practical results had been frustrated—at least in Europe.

But Fenichel was not very optimistic about the United States either. He saw all the tendencies of turning psychoanalysis into a clinical endeavor and cutting all ties to a critique of society, tendencies he had always opposed, in full swing there.⁶³ Thus, he ended his farewell speech with the ambivalent statement: “There is—in grief—hope in America.”⁶⁴

Sources

Archivzentrum der Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt am Main (AUF), Nachlass Max Horkheimer.

Památník národního písemnictví (PNP), Literární archiv, Fond Druženství práce, Historická skupina ke sborníku *Dějiny a přítomnost*.

Literature

Adorno, Theodor W., Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson, and Nevitt R. Sanford. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: John Wiley, 1964.

Anderson, Perry. *Considerations on Western Marxism*. London: Verso, 1987.

Benda, Jiří [Löwenfeld, Heinrich]. “K psychologii německého fašismu” [On the Psychology of German Fascism]. *Dějiny a přítomnost. Sborník Historické 1* (1937): 74–85.

Burian, Wilhelm. *Sexualität, Natur, Gesellschaft. Eine psychopolitische Biographie Wilhelm Reichs* [Sexuality, Nature, Society. A Psycho-Political Biography of Wilhelm Reich]. Freiburg: ca ira, 1985.

62 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 48,” 930.

63 Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, 9.

64 Fenichel, “Rundbrief 48,” 936.

- Čornej, Petr. “Jan Slavík v kontextu české Husitologie první poloviny 20. století” [Jan Slavík in the Context of Czech Studies in Hussitism in the First Half of the 20th Century]. In *Život plný střetů. Dílo a odkaz historika Jana Slavíka (1885–1978)* [A Life Full of Conflict. The Work and Legacy of the Historian Jan Slavík], edited by Lukáš Babka and Petr Roubal, 59–84. Prague: Národní knihovna ČR, 2009.
- Dahmer, Helmut. *Libido und Gesellschaft. Studien über Freud und die Freudsche Linke* [Libido and Society. Studies on Freud and the Freudian Left]. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982.
- Fenichel, Otto. “Elements of a Psychoanalytic Theory of Anti-Semitism.” In *Anti-Semitism. A Social Disease*, edited by Ernst Simmel, 11–32. New York: International Universities Press, 1947.
- Fenichel, Otto. “Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism.” *American Imago* 2 (1940): 24–39.
- Fenichel, Otto. “Rundbrief 20” [Circular letter 20]. In *Otto Fenichel. 119 Rundbriefe (1934–1945)* [Otto Fenichel. 119 Circular Letters (1934–1945)], edited by Johannes Reichmayr and Elke Mühlleitner, 283–90. Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998.
- Fenichel, Otto. “Rundbrief 23” [Circular letter 23]. In *Otto Fenichel. 119 Rundbriefe (1934–1945)* [Otto Fenichel. 119 Circular Letters (1934–1945)], edited by Johannes Reichmayr and Elke Mühlleitner, 339–53. Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998.
- Fenichel, Otto. “Rundbrief 36” [Circular letter 36]. In *Otto Fenichel. 119 Rundbriefe (1934–1945)* [Otto Fenichel. 119 Circular Letters (1934–1945)], edited by Johannes Reichmayr and Elke Mühlleitner, 577–91. Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998.
- Fenichel, Otto. “Rundbrief 40” [Circular letter 40]. In *Otto Fenichel. 119 Rundbriefe (1934–1945)* [Otto Fenichel. 119 Circular Letters (1934–1945)], edited by Johannes Reichmayr and Elke Mühlleitner, 625–72. Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998.
- Fenichel, Otto. “Rundbrief 48” [Circular letter 48]. In *Otto Fenichel. 119 Rundbriefe (1934–1945)* [Otto Fenichel. 119 Circular Letters (1934–1945)], edited by Johannes Reichmayr and Elke Mühlleitner, 877–945. Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998.
- Fromm, Erich. “Über Methode und Aufgaben einer analytischen Sozialpsychologie.” [On the Method and Tasks of an Analytical Social Psychology]. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1, no. 2 (1932): 28–54. <https://doi.org/10.5840/zfs193211/290>
- Giefer, Michael. “Die Entwicklung der Psychoanalyse in der Tschechoslowakei von den Anfängen bis 1939” [The Development of Psychoanalysis in Czechoslovakia from its Inception to 1939]. *Luzifer – Amor* 68 (2021): 7–26.

