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Inara Luisa Marin

## Interview with Axel Honneth

**Inara Luisa Marin.** *You have shown a strong interest in psychoanalysis, especially after your book *The Struggle for Recognition*, where it takes the form of a discussion about the works of the American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin and those of D. H. Winnicott about object relations. Afterwards you have written various texts in which you engage in a discussion with psychoanalysis (with Freud, Loewald and Mitscherlitch). But you are above all a philosopher; your project subscribes completely to social philosophy, from which you clearly claimed this heritage. Would you explain what has driven you to work with psychoanalysis, to discuss its contributions and its heritage with a certain number of its authors?*

**Axel Honneth.** My interest in psychoanalysis goes back deeply into my philosophical and sociological education. I was greatly fascinated by the writings of Freud when I was much younger, namely when I started to study and to do philosophy. In the beginning, in my first semesters, I also did psychology, so I was confronted with the academic psychology and I greatly preferred the writings of Freud, which I took to be much deeper and much more relevant to our self-understanding as human beings. So even when in my first readings of Freud I wasn't able to subscribe to everything he had written, especially not to his sociological writings, I was very impressed by at least three things. First, his wonderful way of writing—something you cannot match. I think he is the best German-language author in recent times. Secondly, by his radical mind: he didn't give up working through his first intuitions his whole life, and by the openness and clarity with which he did that. And thirdly, by his view on the human psyche. It is extremely helpful in making sense of some of one's own experiences. It allows oneself a better self-understanding, so it's pertinent even when it's quite away from our normal psychological descriptions, it is useful for stimulating more radical interpretations not only of one's own psyche but also of several events in your life world and in the world around you.

I started to read Freud at a time when it was much more common to read Freud, everyone was reading Freud, and the Freudian language infiltrated the life world, so you couldn't speak about yourself without using certain Freudian phrases. It was the 70s and these phrases belonged to everyday communication to make use of very specific Freudian ideas. I was also a little bit skeptical about this, because it indicated a certain dogmatic use of his writings. The movement of 68, and especially the outcome of it in the early 70s and in the 80s, made use of Freud's descriptions as if nothing would have to be proved or would have to be tested. So in spite of all my fascination for Freud, I was also against the tendency to simply make a dogmatic use of him, because I could see the completely uncritical use of his writings in my own subculture and surroundings, for example in Berlin.

Later on, I became a little bit clearer about what really fascinated me in Freud, and it is probably far away from the official view of his theories and his works. What fascinated me was the depth with which he described the human mind and the human psyche as being extremely fragile, open to drives, not completely controllable and also in the hands of deep anxieties and needs; the placement of the human mind inside the body, making it almost dependent on bodily experiences—that was the framework from which I really started to appreciate Freud's writings. That was also in contrast to some other models of that time, which were also interesting to me—such as the philosophical pragmatist tradition—which also placed the human

mind inside nature, to a certain degree; not so much the human mind in the inner nature of the individual, but the confrontation of the human mind with outer nature. Thus what I liked in Freud was the ambition to place the human mind inside the inner nature of human beings. At that time I was not very aware of the schools that came after Freud; I was mainly fascinated and interested only in Freud and only much later I read other authors who belonged to that same tradition. I can't remember who the first one was; probably I read some Ferenczi and also Anna Freud and Melanie Klein. Much later I got in touch with Winnicott and others that follow Winnicott's tradition, but it was a long process before I got acquainted with the object relation theory.

*In your work psychoanalysis plays a part, especially in connection with the first level of recognition, that is to say, love relations. Would you tell us a little bit about how it came to be?*

