

Contributions

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC PASSION OF J.D. BERNAL IN 1920s CAMBRIDGE

John Forrester

ABSTRACT Following Hinshelwood (1995), the paper points to an overlooked point of cultural access to psychoanalysis in early 20th century England – the enthusiastic reception of Freudianism amongst scientists in Cambridge. The manuscripts of the Marxist X-ray crystallographer, J.D. Bernal, are employed to reveal his quasi-religious enthusiasm during the 1920s for psychoanalysis as the foundation for a revolution in all the sciences; this enthusiasm disappeared with Bernal's growing commitment to the cause of socialist science.

Key words: Bernal, Marxism, psychoanalysis, Freud, Cambridge, 1920s, Bousfield

Hinshelwood's classic article (1995) forms the necessary foundation for this paper, as it has done for the larger project of which it forms a part: the reception of psychoanalysis in 1920s Cambridge (Cameron & Forrester, 1999, 2000; Forrester & Cameron, forthcoming). Hinshelwood's masterly account did, fortunately, leave a gap: the widespread interest in psychoanalysis to be found amongst natural scientists. Such interest in Cambridge began before World War I but became powerful during and soon after. As one of the major centres of the sciences in Britain, this enthusiasm (despite being mixed with disdain and contempt) is intriguing. Schematically, one can list – in Hinshelwood fashion – a number of points of cultural access in 1920s Cambridge through which psychoanalysis was taken up:

- A.G. Tansley, botanist, analyst, intellectual entrepreneur and his circles
- Progressive intellectuals, emerging from the Apostles and Heretics, centring on C.K. Ogden and his editorial empire but including radical organizers like Lella Secor Florence (Alix Strachey's sister-in-law) and the Birth Control Clinic she founded in 1925
- Within university discipline formation and development – psychology (C.S. Myers and W.H.R. Rivers); anthropology (Rivers and John Layard); English (I.A. Richards, C.K. Ogden and William Empson)

JOHN FORRESTER is Professor of History and Philosophy of the Sciences in the University of Cambridge. Address for correspondence: [jpf11@cam.ac.uk].

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- The Cambridge Psychological Clinic, founded in 1919 (Forrester, 2008)
- Former analysts meeting to discuss original papers – Rickman, Tansley, Jeffreys, Strachey, Penrose, Ramsey
- The Malting House School (1924–27) founded by Geoffrey Pyke and Susan Isaacs
- Last but not least, psychoanalysis as part of the education for life of enthusiastic, intellectually curious undergraduates: e.g. in 1919–25, Penrose, Ramsey, Kingsley Martin and J.D. Bernal.

This paper will be concerned with just one of these undergraduates.

The shape of J.D. Bernal's professional life was not complicated. After studying science at Cambridge after World War I, he spent 1924–27 working at the Davy–Faraday Laboratory at the Royal Institution (RI), where he developed the techniques, both instrumental and mathematical, that made him one of the foremost X-ray crystallographers in the world, extending this technique to the larger organic molecules when he returned to Cambridge (1927–38). Professor of Physics at Birkbeck College, London (1938–68), *The Social Function of Science* (1937) established him as the foremost British scientific intellectual of his time. An indefatigable spokesman for international scientific Communism, he suffered a major stroke in 1963 and died, virtually incapacitated, in 1971. Planning his own biography, Bernal pictured three strands: red for politics, blue for science and purple for his sexual life. His Freudianism, more hidden even than his famously flamboyant sexual life, threads between all three but, in the end, appropriately enough, is most closely bound to sex.

Born in 1901 in Northern Ireland, John Desmond Bernal came up to Emmanuel College in October 1919, studying mathematics, then switching to Natural Sciences (chemistry, geology and mineralogy in 1920–21, physics in 1921–22). The general atmosphere of Freudianism seeped into Bernal from 1920 on; its influence went hand in hand with his personal grappling with the problems of sex. In January 1920, he recorded a conversation with his friend Lucas, who 'told me the advice of a Harley St nerve specialist a freudian who puts everything down to sex in a rather material and cold blooded way' (BP/O.1.1/16.1.20).¹ In February 1920, his friend Lucas 'psychoanalysed' him 'and suggested that "love was the cause of his despair"' (Steward, 1990; BP/O.1.1/19.2.20). By October 1920, his diary records: 'I find myself more of a Freudian than any of the others, though I never read a word he wrote' (BP/27.10.20). A few days later, he wondered if he had an original mind, or if he were 'merely an undigested mass of Einstein and Freud with a top dressing of Wilde and Shaw' (B35). But he was not all Talmudic blarney: on 29.9.20, he recorded reading Bousfield's *The Elements of Practical Psycho-Analysis*. Eventually he read *The Interpretation*

of *Dreams* (BP/3.6.21) and his diary records his response: 'I expound the new religion' (BP/5.6.21). And then came the following entry:

I find a note inviting me to hear a psychoanalyst [*sic*] on love in Dobb's rooms . . . Gr and B [Grey and Barnes] are there also Sprague, & religious people. We meet the stupendous Jonty Hannagan [*sic*]. He talks psychology rhapsodies & metaphysics and is immensely inspiring though he instils in me the spirit of contradiction. Hutt and I talk a lot. We go out inspired full of life and love . . . This at last is the new religion and I am in love with Grey. (BP/10.6.21)

The 'stupendous' Jonty Hanaghan (1887–1967) – a 34 year-old self-taught teacher who in 1926 moved to Dublin where he founded the 'Monkstown Group', the first psychoanalytic group in Ireland – had come to Cambridge to spread the psychoanalytic word in June 1921. His effect on Bernal was overwhelming, from the first day inducing intellectual intoxication, religious enthusiasm and love for all, most particularly for the young women in his circle. A month later a visit to the Salon de Printemps in Brussels prompted a diary entry:

Looking at a picture of a red staircase I began to realize the illuminating application of the *Traumdeutung* to pictures. A real picture (not made to order) must like a dream be made out of material taken from nature direct or through the memory but this material is chosen & formed unconsciously and in symbolic shape by the wish and the complete picture results. Now in looking at a picture we unconsciously analyse it in a similar manner again effecting a choice of material but not simple, as we get them from nature but in already formed bundles and if there is any aesthetic pleasure it is the sublimation or displacement of our pre-existing wishes as expressed on the canvas. A glorious theory, not original of course it is too simple a deduction from F for that. I would love to follow the threads. (BP/ O.1.1/Notebook 2)

Jonty Hanaghan returned to Cambridge in autumn 1921 and conducted 'Seminars' for the self-styled Neurotics (a self-conscious parody of Ogden's Heretics) on fantasy, on Oedipus, on normal sexuality, while the liaisons and alliances in the group shifted from day to day: 'Triangles have given place to the most complexly joined polygons and jealousy is by no means absent' (B43). Jonty's course came to an end on 1 November 1921. Many years later, Allen Hutt described Hanaghan as:

a sort of maverick missionary with a considerable load of what, in those early days of Freudian enthusiasm, passed for Freudianism . . . A whole lot of us, including Des, myself, Dick and Eileen gathered for what one could almost call, I suppose, a species of prayer meeting where this strange, rather magnetic man, Hanaghan, addressed us on the basic problems of what, as far as I can recall, were the relationships between the sexes, which we found very encouraging and mostly set us, as it seems to me now, on the right path at an early stage. (Synge, 1990, p. 13)

The right path for Bernal lay with Eileen Sprague. They married in June 1922.

Bernal had become a Marxist in the spring of 1921, a few weeks before he first read Freud. His 'Psychology and Communism' (1922–3) argues: 'Ever since Marx, the chief scientific basis of communism has lain in economics . . . I think it is safe to predict that in future the place of economics will be taken by psychology . . . the whole theory of economics rests on a basis of psychological assumptions' (BP/B.4.10). The only 'new psychology' considered is Freud's. The best plan of attack was to 'divide humanity into types according to their dominant complexes'. Bernal explores two in detail: the anal-erotic and the two-fold Oedipus complex – one which generates abstract ideals, the other hatred of the father, then leading to submissiveness towards authority and the possibility of revolution: 'Most of the psychological motive power of revolution is contained in the hate aspect of the Oedipus complex'. In 'Psychology and Communism' the anal-erotic complex's characteristic of retentiveness is manifest in collecting and thence to the development of money, while its creative side is seen in the plastic arts, with their unconscious identification of faeces and matter, of 'flatus with music and poetry and oratory'. The visual complex then produces exhibitionists (actors, aesthetes and politicians); the complex of 'inspection' leads to curiosity and thus to the scientist.