- Historická skupina. “Dějiny a přítomnost” [Past and Present]. *Dějiny a přítomnost. Sborník Historické skupiny* [Past and Present. Journal of the Historical Group], no. 1 (1937): 1–4.
- Horkheimer, Max. “Geschichte und Psychologie” [History and Psychology]. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1, no. 2 (1932): 125–44. <https://doi.org/10.5840/zfs193211/294>
- Horkheimer, Max. “Sociological Background of the Psychoanalytic Approach.” In *Anti-Semitism. A Social Disease*, edited by Ernst Simmel, 1–10. New York: International Universities Press, 1947.
- Jacoby, Russel. *The Repression of Psychoanalysis. Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Jay, Martin. *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923–1950*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996.
- Jiroušek, Bohumil. “The Journals of the Historical Group.” *Prague Economic and Social History Papers* 12 (2010): 101–16.
- Jiroušek, Bohumil. *Historik Jaroslav Charvát v systému vědy a moci* [The Historian Jaroslav Charvát within the System of Science and Power]. Prague: Nakladatelství ARSVI, 2011.
- Lev, Jindřich [Löwenfeld, Heinrich]. “Psychologie diktátora. Muž, který se skrývá” [A Dictator’s Psychology. The Man Who Hides Himself]. *Přítomnost* no. 8 (1937): 127–28.
- Pachta, Jan. “Institut für Sozialforschung” [Institute of Social Research]. *Dějiny a přítomnost. Sborník Historické skupiny* 1 (1937): 98–100.
- Pachta, Jan. “Sociální psychologie a dějezpýt” [Social Psychology and Historiography]. *Dějiny a přítomnost. Sborník Historické skupiny* 1 (1937): 58–74.
- Petrán, Josef. “Historická skupina. (Komentář k vzpomínkám jejich členů)” [The Historical Group. (Commentary on its Members’ Memoirs)]. In *Studie z obecných dějin. Sborník k sedmdesátým narozeninám prof. Dr. Jaroslava Charváta* [Studies in Common History. An Anthology for the 70th Birthday of Prof. Dr. Jaroslav Charvát], edited by Jaroslav Pátek and Věra Šádová, 11–48. Prague: Univerzita Karlova, 1975.
- Reich, Wilhelm. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Translated by Theodore P. Wolf. New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1946.
- Retzlaw, Karl. *Spartakus. Aufstieg und Niedergang. Erinnerungen eines Parteiarbeiters* [Spartacus. Rise and Fall. Memoirs of a Party Worker]. Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 1971.
- Šebek, Michael. “Předválečný vývoj psychoanalýzy v Čechách” [The Development of Psychoanalysis in Czechia before the War]. In *Psychoanalýza v Čechách*.

Sborník ze semináře ke 140. výročí narození Sigmunda Freuda [Psychoanalysis in Czechia. An Anthology for a Seminar Remembering the 140th Anniversary of the Birth of Sigmund Freud], edited by Martin Mahler, 7–21. Prague: Nakladatelství Franze Kafky, 1997.

Šebek, Michael. “Psychoanalyse in Tschechien. Äußere Realität und Verdrängung” [Psychoanalysis in Czechia. Outer Reality and Repression]. *Psyche. Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und ihre Anwendung* 67, no. 3 (2013): 238–50.