At the time when I wrote *The Struggle for Recognition*, there were already a few others who had tried to build a bridge between some Hegelian ideas and psychoanalysis. There was Judith Butler and Jessica Benjamin, to name only two that had certain ideas that may represent a certain link between some Hegelian ideas about how the human mind is developing and some Freudian aspects. So I was not completely unprepared. And especially the notion of recognition (even though it does not play a systematic role in Freud) has such a large part to play in the psychic fabric of the human being that I got almost confronted with the connection between psychoanalysis and my own interest in recognition. At that point I also realized that that was the most fruitful approach to the Freudian tradition. To start with, when you speak of recognition, my point of view was that of the object relations theory—not so much Freud's. Only in the last five or six years I realized that you already have in Freud certain theoretical concepts on object relations, that is, when he is talking about anxiety. But at the time when I wrote *The Struggle for Recognition*, in order to think about the dynamic role of mutual recognition in the early development of the child, I left Freud out and concentrated on Winnicott. And it all fit so close together that it was relatively easy to work that out. I had no doubts that in order to explain love as a kind of specific form of mutual recognition I had to follow the line of Winnicott, who tries to show that it is a permanent struggle for a certain ambivalence between fusion and demarcation which can be described in Hegelian terms.

*You have had a debate with Joel Whitebook about the usage of psychoanalysis in connection to critical theory. How do you answer Whitebook's criticism that your recognition theory dismisses the conflicting nature of socialization?*

To be honest, I have never accepted that. I mean, I know what he wants to say, but I think he is underestimating the fact that I myself tried to describe the necessary conflicting part in each process of socialization. I describe it quite differently from Whitebook. There are a lot of differences that I try to describe in my rejoinder to his article, but I think that one of the main differences is to what degree we should accept the naturalistic basis of aggression, or omnipotent structure of the psyche, of the early psyche. And I think here we have certain differences not in the interpretation of Freud, but in what use to make out of psychoanalysis today.

In the background there is another more meta-theoretical question, namely, the question of what directions should psychoanalysis as such take today, and here I have the strong conviction that psychoanalysis is at this moment at a methodological crossroads, namely: either defending its original ideas, but at the same time isolating itself from further developments in the research of child development and from the still quite considerable research on early socialization, or opening itself up for a fruitful debate with this research. And my view is that because of different reasons the time has come for psychoanalysis to open itself up, to engaging not only with empirical research but also with accepting the means of empirical research which produces insights. And this is the meta-theoretical question between Joel Whitebook and me. We will probably come back to that later.

Up to the seventies, psychoanalysis could afford or had a certain privileged role to play and was allowed to develop its own theoretical ideas independently of empirical research, probably mainly because the empirical research was not so much developed as it is today. For at that time those who were doing empirical research and child development were, like Piaget, mainly concentrating on cognitive aspects; they had no big ideas of how to really investigate the inner world of the child, and were thus abstracted from the emotional factor of child development. Only later then, some people who were previously trained in psychoanalysis went over to do child research (e.g. Daniel Stern). They had developed instruments that could be useful for the investigation of the children and since then psychoanalysis hasn't isolated itself from this new empirical research. And there is a lot going on. I see a lot of fruitful developments in psychoanalysis in connection to some empirical research, whereas to me Whitebook has a certain tendency to isolate psychoanalysis from these developments by simply insisting on some core ideas, like the core idea of the role of omnipotence as a constitutive factor of human socialization.

*If I understood you correctly, the infant research confirms for you the hypothesis of Winnicott's object relations theory. If yes, why and how?*

First, empirical research stresses the fact of the very early communication of the child with the outside world. So I am using especially Daniel Stern's writings. Stern was in my view able to prove the hypothesis that the very early stage of, either fusion of the child with the mother, or complete self-absorption of the child was falsified. That means that we should stop making the presupposition that this was of a great importance to Freud, namely the idea of a free, social, self-isolated, self-absorbed infant, instead of thinking of it as not only being dependent on interaction but also looking for interaction; in the search for interaction. If you take that step, you already come quite close to the premises of object relations theory, and you go probably a little bit further than Winnicott, because he is still presupposing a period, a phase of very early fusion, without any experiences of demarcation. So you start with a certain Winnicottian idea, namely, that the infant is depending on interaction; to a certain degree depending on different forms of care like recognition, and is even looking for it. All the conflicts then which you can observe have to do with a certain ambivalence of the child's use of the mother and a search for certain self-stability. In that sense it was much easier for me to go back to Winnicott and to rethink his writings as well as those of other object relations theorists. And in contrast to some advancements in child developments research, I stick to one psychoanalytical idea that I take from Freud, namely the idea that separation is a real challenge and a problem for the child. And there have been many reasons why I stick to that, and they can't be empirically verified. So there is a non-empirically validated element in my own thinking about the early development. And the reason for that is something that comes closer to the Freudian methodology-mythology. In order to be able to explain all of our late anxieties—or late experiences—we have to somehow presuppose early moments of separation-anxiety in the child. And so the dynamic factor of the conflict in early childhood starts from this dramatic, tragic experience of separation. That also means that, in spite of Daniel Stern, I have a certain tendency to believe that even when one describes the little infant as being from the first moment open to the world and being interested in interaction (which also includes having a primary self) there are moments, important moments of fusion with the care giver which then explains the experiences of separation – and only that, since there are probably just small phases of fusion and not a whole stage of fusion. Because of that we have the experience of separation, frustration of separation, and then the ongoing search in the whole life for fusion. So I tried to give a certain place for this conflicting element, but not by taking Freud, not by taking Whitebook's teachings, but by giving a certain weight, a certain role to the experiences of separation, which can be explained in harmony with empirical research.

