Psychoanalysis and Politics: History and Theory

Fall 2020, Prof. D. Herzog, Tuesdays 2-4

This is a course in intellectual history and theory; but it is also, and above all, a course in the history of ideas about human selfhood, motivation, and behavior – and the endless mystery of the relationships between fantasy and reality. The course arcs from Freud’s and his contemporaries’ writings in the 1890s-1930s through World War II, Cold War and decolonization to the post-postmodern present. Themes explored include: trauma, aggression, anxiety, destruction, and prejudice; obsession, love, desire, pleasure, attachment, dependency; models of selfhood (conflict vs. deficit vs. chaos), compulsion, neurosis, perversion, narcissism, psychosis; therapy, including neutrality, interpretation, holding, transference, and countertransference; and the myriad relationships of psychoanalysis to politics. Most of the texts focus on Europe and the U.S., but we will explore as well examples from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

Our aim is not only to acquire a deepened understanding of the interactions between individual subjectivities, social conditions, and ideological formations (and to consider how psychoanalysis-inspired commentators have theorized these interactions), but to inquire into whether and, if so, how the mechanisms of these interactions may perhaps themselves have changed over time (and this will require situating the assigned texts contextually, but also often reading them against their own grain).

Requirements include: consistent careful reading of assigned materials and active and informed participation in class discussions; one final conference-style paper with PowerPoint images relevant to the student’s dissertation (or related intellectual development) either focused on a psychoanalysis-related topic or in some way putting to use psychoanalytic concepts. The final two sessions (Dec. 1 and Dec. 8) are reserved for student presentations to the class. However, first drafts will be circulated ahead of time (they are due Nov. 17), and students will be expected to provide helpful written responses to their peers (due Nov. 24). Instructor permission is required to enroll in this course.

Learning Objectives:

Upon successful completion of this course, students should be able to:
*Read both primary-source and secondary-scholarship texts more critically and effectively than when the semester began
*Identify – and summarize accessibly and persuasively, both verbally and in writing – challenging theoretical-conceptual ideas
*Demonstrate a strengthened understanding of the evolution of psychoanalytic theory over the last 100+ years as well as many of the possible uses to which Freudian and post-Freudian thought has been put – but also a deepened grasp of the conundrums posed by psychoanalytic theory to historians’ craft and historians’ enduring concerns with periodization, causation, and interpretation
*Develop and present a formal conference paper to the class creatively engaging psychoanalytic history and/or theory

Sep 1 Introduction to the Class
1 Sep 8 Debates about Freud


2 Sep 15 Desires (Drives and Objects)


Teresa de Lauretis, “Introduction: Death @ Work” and “The Queer Space of the Drive: Reading Freud with Laplanche,” both in Freud’s Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film (2008), pp. 1-12 only and pp. 58-87.

3 Sep 22 Selves (Identities, Memories, Meanings)


Sep 29 No class – CUNY on a Monday schedule

4 Oct 6 Aggression

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents (1930), Part V, pp. 68-74 only.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “Elements of Antisemitism” (excerpt, Parts II-IV), Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944), pp. 139-147 only.


5 Oct 20 **Trauma**


6 Oct 27 **Therapy**


7 Nov 3 Resistance

Wilhelm Reich, “Ideology as a Material Force” *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933/1946), pp. 3-9 and 21 only.


Nov 10-11 Individual conferences on final conference-paper projects.

Nov 17 Student choice readings to be discussed; final project drafts due, to be circulated to entire class.

Nov 24 Written responses to each other due.

Dec 1 & Dec 8 Student presentations.