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## Answers to Questions - Martin Wieser's "Psychology in National Socialism [Psychologie im Nationalsozialismus] at Sigmund Freud Private University Berlin, July 27–28, 2018"

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With the publication of Martin Wieser's "Psychology in National Socialism [Psychologie im Nationalsozialismus] at Sigmund Freud Private University Berlin, July 27–28, 2018" in *History of Psychology*, 22(1), 107-109., the IBPP Editor requested the author provide responses to the following questions...and Dr. Wieser graciously accepted.

Dr. Wieser is Assistenzprofessor für Theorie & Geschichte der Psychologie, Department Psychologie, Sigmund Freud PrivatUniversität, Berlin, Deutschland. As Dr. Wieser puts it, "Wandering through the fields of theory and history of psychology, I am interested on visualization practices within psychological theorizing, as well as the social and political determinants of psychological knowledge and the historical development of the occidental 'self'". Titles of his publications include "Psychology's 'Crisis' and the Need for Reflection. A Plea for Modesty in Psychological Theorizing"...and with Thomas Sulencko "(Theories are) More than words. Why images are significant to theoretical psychology" as well as "Images of the invisible: An account of iconic media in the history of psychology".

[The Editor has made several, very minor textual changes to what follows].

**Editor:** For some of the more common psychoanalytic constructs of *the unconscious*—What are their strengths and weakness in context of philosophies of science? How do they support or not support forensic constructs like repressed memory (especially concerning alleged sexual abuse)?

**Dr. Wieser:** [It] might be worthwhile to point out in advance that the concept of the unconscious is much older than psychoanalysis – for example, the German philosopher Eduard Hartmann published his "Philosophy of the Unconscious" in 1869, and even before him, the pedagogue and psychologist Johann Friedrich Herbart argued that unconscious elements form the vast majority of the soul in "Psychology as a Science" from 1824. So my first argument is that one does not need to be a psychoanalyst to argue that there is something called the "unconscious".

Secondly, there are several variations of the concept of the unconscious within the psychoanalytic community. If you look at Freud's earliest publications on neurosis, he does not refer to any sexual drives or desires that lie beneath our conscious thoughts or emotions, but speaks about "clamped affects" that can be caused by various unexpected or threatening events (e.g., a railway accident). Freud revised his own concept of the unconscious in the following decades, and many of his colleagues or followers did not agree with him in connecting it so strongly with sexuality – the most famous examples may be the concepts of C.G. Jung, Erich Fromm or Jacques Lacan.

It is interesting to see that all of them, despite their disparities (e.g., Lacan's concept of the "Id" differs from Freud's by emphasizing the linguistic structure of its content, while Fromm and Jung rejected Freud's theory of the dominating role of sexuality and biology), ...are all targeted by the same line of critique, which was probably most famously put forth by Karl Popper. Popper argued that the unconscious is a) not

observable and b) compatible with any given observation. [This means] that any theory built upon this concept is to be considered as non-scientific – at least as long as it does not allow *specific* predictions for future events which could possibly falsify its existence.

Defenders of the “unconscious” could answer that, following philosophers such as Ludwik Fleck, Imre Lakatos or Thomas Kuhn, a) *every* scientific theory contains presupposed beliefs, assumptions or norms, and b) *every* theory can be saved from falsification by introducing “auxiliary hypotheses”. So what usually happens during the confrontation between competing psychological currents (e.g., experimental psychologists and psychoanalysts, or between Freudians and Jungians) is that each group points out the other’s untested presuppositions, while denying their own – a gesture which usually does not help much in reaching any kind of consent.

If you look the history of European and United States (U.S.) academic psychology, you can see very easily that psychological concepts (e.g., reflex, cognition, attribution, hysteria, motivation etc.) do have a history of their own, a history which cannot be properly understood without their cultural and social contexts (e.g., see Kurt Danziger’s *Naming the Mind* which provided a detailed analysis of many core concepts of psychology). [It]... might be much more interesting to reflect on these concepts – including that of the “unconscious” - within their historical context, rather than trying to prove that they are “non-scientific” from a supposedly ahistorical standpoint.

I would argue that the “unconscious” *appeared* to be a very practically useful and theoretically enriching concept for many generations of psychologists and psychoanalysts, so why not understand it as a *historical* concept (in the sense of Thomas Teo) and see how and why that happened? I think the so-called “memory wars” that took place in the U.S. during the 90’s represent a debate that would be very interesting to look at from a historical standpoint –why did this happen in the U.S. at that point in time, while in Europe there was no such debate?

I do think that a critical historical analysis of this debate, which included accusations of satanic rituals and sexual abuse, could tell us a lot about the cultural environment that facilitated it, including religious norms, conceptions about “speaking out” one’s inner feelings in public, power relations within families, etc. While I do not think that this analysis might result in a “proof” [of] whether or not there is such a thing as the “unconscious”, it might help us a lot in understanding why many people feel that this concept is important to their lives.