*But then I don't see why you need the empirical research after all, because when Freud speaks of primary narcissism he is saying that it is non-empirical, a presupposition that he has to make.*

I see, I see, that is a question of methodology. I agree, I also work with certain hypotheses, which can't be fully empirically verified, for example, this element of the anxiety of separation. This is something you can't find today in empirical research, but I think it makes a difference whether you describe your own hypothesis as being in need of empirical verification by child research or whether you describe your own hypothesis as being true anyway, and this second stand is something which I take as being wrong. I think you should always try to find as many empirical indices as possible, which allows you to generalize your own very primary hypothesis, so I think you have to broaden the empirical fundamentals of your own hypothesis. Thus, what I am doing when I am making use of psychoanalysis is methodologically seen different from what other psychoanalysts are doing because there is a certain place for creative hypotheses. But these hypotheses are still in need of empirical validation and we shouldn't describe them as being not falsifiable. I think these are falsifiable descriptions of human mind stages about which we don't have direct knowledge. And it makes a difference to me whether you describe or understand your own hypothesis as being in principle falsifiable or as being immune against empirical research. And my objection to Whitebook would be that he is taking the second line, namely, he immunizes himself against all empirical research. The reasons why I am thinking of for example the early moments of child development as having only short temporary phases of fusion, is because of empirical research; I mean this is a new differentiation. When I was writing *The Struggle for Recognition* and using Winnicott, I was presupposing a whole period of fusion of, let's say, six months. I gave that up because I couldn't resist the power of empirical research, which was able to show that the very early infant must have something like a rudimentary feeling of its own demarcations, and therefore of its own self. If you are convinced by this empirical research, you can't presuppose a whole stage of fusion any longer. That has to change the picture, and my way of changing the picture was to try the hypothesis that even with an experience of preliminary self you definitely have moments of fusion, probably even quite short ones, but those are so powerful for the infant, because of, let's say, its completeness, that it is a central factor probably for the whole life. But you see that this is a picture which is already corrected by the empirical research, it is no longer the original Freudian picture, and not even the Winnicottian picture anymore, but a picture which allows a fusion between empirical research and some psychoanalytical premises, and in that sense I am trying to understand all the hypothesis I'm supporting in this area. You see, I could talk for a long time about this; about this methodological crossroads. I also think that, to a certain degree, the time in which psychoanalysis was able to create out of itself new ideas, the long period of let's say almost eighty years, in which one scholar after the other (Freud's scholars, like Balint, Ferenczy, Mahler, etc.) was able to play with the original theory and to develop out of it new proposals and new extremely creative fruitful ideas—I think that time is over. The theory has absorbed itself (become self-absorbed?) and therefore it needs new stimulations, and new stimulation only can only come from the outside. Therefore I believe we are in a period in which psychoanalysis has to open itself up, in the consciousness that its own history of self-exploitation, where you exploited Freud's original ideas, again and again, and you were creative enough to find new interesting hypotheses—in the consciousness that that time is over, you have to open yourself up to insights of the now highly developed and extremely differentiated child research, which is no longer Bowlby and Piaget. It has changed. It has become much more sensitive; the instruments are better.

