The Rise and Fall of Psychoanalysis in America

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A review of

After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America
by John Burnham (Ed.)

Reviewed by
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In many introduction to psychology classes, students are taught that psychoanalysis was introduced to Americans during the lectures delivered at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, by Sigmund Freud in 1909. These lectures, all given in German, have become iconic in the history of psychology, and why not? Not only was Freud present, but also were Jung, James, Ferenczi, G. Stanley Hall, Titchner, Boas, Adolf Meyer, A. A. Brill, and Ernst Jones, individuals who became legends in the world of psychology and psychoanalysis.

John Burnham has assembled a formidable team of historians to evaluate the events that led up to this milestone event and the historical impact it had on the opinions about psychoanalysis in North America. The material covered in After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America does not focus on the development of ideas and practices that
make up the clinical practice of psychoanalysis; rather, the authors examine the ideas and opinions that developed about psychoanalysis.

Consequently, there is little new material presented about the conceptual struggles that mark the development of this clinical approach. Burnham and his team are, for the most part, more interested in how psychoanalysis became a worldview and then influenced the worldview of America during the 20th century. The book’s title should have been *After Freud Left: A Century of Freudianism in America*.

The book starts with an excellent overview of the ideas about psychotherapy that were being explored in 1909, the year of the Clark lectures (Rozenzweig, 1993). Contrary to opinions that emerged in the psychoanalytic community, there was a robust interest in the use of psychotherapy in the United States before Freud’s visit. Morton Prince, Hugo Münsterberg, W. B. Parker, and E. W. Taylor, among others, were exploring the use of psychotherapy prior to the Clark lectures. There even was an American Therapeutic Society and a New Haven Symposium that were dedicated to exploring the nature and usefulness of psychotherapy in the treatment of mental disorders.

Authors point out that the impact of Freud’s ideas on U.S. psychotherapeutic practice following the Clark lectures was probably minimal. It must not be forgotten that Freud was presenting at a conference where many other distinguished pioneers in mental health treatment were presenting as well. Freud was not even the major draw among the other prominent figures presenting. Although Freud was given an honorary degree at that conference, 20 other invitees were given the same award.

The effect on American psychoanalysis of the influx of émigré psychoanalysts fleeing the Nazi *Anschluss* is well discussed by several authors in this work, who outline the tensions between the émigrés and U.S. analysts. Many of these tensions were due to Freud’s own ambivalent attitudes toward Americans and American culture. European analysts expected, and often got, unquestioning acceptance of their ideas and methods; they were not expecting thoughtful dialogue from any U.S. psychiatrists.

Quickly many Americans and many Europeans who had adapted to America became disenchanted with the autocratic style of the newcomers and set off on their own. Thus began the great “war” between the Freudians and the neo-Freudians that continues to this day, a “war” that reached its peak, according to this book, in the works of Heinz Kohut, who after World War II broke completely with the psychoanalytic establishment and founded self psychology.

In her chapter “Freud and the Vicissitudes of Modernism in the United States, 1940–1980,” Dorothy Ross states the essential theme of the book. For her, history is essentially an interpretive science: It takes events and ideas and subjects them to analyses that are driven by a series of presuppositions that make up a particular interpretive hermeneutic. In this, history is similar to the methods of psychoanalysis. Indeed, psychoanalysis itself has been used as a historical interpretive method (Gay, 1986).
In the current book, however, the authors distance themselves from the psychoanalytic hermeneutic method and advance one of their own. The editor, Burnham, and other authors assume that psychoanalysis is more than a clinical method: It is a particular modern historical narrative as opposed to a traditional historical narrative. All historical narratives interpret events from a particular point of view. Traditional historical narratives typically take the point of view of a particular person or location. Modern historical narratives start with a particular explanatory point of view; that is, the conclusions about what historical events mean are determined in advance of the investigation. Events are then used to confirm and elaborate this interpretive presupposition (Gay, 1986).

In her chapter, Ross elaborates the book’s interpretive hermeneutic method. Using this method, she asserts that American intellectuals accepted Freud’s ideas because they were aligned with the basic ideas of modernism. Freud’s ideas and the influence of psychoanalysis on North American culture were influential as long as modernism was influential. With the development of postmodernism, Freud and psychoanalysis inevitably fell into decline. Although this notion is somewhat compelling, it leaves out several important factors.