Bernal then attempted to fuse a Hegelian–Marxist account of class consciousness with Freud's group psychology, leading to an understanding of the role of the Leninist Party: 'The function of the Communist group in society is essentially the same as that of the psycho-analyst to the individual.' Modern civilization is in crisis because 'humanity had never learned to face itself'. The solutions to date are simply substitute symptoms, such as 'taboo, religion, nationality or the capitalist system' which are all breaking down: the repressed is returning:

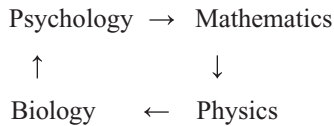
It remains for the communists to prevent this . . . But just as in psychotherapy an analyst cannot cure a neurosis in an other, if it lies latent in himself, but must first himself be analysed, so the communist cannot help to cure society while he is ill himself. The communist must first face the facts of his inner life and it is here that the new psychology comes to his aid. He can learn the irrationality of his motives and the sources of his strength and can build upon the secure foundations of external reality. (BP/B.4.10)

On every page, the novel intellectual resources come from Freud, not from Marx. Just as with Keynes's *Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919), where it is the psychology of the economic system that underpins World War I and its aftermath, Bernal shifted the foundation of Communism from economics to psychology.

During his time in London working at the Royal Institution, Bernal wrote his autobiography. This massive manuscript entitled 'Microcosm' is a record of his personal development and his vision of knowledge, the sciences and

civilization in general. It opens with two chapters on psychology: '[F]or the purpose of my method only that psychology is of any use which can be applied directly to processes of thought in myself and other people or to problems which implicitly contain such processes. To me only Freudian psychology can do this' (BP/B.4.1). Again Bernal asserts that Freudian psychology must underpin the great deterministic system of Marxism: 'Much as the laws of atom mechanics supplement those of thermodynamics in physics . . . , the Freudian approach towards such a group psychology seems the only possible one.'

Bernal expresses his conception of the interrelation of the major disciplines of knowledge in a simple diagram:



Just as there is a surprising link at the heart of 1920s radical economics between psychology and economics, so we see a comparable link between psychology and mathematics, a radical psychologism, also found in Ramsey's reflections and in Penrose's research projects (Cameron & Forrester, 2000). Bernal spells out why Freud's new psychology is the era's foundational discipline:

It might be safe to guess that the thought of the present age is more characterized by the importance of psychology than by any other movement . . . The laying bare of the unconscious basis for human desire and action will rank with that of the cosmologies of Copernicus and Newton and of the process of Evolution as one of the greatest liberating discoveries of mankind . . . It shows its greatness as a scientific theory by the number of separate fields it brings together – Philosophy, Psychology, Metaphysics, Ethics, Anthropology, Sociology, Politics, Economics, Medicine, Religion, Art, Education – all those in fact which have as their essence the operation of the human mind. (BP/B.4.1)

'Microcosm' was Bernal's first stab at a global account of the sciences which would come to fruition in his monumental *Science in History*. But in the mid-1920s the *foundations* are laid by Freud's revolutionary science of psychology, the era's response to the twin failures of rationalism and religion. Even such effects on the sciences do not give an adequate measure of psychoanalysis's larger significance for modern civilization:

By showing that the universal amorality and sexuality of the human mind cannot be extinguished by the most complete asceticism and rigorous discipline, but instead takes on forms more dangerous to the individual and to society, Freudian psychology has given a powerful impetus and a scientific

sanction to the idea of a natural life, first romantically proposed by Rousseau. There appears for the first time the possibility of a natural morality . . . [T]he realization of the nature of the unconscious made possible for the first time an objective unemotional facing of the evil nature in man.

More particularly we owe to Freud the removal of hitherto completely irrational fears and disgusts, such as those of incest or sexual perversions, by showing their universal nature and the mode of their development. At last nothing is *nefas* [wicked] and by keeping our taboos we are only advertising our relation to savagery. At the same time our attitude to crime and punishment has been profoundly altered . . . The vindictive aspect of punishment has now been exposed in its primitive sadism, in spite of its philanthropic disguises, which to the modern eye leaves very little to choose between justice and crime. [And] without the realization of the sexual nature in the child, which we owe to Freud, all the good intentions in the world would not have prevented the same stunting of development that has hitherto marked the progress of education. (BP/B.4.1)

This prodigious encomium gives the basic architecture for all of knowledge. While nodding to the advances of the new physics, his own discipline – he is less than impressed by Einstein’s theories, more impressed by Schrödinger – nothing in contemporary science matches the revolutionary impact of Freudianism.