*In that sense we see how Winnicott is more fruitful to your project than Freud. But is there an anthropology in Freud according to you? If yes, is that another circumstance that has driven you to Winnicott?*

That is an interesting question but it is probably the other way round. I think it is more complicated. The anthropology of Freud, of the Freud whom I have read before I was writing *The Struggle for Recognition*, was the pessimistic anthropology of the human psyche which somebody like Whitebook, who has the strong conviction of aggressiveness and destructive element of the human mind, is describing, and this kind of anthropology I never really liked. Winnicott was obviously offering a in certain ways completely different anthropology, with many more elements of harmony and even when that harmony was structured by certain conflicting aspects, at least it was something like a possibility of harmony as opposed to Freud. The difference was also that the Freudian anthropology was extremely monological, which means he was

presupposing a self-contained subject with these destructive elements, but not principally in deep need of interaction and recognition. That was my first picture of the Freudian anthropology. Then I went over to Winnicott and became aware of this completely different anthropology where interaction plays a central role for human development and the picture of the human being is not as destructive as in Freud. After that I realized that there is at least a certain tension between two anthropologies in Freud. One of them I have already described, but there is also another Freud, namely a Freud who is at first relatively convinced of the importance of love and interaction; that is the Freud whose writings, like *Inhibition, symptom and anxiety* (1926), are relatively close to object relation theories and also a Freud who believes that the human psyche is structured in such a way that it always tries to liberate itself from unknown and non-understandable influences. So I slowly became aware of this other Freud with a deeply humanist anthropology where destructiveness doesn't play the main role but where the main role is played by the drive, I would say, for self-liberation and even for self-transparency. And this Freud is becoming more and more important to myself, so the last article I wrote on Freud was on this Freudian anthropology and not the anthropology I had seen before.

*This last article on Freud, which is centered on the question of liberty, is very close to the Habermasian Freud, the one from Knowledge and Interest. How do you feel about this statement, do you accept it or not?*

I think I have never thought of it like that because I am not presupposing self-transparency, or self-transparency as a goal. The only thing I am presupposing (and that is different from Habermas to a certain degree, but I am not quite sure—it is complicated) is that Freud believes in something like an almost naturally based interest of humans in their own freedom. And I am describing that more as something which belongs to the human mind, as if the human mind is nothing else than the need or the wish to become independent from natural, causal effects. And it is a little bit different from Habermas, because he was much more into language theory at that time and into the linguistic elements of all this. It doesn't play a big role for me, but I agree, you are right and I am also a little bit right. It is the Habermasian Freud, but it is also the object relations Freud which I am making use of, but that is not again the Habermasian Freud. Habermas never showed any interest in Freud's object relation theory. He has a relatively conventional picture of Freud and, astonishingly, he is not interested in those elements in Freud whereas he himself is stressing the need of interaction and recognition, and in that sense it is a little bit more complicated than to say that I am going back to the early Habermas.

*Don't you think that we should consider the two anthropologies you have described in Freud not as one opposed to the other, but as constitutive of a tension in Freud's thought, like, for example, the kind of tension we can also find in the death drive and the life drive, or Eros and Thanatos. Would you comment on that?*

I don't know whether I would describe it like that. I mean it is right; the picture I am offering of two anthropologies is too simple and probably the real creative force in Freud's writing was the tension between two competing anthropological views. But I would probably describe this tension, when I make the best use of it, differently. I wouldn't say tension in one side of accepting the death drive and destructiveness, and on the other side accepting the emancipatory interest of the human mind. I would say it is a tension between accepting natural forces. I would use a more general language: that there are natural forces steaming from our embeddings in a fragile and scaring world on the one side and out of that this kind of being exposed to uncontrollable separations, events and happenings. That is one element about which he is extremely realistic and which he takes as being almost causal factors in our psychic developments. On the other side there is the insight into the emancipatory interest of the mind. So, if you bring these two elements together, he has in fact a conflicting view that the main tension is between natural, almost causal emotions and affections and the liberating elements of it. So you can describe what you want to describe, namely, that there is only one

anthropology, I could accept that. But I wouldn't say that it means accepting the drive theory as he is offering it.