**Editor:** Can there be a universal psychological knowledge decontextualized from histories, cultures, and societies? If not, why is the quest for universalisms frequently embraced by psychological researchers?

**Dr. Wieser:** While it would be a very strong argument to say that universal psychological knowledge can *never* be found, I would say that, based on psychology’s past and present, *if* something like a “decontextualized” psychological knowledge *would* exist, we [would] have absolutely no idea how this knowledge looks... In what language

would it be formulated? Which psychological concepts, school, currents, ontological standpoints should build its foundation? I would argue that there is no “independent” psychological knowledge that can be extracted from its cultural context, because without its context, psychology has neither any meaning nor purpose.

Psychology refers to and describes cultural and historical beings who develop and change over the course of their lives, beings who live and “breathe” the culture they live in. As many experimental psychologists want to be included as natural scientists, especially since the rise of neo-positivism and the movement for the unity of science from the 1930s onwards, it is understandable that they aim for the same kind of decontextualized knowledge as physics and chemistry. However, human beings are much harder to analyze than atoms and molecules: they make hypotheses of their own, they act differently under the same circumstance, and, at other times, act the same under different circumstances.

Experimental psychologists have developed a big arsenal of research methods to get such cultural “confounding variables” under control, e.g., by creating artificial environments such as the laboratory, deceiving their subjects, eliminating subjects who refuse to acknowledge the implicit rules of the experiment, etc. But this arsenal can never “overcome” the cultural foundation of the subjects under investigation. I will give you just one example. Imagine Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments were replicated in 2019, and the results would be completely different. That is, no subject would have applied severe electrical shocks. Would this have falsified Milgram’s study? Of course, we would not have tested the same subjects as Milgram. And even if they were still alive, they would be completely useless to us, since they remembered the purpose of the experiment. But maybe our younger subjects have also heard about the experiment? Or people just became generally nicer? Or maybe they have experienced torture themselves? In any case, we might have shown that people act different today, but this does not falsify Milgram’s earlier findings. We cannot test human subjects in the same way we can test atoms or molecules, because humans have a history, a social and cultural position which is unique to their time and place. This does not devalue Milgram’s results in any way. In fact, it makes them even more interesting, because it tells us a lot about Milgram’s times and the contexts that shaped a particular style of psychological research. But it does put a big question mark behind all assertions of a psychological theory which claims to describe a “decontextualized” human being as “in nature” – because culture, as the German psychologist Ernst Boesch argued, *is* our nature.

**Editor:** Might you explore counterfactually, how the choice of a depiction different than Freud’s iceberg model might have changed theorizing about the topography of the mind?

**Dr. Wieser:** There are many examples of different styles to visualize the mind, and I do think that there is a “pictorial” element of psychological knowledge that has not been taken seriously enough in psychology’s historiography yet. Just to give you one small

example: During the 1950s, cognitive psychologists imported the “flow-chart” as the primal stylistic element to visualize the mind, depicting it as a series of “boxes” which are connected through lines, showing a serial order of how information is “processed”. This style was not invented by psychologists, but imported from engineering, mathematics and cybernetics in the aftermath of World War 2.

This style lays heavy emphasis on temporal order and the sequence of how information is stored, processed, filtered and used to execute action. And it also [occludes] other aspects important to other “thought styles” (to use a concept used by Ludwik Fleck), such as how the psyche develops over time, how it relates to the body, how cognition differs from emotion, etc. If you are interested in a history of how psychology visualized the “invisible”, I would take a look at my publications, especially “Images of the Invisible”, “From the Eel to the Ego” and “Buried Layers”.

**Editor:** How is ‘radical behaviorism’ (whether Skinnerian or Watsonian) anything but just another variant of introspection with no redeeming benefits in the context of philosophies of science?

**Dr. Wieser:** “Radical behaviorism”, as the term was used by Skinner, refers to a philosophical position that accepts no other descriptions of events than those which refer to observable movements of material objects in space. Introspection, e.g., observing and reporting one’s “private” feelings, memories, or any other “mental” processes, is refuted as a foundation of any science. While Watson never described himself as “radical behaviorist”, the movement of behaviorism was described from time to time as “radical”, especially during its founding years in the 1920s and 1930s. What was “radical” in Skinner’s position was that he did not just discount inner processes on a methodological level (by merely focusing on stimuli and reactions), but deny that there is anything else to know about the organism. If one would argue that Skinner’s position is “another variant of introspection”, I would be quite interested to hear what they would mean by that, because Skinner surely would have strongly disagreed. **[Editor:** They might that Skinner is depending on memories of observable movements of material objects in space.]