Psychoanalysis is not just an intellectual point of view; it is a clinical technique that has to be mastered. As is the case for learning any other clinical technique, there are theoretical classes that must be taken, supervised clinical practica that have to be undergone, and skills that must be demonstrated. The technique can also be independently evaluated for its effectiveness.

Modernism is an intellectual concept that has no essential experience. Whereas one can “do” psychoanalysis, one cannot “do” modernism in the same way. Unlike with psychoanalysis, there is no way to empirically determine whether its ideas are true. Modernism’s ideas may be persuasive or not, but they are not subject to impartial investigations. The ideas of modernism can be evaluated only by other interpretive methods. The results of these sorts of evaluations produce scholarly discussions but no real facts.

The hypothesis that psychoanalysis declined in North America because it was aligned with an interpretive hermeneutic that went out of fashion is hard to support. That it declined in part because a method was not discovered that could establish its claims of clinical effectiveness is a more persuasive argument.

The second factor that is not well addressed in the book is the rise of nonpsychiatric mental health professions following the end of the Second World War. One of the primary reasons for the reduction of psychoanalytic influence in the second part of the 20th century was the systematic exclusion of all nonpsychiatric professions from psychoanalytic training by American psychoanalytic training institutes. Despite Freud’s own opinion that psychoanalysis should not be restricted to the medical profession, U.S. psychoanalytic training institutes refused until recently to accept any candidate who was not a psychiatrist.

The demand for mental health services, which expanded after the war, exceeded the psychoanalytic treatment resources, and other therapeutic techniques, such as biochemical advances in treating psychiatric disorders, emerged to fill the gap. Although psychoanalysis
continued to inform the developing psychodynamic psychotherapies in the second half of the 20th century, for practical reasons it ceased to be the method of choice for treating mental disorders.

Last, psychoanalysis did not appeal to the worldview of most American academic psychologists. Academic psychology, for the most part, has been grounded in the natural science perspective: Many psychologists think of themselves as scientists who use more-or-less empirical methods to establish their ideas. The psychoanalytic approach is more aligned with rationalism and continental philosophy, and it uses reflective introspection as its starting point of investigation. As such, it is much more related to the efforts of phenomenology and the human science perspective than it is to empirical science (Thompson, 1994).

This is not to say that *After Freud Left* is not interesting and useful in its own way. At the very least, this book contains many fascinating historical facts that help broaden the understanding of the development and decline of psychoanalysis in America.

The central presupposition of the book, that psychoanalysis’s rise and fall in the United States was due to its acceptance as a modernist worldview, can easily be challenged by a different hypothesis. Modernism declined, in part, because psychoanalysis ceased to be persuasive to the American mental health community.

Much of modernism’s, as well as Freud’s, ideas derive from the assumption that the human mind is made up of different components that operate in a mechanical way and that subjective experience is the product of the interaction of these components. With developments in neuropsychology and social psychology, academic psychology moved away from the ideas of psychoanalysis when it was discovered that many of the tenets of psychoanalysis could not be easily empirically established.

The conclusion of the book, that the ideas of psychoanalysis no longer inform North American culture, seems a bit premature. Recent meta-analyses of the effectiveness of long- and short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy point to a resurgence of the clinical use of many of the core ideas in psychoanalysis (Leichsenring & Rabung, 2008; Shedler, 2010). If empirical investigations of psychodynamic psychotherapy continue to show that this treatment method is indeed effective, then it seems reasonable to expect that the ideas of psychoanalysis, which inform psychodynamic psychotherapy, would once again find their way into a larger academic dialogue.

Readers who wish to review the history of the ideas that make up the conceptualizations of psychoanalysis would be better off reading Henri Ellenberger’s (1981) monumental work, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*. Fair and relatively impartial examinations of the development of variations of psychoanalytic approaches, such as Andrew Samuels’s (1986) *Jung and the Post-Jungians* or the chess-master-turned-psychologist Reuben Fine’s (1990) *The History of Psychoanalysis*, provide greater clinical utility than does this historical work.
References