*The real difficulty of social psychology has always been the passage from the ontogenetic to the phylogenetic level of explanation. Jürgen Habermas has tried to work out a solution with his theory of social evolution by using Kohlberg and Piaget. What do you think of this solution? And what is yours?*

I fear that I have more doubts about the existing solutions than my own solution, so I first comment on the solution of the later Habermas, namely, making use of Piaget and Kohlberg in order to reconstruct societal development along the lines of a kind of combination between cognitive developments and interactional rationalizations. This I take to be too simple and non-conflicting. Freud has his own speculations about how that probably developed, and I can't really accept that. What we need is a more synthetic picture of the development of human societies, in which on the one side cognitive and interactive developments play a certain role as well as the symbolic elements of human fantasy in conflict on the other side. I don't have a very good idea about how that should work, whether it is possible at all to integrate these two sides and develop out of these two sides a coherent picture, I don't know. What is undeveloped in the Habermasian framework is something which I also take as being very important for individual development or ontogenesis, and this is the role of anxiety—the different individual or collective copings of individuals with anxieties. It is only by integrating anxiety as a central factor in the life of human being (also phylogenetic) that we will begin to get a better picture of it. I would even connect that with the ideas of recognition, because if I tried to develop a picture of the phylogenetic development, I would make use of the idea that the recognition patterns of human interaction are mainly changing, but I would bring that together with the role of anxiety, in the sense of an anxiety for being lost, for being deprived— anxieties of separation in the different forms it can take plays a central motivational role on these terms. So I don't even think that we can have a clear picture of German fascism without having anxiety as a central motivational path.

*Don't you think that a reading of *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*, which tries to bring together the role of terror, fear and anxiety based on the Freudian text (Inhibition, symptom and anxiety), could also be considered a picture of the phylogenetic development of the human being with the target of understanding the phenomenon of German fascism? And if you allow me, don't you think that this reading of Adorno and Horkheimer is very close to the Lacanian idea that anxiety is the primary affect of the human being?*

I see that their interest is in explaining Nazism and barbarism probably even out of a certain anxiety. What I don't like in the whole picture by *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*, however, is that they are not concrete enough, substantial enough, about the specific forms of anxiety. My picture would be that the forms of the anxiety of separation (if we accept that kind of anthropological faith of human beings) are permanently taking different shapes in dependence to the technological progress, political changes and economic structures. So I would have a picture like the following one: that on each new stage the form of anxiety is taking a new form, so that you have in each period of human history specific patterns of anxiety, and that is something that I can't find in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*. It is as if anxiety always had the same form, let's say, it doesn't change with historical experiences and historical stages, and therefore their picture of Nazism and Fascism is completely unhistorical. That is an element I don't like in the book, it is the same anxiety that already might have played a role in the very early human history, whereas I believe that the anxieties which can really help us to explain the developments of German Nazism are much more concretely connected with specific situation of the early 20th century and its political and economic situation. Nevertheless, in a certain sense you are right, they also regard anxiety as being a moving factor. But they are making a too unhistorical use of it, and I would prefer a picture where we try to understand the changing patterns, the changing objects of anxiety, so that the form of anxiety is always in a certain deep way the same, namely, it is the anxiety of separation, while the content of anxiety, its object and its specific

phenomenal quality is changing a lot. I believe that there are distinctions between different patterns of anxiety, but I do not see them as being in a historical sequence; I mean it more concretely. I think the anxieties of the early 20th century are completely different from the kinds of anxiety of the 19th century, and in order to be able to explain German fascism one should be able to talk about the specific anxieties prevailing in the first third of the century in a core country in Europe. And only if you can make it concrete will you get a certain picture, probably on the history of its development, and that is what I consider to be at a more concrete level than the distinctions present in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*.

