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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

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OPINION: TASTE | AUGUST 6, 2009, 11:00 P.M. ET

# One Hundred Years of Freud in America

By DANIEL AKST

Sigmund Freud hated America. He couldn't stand being called "Sigmund" by his informal hosts. He believed that Americans had channeled their sexuality into an unhealthy obsession with money. And he seethed at his own need for the dollars that we had in such unseemly abundance. "Is it not sad," he wrote to a German friend after World War I, "that we are materially dependent on these savages, who are not a better class of human beings?"

But while Freud loathed all things American (except its currency), the feeling was anything but mutual. "No nation outside of Germany and Austria was more hospitable to psychoanalysis than America," notes Mark Edmundson in "The Death of Sigmund Freud" (2007). Freud may even have anticipated the eagerness with which Americans would embrace his theories. "We are bringing them the plague," he reportedly told colleagues when disembarking in New York. "And they don't even know it."

Freud made that fateful trip to the New World he so thoroughly despised 100 years ago this month, carrying with him the intellectual equivalent of an alien species that would run riot in the wildly favorable climate of opinion in its new home. He traveled from Europe by steamship with Carl Jung and Sándor Ferenczi, the three of them psychoanalyzing one another en route. When they arrived, they spent several days touring Chinatown, Coney Island and other New York sights.

Then Freud went on to Worcester, Mass., where on the morning of Sept. 7 he gave the first of his famous "Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis" at Clark University. At first Freud had been unwilling to accept Clark's invitation—the impetus for the whole journey—because it would have meant losing patient fees in Vienna. "America should bring in money, not cost money," he wrote to an acquaintance. But Clark's president, the psychologist G. Stanley Hall, rescheduled Freud's appearance to suit the analyst's calendar, promised him an honorary degree—and raised his fee.

The impact of Freud's talks was enormous—and enduring. Listeners included the great psychologist William James, who told an associate of Freud's that "the future of psychology belongs to your work." The anarchist Emma Goldman was at Clark, too, and was smitten. "Only people of depraved minds," she said later, "could impugn the motives or find 'impure' so great and fine a personality as Freud."

Freud claimed to dislike the popularization of his ideas, but he aimed for it with his Clark lectures—composed for a "lay" audience rather than a specialized one—and scored a clean bull's-eye. The lectures sold well in book form, and psychoanalysis was soon a topic in general-interest magazines. During the 1924 murder trial of Leopold and Loeb, Chicago Tribune publisher Col. Robert McCormack cabled Freud with an offer of \$25,000 or, as he put it in telegraphese, "anything he name," to come to Chicago and psychoanalyze the killers. Later that year the movie producer Samuel Goldwyn (who called Freud "the greatest love specialist in the world") offered him \$100,000 to write for the screen or work as a consultant in Hollywood. Freud accepted neither offer, but

playing hard to get probably amplified his renown. "By the mid-1920s," Peter Gay tells us in "Freud: A Life for Our Time" (1988), "Freud had become a household name."

In the decades to come, Freud's ideas would grow into a kind of orthodoxy in America, becoming a staple of medical training in psychiatry and permeating the larger culture. By the 1950s Freudian therapy was almost commonplace for those who could afford it, and its basic doctrines were familiar even to those who had never reclined on an analyst's couch. For literary critics, the encounter with Freud was practically "transference" at first sight; classics such as "Moby-Dick" were subjected to psychoanalytic review, and psychobiography became a trendy approach to writing lives. Popular culture was perhaps more ambivalent, offering layman's explanations in paperback but mocking Freud and his ilk in films such as Billy Wilder's "The Seven Year Itch" (1955) and in songs such as the Chad Mitchell Trio's "Ballad of Sigmund Freud."

Since that high-water mark, Freud's ideas have gradually receded from American culture. In the humanities, rival theories—including feminism, structuralism, postcolonialism—have seized the attention of scholars and critics. More important, Freud's methods and ideas, not to mention the mythology that surrounded him, have come under assault from such skeptics as Adolph Grünbaum, Frank Sulloway and Frederick Crews.

These attacks have been fueled by decades of clinical and scholarly research. There is scant evidence, for example, that repressed impulses produce tell-tale symptoms, as Freud insisted. There is considerable evidence, though, that Freud claimed success for treatments that failed. In the famous case of "Dora," he accused a young girl of lusting for her own molester—and, incidentally, of wanting a kiss from her therapist. In the case of the admiring Horace Frink, in whom Freud instantly and erroneously diagnosed latent homosexual tendencies, Freud aggressively intervened to blow up two marriages. Freud's clinical record is riddled with dangerous meddling, ludicrous interpretations tailored to fit his theories and skewed accounts fashioned to justify himself and his ideas. In the judgment of the psychiatrist Peter D. Kramer, writing in "Freud: Inventor of the Modern Mind" (2006), Freud "was more devious and less original than he made himself out to be, and where he pioneered, he was often wrong. Freud displayed bad character in the service of bad science."

It would be easy to blame Freud's American housecall for the culture of therapy and victimization so widely decried today. But in fact he landed in a nation that was already well on its way to throwing over the stoic legacy of Puritan restraint. The rise of Swedenborgianism, Christian Science and the "mind cure" movement all helped to cultivate the public's fascination with a "subconscious" mind long before Freud got here. "By the middle of the nineteenth century," Eli Zaretsky writes in "Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis" (2004), "American receptivity to the idea of mental healing was unparalleled in the world."

It may be still. A Harris poll last year found that nearly one in three American adults had "received treatment or therapy from a psychologist or other mental health professional." Orthodox Freudians are relatively rare nowadays, and drugs are replacing psychotherapy as a treatment for many mental ills. (A study out this week from Columbia University says that one in 10 Americans is now on antidepressants.) Yet some version of Freud's talking cure—with or without the dogma—is an accepted feature of American middle-class life.

Before his visit, Freud predicted to his circle of followers that presumably strait-laced Americans would never embrace his ideas "once they discover the sexual core of our psychological theories." But of course in America sex sells; indeed, it is probably one of the biggest reasons that Freud's theories gained such currency here. As with so much else, he was wrong about that, too.

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