Dinner-party life was also full of psychoanalysis – ‘Go to Cambridge at the Isaacs. Talk on Sex Differences. JBS Haldane to dinner. Arguments on Philosophy of Science’ (BP/16.1.26) – as were his diary reflections on his increasingly extensive sexual explorations. But in addition to the complex lives of Bernal – husband, Marxist, Socialist, promiscuous radical, inventive scientist – in early 1925 he had ‘meetings’ with ‘Bousfield’, almost certainly Paul Bousfield, in private practice at 7 Harley Street, prolific psychoanalytic author (without having any connection to the British Psychoanalytic Society), including of the first psychoanalytic book Bernal read.

Bernal’s first book appeared in Ogden’s successful *Today and Tomorrow* series: *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (Bernal, 1929). The world was covered by physics, the flesh by biology. ‘The devil is the most difficult of all to deal with: he is inside ourselves, we cannot see him.’ Once humans have, through astrophysics, abandoned the Earth, and have abandoned their bodies (the vision of a ‘brain in a vat’ which Bernal introduced (Gere, 2004; Parry, 2004), Freud shows how they may ‘find the capacity to live at the same time more fully human and fully intellectual lives’ through recognizing the claims of both id and super-ego, ‘leading to a life where a full adult sexuality would be balanced with objective activity’. In this exquisite period phrase, ‘objective activity’, one hears Bernal’s Freudian Communism still keeping some kind of balance.

Not for long: ‘The whole complex of individualism, self-development and self-expression loses its overwhelming importance . . . these are no longer advanced but reactionary aspirations’ (Bernal, 1931, BP, B.4.13). By 1937, the

subjectivism of psychoanalysis was perceived as ‘a profoundly dangerous influence, paralysing action and tending to fascism’ (Bernal, 1937). Except for one more failed analytic episode in 1939 on account of crises in his complex marital lives, Bernal gave up the Freudian inspiration for good (B155; Brown, 2006).

In the immediate post-War period, Freudian ideas were devoured by Cambridge undergraduates with the frenzy of youth’s hunger. A week is a long time in an undergraduate’s life. By the mid-1920s Freudianism was ripe for a more sober assessment. Bernal’s ‘Microcosm’ was the most ambitious attempt yet, later distilled into his provocative futurological essay of 1929. However, with the turning of the political and economic tide at the end of the 1920s, Bernal’s Freudianism was left high and dry, drained of life by the repudiation of the search for the sources of cultural malaise in the inner nature of modern man. Bernal’s later great causes – ‘Science and society’, ‘Marxism and science’, ‘Fascism and war’ – bore hardly a trace of his early Freudianism.

The example of Bernal’s passion in the early 1920s for Freudian science helps clarify the factors conditioning the overall reception of Freud’s ideas. For Bernal, the attractions of Freudianism lay in its unique ability to serve as a foundation for the transformation of many other disciplines. Freudianism promised a revolutionary *science* of the human subject of knowledge, passion and action – whether the subject be a priest, a pilot or a physicist. This reading of Freud’s work naturally leads to the development of a Psychoanalytic Movement. But in the 1920s, English Freudianism was not primarily a Movement, unlike its Continental counterparts. A second aspect of Freud’s work was coming more to the fore: the practice of psychoanalysis as a *therapy* for the neuroses. Although Bernal had brushes with this aspect – through the informal analyses the *Neurotics* practised on each other in Cambridge in 1921 and through his visits to Bousfield in 1925 – he never engaged fully with the practice of psychoanalysis. Others, particularly those setting up the British Psycho-Analytic Society, the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, the Cambridge Psychological Clinic and the London Clinic in the early 1920s, were principally concerned with that applied dimension of Freud’s invention. To them, Bernal’s revolutionary Freudianism, and other enthusiastic projects like it, might seem a danger, a distraction, even a very unwelcome guest, perhaps entirely alien to the project of establishing a more sober Freudian professional practice.

Note

1. Principal sources for this paper:

(1) The admirable biography of Bernal by Andrew Brown, *J.D. Bernal: The Sage of Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. [hereafter cited as B]

(2) The extensive Bernal Papers, University Library, Cambridge. [hereafter cited as BP] Because of restrictions of space, references will be given by box number and/or by date of letter or diary entry.

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