*In researches with babies, the main hypotheses of the Freudian theory disappear and are replaced by a naturalistic, empirical description of interactions. What are, according to you, the limits of these researches?*

I am treating this research not as replacing completely the psychoanalytic methodology, which means I give it only an indirect methodological position, which, again, means that it can help to correct some psychoanalytical hypothesis. But these researches can't completely replace the other kinds of methods and methodology which psychoanalysis is using, namely therapy and the insights acquired in therapeutic processes. So in that respect the results of infant research have a certain correcting force with respect to psychoanalytical hypothesis but nothing more. They make us aware of certain capacities the baby has and of certain experiences the baby is undergoing which can be probably found with the aid of infants research, but they shouldn't be treated as replacing completely the methodological basis of psychoanalysis. On the other side, I would find it problematic if psychoanalytic theory completely ignored those results of infants research, because they are very often very carefully done today. If I take Daniel Stern and others—and even from within psychoanalysis Fonagy—they are using more and more methods of infant research to give to their own hypothesis a more valid foundation. But again, I think that as long as infant research is not able to falsify the deepest hypothesis of psychoanalysis, namely that there is something like a growing unconscious in the child, we shouldn't leave open the whole explanation of the development of the baby and the infant to empirical research of this kind.

*According to you we have battles for recognition when we suffer from disrespect. Is social disrespect moral or does it correspond to a psychic phenomenon? In what would the psychic element consist?*

In philosophy I am very often accused of reducing disrespect to a psychic phenomena, but I always took this kind of accusation as being misleading and wrong, because you can treat these experiences from both sides; from the side of social psychology and from a moral point of view. If I treat them from a moral point of view, I take them as being instances of a possible justification for moral claims, but only possible hints of justification; they are not replacing justification. I can take them only as instances or signals that inform us that are claims that possibly deserve moral justification. If I take them from the socio-psychological viewpoint, the question of their validity is completely irrelevant. I have to take them all as being important signals of failure in the completion of the identity formation of one's self relationship. The main difference between the two perspectives is that from a moral point of view there are indications of a probable moral validity, whereas from the psychological view point they count as such as being important signals of a failure in identity formation, and as such I have to take them all as being of the same kind of importance, even when any kind of moral validity should be lacking. I mean, even then they are important instances to indicate that the process of identity formation is somehow violated, or inhibited.

*“Wo Es war soll ich werden” the Freudian maxim has had several interpretations in Critical Theory. What is your interpretation of this phrase?*

I am not so sure whether the different representatives of Critical Theory really have a different interpretation of that same phrase. I think they all, even Adorno, are presupposing a normative idea of personality; the idea that personality should normatively be described in terms of ego strength and other characteristics of the superego and so on. So in that respect all the representatives of Critical Theory would have liked to see that Freudian phrase to be understood as saying that the goal of the individual socialization process, or the individual ego development, should consist in finding a kind of relatively transparent form of awareness and interaction through the unconscious; and I don't believe that any of these representatives have ever really had the idea that we could overcome the unconscious, in the sense that we can get a fully transparent awareness of the unconscious. There are certainly certain nuances between the interpretations of that Freudian phrase. Habermas is probably more optimistic about coming closer to transparency, but even in his writings it is not completely clear whether he has that idea, and I guess that a more accurate understanding of it would be to say that we shouldn't give up the belief that we can have a relatively open... We have at our disposal the possibility of a quasi-interactive openness to our unconscious, in the sense that we can indirectly articulate it, we can become slightly aware of it in indirect ways; of what kinds of feelings we have, what kinds of dreams we have, and so on and so on. But the idea of complete transparency shouldn't be attributed to them or to us.

*Social Psychology despises the Freudian metapsychology. How do you see the function of psychoanalysis in your recognition theory? Is it only a therapeutic critic?*

I think that social theory shouldn't be done without the help of psychoanalysis, and this position was shared by a lot of sociologists, even by Parsons. Parsons strongly believed that we can describe the socialization process only with the help of Freudian metapsychology, the categories of *id*, superego and ego ideal. I still believe that these are the most accurate categories which we have at our disposal to describe the way in which the infant is somehow incorporated into society. So we can't do without notions like ego ideal, superego, a certain concept of drives, and the idea of an 'I' which slowly develops and tries to get certain control of itself, so in that respect I believe that the metapsychology of Freud is still the best framework of understanding the socialization process. And, which is even more important, it helps us find the categorical instruments, which allows us to connect the individual socialization process with society. And that is why I think that the concepts of the superego and the ego ideal are important; because these two are the instances by which certain social demands and certain social expectations are incorporated into the individual subject. So I don't see the point with overcoming or giving up this categorical framework, because it helps us to link, on a very elementary level, the subject with society.