**Editor:** Doesn’t one always ‘do psychology under new conditions’ even if one thinks one isn’t?

**Dr. Wieser:** Referring to the title of a book that I co-edited in 2013, “new conditions” described a change in the political, social, cultural and economic landscape that challenged psychology to reflect on its own theoretical foundations and practical effects. In a trivial sense, every day is “new” and therefore, the “conditions” that we live and work in are different – but the question is onto what psychology is able to adapt and criticize its own methods, concepts and theories in the light of changes that go beyond individual biographies. To give you one recent example: Since 2015, the European Union has seen a series of political ruptures connected to the consequences of the war in Syria and its neighboring countries. What does today’s psychology have to say to these “new conditions” which affect millions of people’s lives? Are our methods suitable

to help? What can we say and do to help people in need of safety and a home? Can we help to stop the spreading of misinformation and prejudices? If you are interested in these kinds of questions, I would invite all readers to come one of the bi-annual conferences of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP)-a place where psychologists who engage into these kinds questions are always warmly welcomed.

**Editor:** Your opinion on the significance of Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* and also his **Character Analysis** in the respective contexts of contemporary psychological theorizing on political psychology and on personality?

**Dr. Wieser:** I have noticed a rise of interest in Reich's earlier works in the last few years, at least in critical-psychological circles in Austria and Germany. This might be connected to the upswing of right-wing parties in Central and Eastern Europe, especially since 2015, and a search for explanations for these developments in leftist intellectual communities. I do think a critical re-evaluation of his work, especially his early works concerning psychoanalysis and politics, is definitely worthwhile. One should not forget that Reich's books were one of the first publicly burned in Germany, and Reich knew very well that he had to flee Germany as soon as the Nazis took over power in 1933. Reich expressed his political positions openly when Europe faced severe political upheavals. While one might not agree with every conclusion he made (e.g. his views on the role of sexuality for mental health), he showed the courage to contribute to the fundamental political issues of his times – not just theoretically, but also practically.

Just to give you one example which many American readers might not be familiar with: In the 1920s, Reich worked as a physician in the worker's districts of Vienna and helped provide sex education material to young women. These women often had very little access to this kind of information to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases. In Reich's view (at least before his migration), psychological analysis and political action require and support each other, and he refuted the idea of a "neutral" scientific observer of the social sphere as a mere phantom. Whether we agree with that standpoint or not, I think that academic psychology would benefit a lot from seriously reflecting upon this issue. As sharp and refined as our statistical methods might be, they cannot relieve us from the fact that, even as psychological experts, we think, act and speak as part of a political sphere.

**Editor:** Counterfactually, what would professional and academic psychologies have been like in a Europe in which Nazi Germany and Nationalism Socialism prevailed?

**Dr. Wieser:** From our historical research we know that many psychologists who were quite successful during the Nazi era also continued their work in West Germany and Austria. In fact, more psychologists were expelled from their positions in 1933 than after the end of WW2! When looking at psychological publications that were written after 1945 in West Germany and Austria, we can see that very often, buzzwords were exchanged (e.g., instead of "race", later publications talked about "cultures", or

“character” was exchanged with “personality” etc.). But the theoretical presuppositions and research methods mostly stayed the same.

Only about two decades later, when the next generation of psychologists [come to the fore], a fundamental methodological and theoretical change makes its way. These younger psychologists were often influenced by U.S. operationalism and positivism to a significant degree. So, from all we know today, there is little evidence to suggest that psychology would have stopped adapting to the new political context and suddenly show some kind of resistance from the inside. Ulfried Geuter has argued that academic psychology saw a rapid growth in terms of employability and professionalization after the beginning of World War 2, and for many psychologists (up to the present day, one might argue), these elements are the most important factors to ensure that they remain satisfied. [Editor: One might read this as suggesting that many psychologists are sanguine about selling the rope to hang others, but less so themselves.]

**Editor:** And what might your take be on why the reception of psychoanalysis was so different in the United States than elsewhere? [Some assert that the work of Nathan G. Hale sets the standard on this.]

**Dr. Wieser:** This question can only be answered by looking at the different cultural, political and economic contexts which enabled (and limited) the growth of psychoanalysis. It is fascinating to see how strong the influence of psychoanalysis on mass media and popular culture became in such a short time in the US – from Edward Bernay’s theories how to manipulate the masses to Woody Allen “Annie Hall”. Freudian concepts, however distorted and simplified, have become part of our everyday vocabulary.

In Germany and Austria, the rise of National Socialism represented a severe rupture for psychoanalysis, as Freud and many of his colleagues and friends were expelled, persecuted, imprisoned or killed during the Nazi Era. While many of those who escaped found a new home in the Anglophone world, they also needed to adapt their theories and practices to their new contexts. Non-medical psychoanalysts often were not allowed to practice in the US, although they had been working as psychoanalysts in Germany for many years. Others were afraid of political persecution during the McCarthy-era and tried to hide their political worldviews. I strongly recommend Russell Jacoby’s work *The Repression of Psychoanalysis* for a deeper analysis. While the alliance with psychiatry helped psychoanalysis become institutionalized and grow from the 1930s onwards, it also made it a part of the “establishment” which the counter-culture of the 1960s was strongly opposed too. The exclusion of psychology as a non-medical discipline also fueled the rise of behavioral therapy as a competitor on the market of “psy-disciplines”.