

REZENSION

Eran Rolnik: Freud auf Hebräisch. Geschichte der Psychoanalyse im jüdischen Palästina

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Reviewed by Anthony D. Kauders.

Was it possible to reconcile Freudian psychoanalysis with early Zionism? This is the central question that informs Eran Rolnik's well-written study of the relationship between psychology and politics in the Yishuv.¹ There are several assumptions underlying this question: that Freud's influence was such that intellectuals in far-away Palestine were bound to consider his theories; that Freud's Jewishness made such a response inevitable; and that the encounter between psychoanalytic 'deconstructivism' and Zionist 'collectivism' entailed controversy, even irreconcilability.

Let me begin with the first assumption. Rolnik maintains that psychoanalysis was popular with Jewish immigrants to Palestine, quickly gaining supporters among prominent Zionists and often informing Jewish responses to psychology in the first decades of the last century (p. 24). This 'enthusiasm', Rolnik argues, all but ended with the publication of *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* in 1939 (p. 195). Most of Rolnik's narrative, however, suggests otherwise. While Achad Ha'am praised Freud (p. 41), most of his like-minded activists, including Hugo Bergmann, Gershom Scholem, and Martin Buber, rejected Freudian theory (p. 61, 63, 73, 157). And while members of Hashomer Hatzair discussed Freud as a potential liberator of repressed sexuality, Freudianism failed to make inroads institutionally. The health service refused to pay for psychoanalytic therapy (p. 147), for example, and the opponents of Freud were successful in halting plans for a chair in psychoanalysis at the Hebrew University (p. 148). Only in 1977 did the International Psychoanalytic Association organize its first conference in Israel, and only in that year did Joseph Sandler become the first professor of psychoanalysis at the Hebrew University. In short, Freud did not fare better in the 'Holy Land' than elsewhere; indeed, the 'enthusiasm' (p. 195) Rolnik mentions in connection with reactions to Freud paled in comparison with the appeal of psychoanalysis in the United States and was confined to (Zionist) intellectuals who hoped that this new mode of thinking would add to their understanding of the Jewish predicament.

¹ The book first appeared in Hebrew in 2007.

This limited impact qualifies the second assumption, namely that the Yishuv's reception of psychoanalysis was determined by Freud's Jewishness. To be sure, there were numerous attempts to establish the Jewish 'nature' of psychoanalysis, a tradition that exists till this day. Freud's concept of repression, for example, was explained with the penchant among European Jews to 'assimilate' and suppress their Jewish descent (p. 196). According to this reading, the fact that an acculturated Viennese Jew came up with the notion that uncomfortable truths were forcibly 'forgotten' was not surprising, given his identity and, by extension, Jewish identity in the diaspora. Freud's public image, moreover, suffered considerably after the publication of his book on Moses, embarrassing leading psychoanalysts such as Max Eitingon and eliciting sharp rebukes by Martin Buber, among others (p. 207). But as Rolnik shows in great detail, much of the debate on psychoanalysis in Palestine reflected European as opposed to specifically 'Jewish' concerns regarding the psyche, concerns that had been raised in similar ways but in different contexts since the turn-of-the-century. Commentators unsympathetic to psychoanalysis such as Jakob Klatzkin joined the neo-romantic camp in rejecting Freud's hyper-rationalism (*Überbewusstsein*), a critique also voiced by Ludwig Klages and C. G. Jung and one that was to dominate the German reception of psychoanalysis in the late 1920s (p. 52). Likewise, Buber's skepticism resembled that of many middle-class burghers in Vienna or Berlin who had difficulties reconciling their belief in emotional self-control and *Bildung* with the purported power of the (sexual) unconscious (p. 61). Jewish youth activists in Palestine, furthermore, mirrored the aims, proclivities, and fears of their counterparts in Central Europe: they too sought authenticity, truthfulness, and naturalness against the ideals of an older generation (p. 60). Once they had adopted socialist doctrines, they too embraced positions popularized by leftist psychoanalysts such as Wilhelm Reich, whereby the 'reality principle' was a product of history and could be changed accordingly. The kibbutz, where early childhood education was to be managed collectively, would hopefully spell the end of the Oedipus complex (p. 183). When the left-wing pedagogues of the Yishuv later disagreed with Reich because his belief in sexual liberation threatened Zionist collectivism, their critique corresponded closely to that of German communists for whom Reich's 'bourgeois' pre-occupation with sexuality threatened party unity (p. 187). In short, the reception of psychoanalysis in Jewish Palestine centered on similar issues as the reception of psychoanalysis in non-Jewish Europe. Freud's Jewishness may have made many Zionists proud, but it was his ideas rather than his ethnicity that demanded a response.

The Jewish encounter with psychoanalysis in Palestine, as the example of Wilhelm Reich indicates, was defined by an inherent tension between Freud's hermeneutics of suspicion and the altogether different demands of the Zionist collectivistic enterprise. Rolnik repeatedly touches on this tension. As much as Zionists were willing to consider psychoanalytic concepts in order to explain the Jewish predicament, overcome the 'inhibitions' of diaspora culture, or heal the Jewish soul, these concepts were only useful if they served the larger objective of creating a new Jewish culture. Ironically, this tension may have subsided in

contemporary Israel—but for different reasons than one might anticipate. As Rolnik concludes in his epilogue, the absence of conflict cannot be attributed to the success of ‘liberalism’, ‘individualism’, or ‘pluralism’ against the forces of Zionist socialism, but rather to the tendency of most psychoanalysts to address the Israeli ‘national psyche’. The fact that so many Israeli psychoanalysts have focused on the effects of trauma, hypothesizing a collective Jewish victimhood of past and present violence alike, has meant that the conflict between the critical, deconstructivist spirit of Freud and the collectivist spirit of Zionism has all but disappeared. Instead, psychoanalysis in Israel has become Israeli psychoanalysis in its preoccupation with certain themes. If the encounter between Freudianism and Zionism once involved controversy and often implied irreconcilability, this is no longer the case. Rolnik’s book is testimony to this change.

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