*You said "a certain concept of drive". Could you please explain what you mean by that?*

There is a big difference between what I mean by drive theory and the Freudian drive theory. I don't believe that we are in a position to fix drives, or to put forth a theory which allows us to specify what these drives are. I think drives are always only indirectly observable, namely by what we can find as powers of resistance in a subject, so my meta-theoretical belief at this point is that drives are relatively open, not fixated and are consisting mainly of a certain naturally based reservoir of impulses which can go in a lot of directions. So in that respect I don't share the picture of two fixated drives, as you find in the late Freud, with death drives and the erotic drives.

*Object relation theory places you mainly in the direct line from Erich Fromm to interactionism and separates you from Freud, Adorno and Marcuse. Do you accept this statement?*



It is clear that after what I have written I am closer to Fromm than to Adorno. The big difference between Fromm and me is that I believe—and we have good reasons to believe—in a certain negativity in the socialization process; a negativity which comes only secondarily, whereas the experience of anxiety which is deeply rooted—not deeply rooted in the unconscious or in the pre-social infant, but in the experiences of loss of symbiosis and direct contact—and this experience goes very deep and is never gone, and I think that Fromm wouldn't accept that kind of negativity. And this kind of negative condition of all of us is also responsible for a certain preparedness of the individual to irrational movements and tendencies and so on. One reason we have to use psychoanalysis is to help us explain why individuals in certain times and under certain conditions are prepared for certain, let's call them, *irrational* acts and actions, like in mass phenomena or in an individual form. And these kinds of being prepared can only be explained in reference to the kind of anxiety that in my view is the human condition, and that is the difference between Fromm and myself.

*You have given a very important place for anxiety in our discussion, but have you ever written about it?*

It plays a certain role in my late article on Freud, where I try to read Freud already in a kind of object relations theoretical sense, so that you can say that that kind of anxiety is the result of an unavoidable loss in very early infancy, so that what comes with the necessity of the socialization process can't be overcome but builds the reservoir of a lot of irrational tendencies in us, and this kind of anxiety plays a certain role in my late article of Freud. And yes, in *The Struggle for Recognition* it doesn't play a big role; I don't think anxiety is even mentioned there. The picture is so much more, if you want, optimistic. This stress on an unavoidable negative moment comes only later and probably from a reaction to certain objections from the psychoanalytic side. But also from an intention to give the best interpretation of certain phenomena in social life, namely from trying to find a way of understanding the individuals tendencies to certain forms of irrationalism.

*To authors like Marcuse, psychoanalysis constitutes a strong source to drag out the emancipatory potentials of the present time, but it is also a source to lead the critiques of the domination processes from the advanced capitalistic societies. Within your own terminology: a source to lead the critic of the pathologies of capitalism. But the usage you have been making of psychoanalysis does not go in the direction of an exam of the pathologies, but it serves exclusively in a positive manner, to make evident the forms of interaction and recognition at the very elementary levels of the development of a person. Don't you have the impression that something is missing in this usage of psychoanalysis—for instance the concept of "repressed sublimation" would permit us to elaborate on?*

Yes, I think there is something missing, namely making a sociological use of the hypothesis of an unavoidable anxiety, so in that respect I agree. When I am treating social pathologies I am forcibly ignoring the relevance of anxiety, and in only very few passages I ever tried to give those elements a certain place in explaining social pathologies. One such passage is, for example, when I tried to examine the social mechanisms by which young people are driven into right wing radical movements. That can only be explained by taking into consideration the force of anxiety, which is directly connected to the anxiety of not being included in a community. So I would agree that I am not aware enough of the use I should make of psychoanalytical categories in explaining social pathologies. I am not so sure whether Marcuse's idea of repressed sublimation would for me be the best category in respect to social pathologies, because I think that the whole concept of repressed sublimation is presupposing something which I wouldn't accept, namely that human beings are constituted by sexual drives which need, because they can't be satisfied, certain forms of sublimation. I can't accept this whole idea of Marcuse, which is in the Freudian tradition, because I avoid the ideas of fixed drives. If you give the idea of fixed drives up, you have also to give up the idea of the necessity of sublimation, and in that sense the Marcusean idea that we have to make a distinction between

repressed forms of sublimation and good forms of sublimation doesn't really function in my own framework. The necessity of the category of sublimation in my own framework would have to be replaced by the necessity to come to grips with anxiety. Anxiety replaces the role that sublimation plays for Marcuse. Or not anxiety, but to cope with anxiety replaces the centrality of the category of sublimation.

*I would want that you, one more time, comment on this idea of drives that are not fixed and their relation to anxiety.*

I simply don't believe that we can determine what kinds of drive human beings really have, so it is misleading to believe that there are on one side sexual or libidinal drives, and on the other side aggressive drives, like *Thanatos*, because I think the only thing we can suppose—and this is in my own theoretical formation the heritage of German philosophical anthropology—is that there are naturally given impulses which are then formed by social expectations, and certain complicated process of socialization. But I don't think there are any indices or empirical observations which allow us to say what content these drives have, and by 'content' I mean what direction they take, or what they are directed at. Whether they are directed at libidinal satisfaction or the satisfaction of aggression, they are simply not formed before socialization comes in, so they are not something that is pre-given, as if you could say that human beings are constituted by on the one side aggression and on the other side sexual drives. There are probably other needs and therefore other drives that are in themselves so plastic and so open that they can take different forms and different directions. So it is a very open plastic bundle of impulses which are not formed in the individual socialization process but formed by, let's say, societal processes. So it would be wrong to believe that those drives are socialized anew in each individual process; they are somehow already formed before the individual socialization process starts because parents and all caregivers confront the child with certain expectations and certain interpretations which are already always there in society. They somehow indirectly and unconsciously form those drives; therefore they can take different shapes and contents in different societies. And therefore I resist the picture that there are some fixed drives with certain directions always given in the same form and in the same way. That is the big point of difference. I can't make fully sense of the idea that before societal formation has taken place there would be a drive with a specific direction like aggression or death.

I don't understand why we have to understand death as drive. Because death is definitely a constitutive experience of the humans, maybe not for the infant, but after a certain while death is always there, let's say. We can't understand what we are doing without referring to the biological level of our organic being, and in that sense death is deeply rooted in the human condition; is always there unavoidably. And the anticipation of death is in that sense a deeply rooted, unavoidable experience of our being in the world—but that is almost Heidegger. And it doesn't allow us to say that there is a drive to it. So the only difference would be how to describe the exact status of that experience, and the only difference there is whether the language of drives, or the terminology of drives, is the best one to explain that kind of constitutive experience and unavoidable experience.

But I think that Freud had a deeper understanding of it. He wanted to say that we have a certain drive for death because we have a certain tendency to escape from the daily stress of everyday life. We are driven towards death because, if you want, it is all too much for us and we can't cope with the daily challenge of maintaining life. And therefore we have these organic beings that have a certain distance to themselves; have a certain drive to overcome life, simply to find peace. I see very often in Freud and in others following Freud a description of the biological situation of a being, because we are aware of ourselves as final beings, therefore we have a drive not to overcome finitude but to overcome that organic state where we are living. And sometimes you see it in Freud—in his famous letter to Romain Rolland. It is present as far as I can see. You see, I don't even know how to debate those questions about whether there is this drive. It is a certain hypothesis which is meant to help us to understand certain of our experiences, and we can deal with that hypothesis only by trying to figure out whether it is the explanation of an experience, and there are certain

other explanations that are as good or even better than the Freudian death drive.

*A last word on anxiety?*

For me that difference places separation anxiety in the center of the early infant development; for me it also means putting destructive needs and wants or wishes in the second place, namely, to understand them as being only a reaction to anxiety. And that explains a lot about human history and a lot about the role of violence in it. But then I don't need destructiveness as being prior to the experience of separation. I don't need, as Freud wants to very often, the hypothesis of a drive of destructiveness of aggression. This is again a very big distinction between Joel Whitebook and me—it is actually precisely *the* difference: he believes that destructiveness is prior to the experience of early experience separation, it is already always there, and I believe that destructiveness and aggression play an enormous role because it is our human reaction to anxiety, to the shocking anxiety of separation in all its forms—that is the main difference.

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