WHY FREUD HATED AMERICA

Sigmund Freud came to the United States in 1909 an eager admirer of this nation and left after a brief visit one of its more vehement critics. Baffled scholars have gone so far as to wonder if it was the American taste for barbecue that alienated the father of psychoanalysis. Here Howard Kaye argues that Freud was appalled by what American reality revealed about his own theories.

BY HOWARD L. KAYE

Sigmund Freud was well-established but far from famous when he received a letter in December 1908 from G. Stanley Hall, a noted American psychologist and the president of Clark University, inviting him to give a series of introductory lectures on psychoanalysis. The 52-year-old physician would be one of several distinguished speakers at a ceremony marking the 20th anniversary of the Worcester, Massachusetts, institution. It was an exciting opportunity for Freud, but he had misgivings. Like most cultured Europeans of his day, he viewed the United States with casual contempt, considering it a land of vulgarity and prudishness. More to the point, he thought it unlikely that his sexual theories would be well-received by a nation of uncultured prudes. Despite such misgivings, Freud's ambitions for psychoanalysis and vanity prevailed. After further correspondence with Hall, he accepted the invitation. To Carl Jung, then his closest disciple, Freud confessed, "This has thrilled me more than anything else that has happened in the last few years . . . and I have been thinking of nothing else."

To Freud the invitation was tangible evidence that his reputation was at last beginning to grow and that psychoanalysis was achieving respectability. Slowly, he was putting behind him the long years of what he called his "splendid isolation." In 1908, more than 20 years after he had begun the long journey from neurology to psychoanalysis, he reconstituted and formalized as the Vienna Psycho-Analytic Society, the Wednesday-night group of obscure, Jewish, and all-too-bohemian physicians who met at his Vienna flat to smoke and discuss his ideas. He had also attracted new disciples, including several promising foreigners who lent his movement more respectability. As well as Karl Abraham in Berlin and Sándor Ferenczi in Budapest, there were the essential non-Jews, Ernest Jones in London and Jung in Zurich.

Although Freud had written several books, including *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), they had found only a small and specialized audience. The lectures at Clark, which Hall had already made an important American center in the fledgling field of psychology, would mark Freud's first public presentations on psychoanalysis. In attendance would be intel-

EMINENT EDUCATORS AT CLARK UNIVERSITY

Psychology, Biology, Mathe-

Sigmund Freud sitting with host G. Stanley Hall (center) and Carl Jung (at right) at Clark University.

lectual eminences such as philosopher William James, anthropologist Franz Boas, and neurologist James J. Putnam (later the first president of the American Psychoanalytic Association). Freud's ideas might finally gain a sympathetic hearing within established, albeit American, intellectual circles.

There was, however, another reason for Freud's excitement. As he explained to Jung, Hall's invitation had reawakened his "youthful enthusiasm" for the United States. According to his sister Anna, that enthusiasm was kindled when the 17-year-old Freud encountered the Gettysburg Address and some of Abraham Lincoln's letters at the International Exhibition of 1873, held in Vienna. She later recalled that the young Freud was so enthralled that he memorized Lincoln's speech and recited it to his sisters.

To the young Jew coming of age during a brief interlude of liberalization in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and dreaming of a political career, Lincoln's eloquent evocations of the ideals of liberty and equality were deeply stirring. When Austrian anti-Semitism began to increase after the depression of 1873, Freud even considered emigration. In 1882, he wrote to Martha Bernays, to whom he had recently become engaged, "I am aching for independence, so as to follow my own wishes" and said he would likely leave for England, the United States, or even Australia.

It was not only opportunity that beckoned. Freud was attracted to the English-speaking world because of "its sober industriousness, its generous devotion to the public weal, the stubbornness and sensitive feeling for justice of its inhabitants." In contrast to Vienna, ruled by an aristocracy and rife with religious prejudice, the English-speaking world offered "a home where human worth is more respected." During his internship at the General Hospital of Vienna he hung a copy of the Declaration of Independence over his bed.

Even after he married (in 1886) and established his private psychiatric practice, Freud still expected to emigrate to the United States. As a two-month trial period in Vienna stretched into years, however, his sister-in-law Minna began to joke that "he should stay in Austria until his fame reached America, when so many American patients would flock to him that he would be saved the trouble of emigrating."

So when Freud, along with Jung and Ferenczi, arrived in New York City at the end of August 1909, the occasion was fraught with professional and personal meanings. The visit was to be both a triumph for the psychoanalytic movement and the fulfillment of Freud's youthful dream of seeing the New World. He and his entourage spent a week seeing the sights of New York, tromping to Chinatown and Coney Island as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, before they traveled on to Worcester. There, much to Freud's surprise, his sexual theories met with little resistance. To the contrary, his five talks were well-received and soberly reported by the Worcester newspapers and the *Boston Evening Transcript*. "In prudish America," he later noted, "it was possible, in academic circles at least, to discuss freely and scientifically everything that in ordinary life is regarded as objectionable." Ernest Jones, a Freud disciple and future biographer who attended the Clark lectures, reports that a woman in the audience begged him to ask Freud to say *more* on sexual matters—a request that Freud declined.

After the lectures, the visitors took brief trips to Niagara Falls and to Putnam's rustic Adirondack retreat near Lake Placid before returning to New York City and sailing for home. All told, Freud's visit lasted only three weeks. But its effects proved enduring. It profoundly altered not only his view of the country he had admired as a young man but, far more important, the course of his social theory and cultural criticism.

To all outward appearances, the trip was a professional success and a personal triumph, but inwardly Freud was deeply disillusioned. His thoroughly conventional European snobbery toward the New World soon gave way to a pervasive and deeply irrational hatred that grew with the passing years. In the United States his ideas quickly won professional and popular acclaim—they were the stuff of articles in women's magazines by 1915—yet Freud never returned to the scene of his triumph. In fact, he became distraught even when any of his followers crossed the Atlantic, as Jung did only a year later, fearing that they would be tantalized by the country's overwhelming materialism and the temptations of popular acclaim. He came to see the United States as "a gigantic mistake," a "miscarriage," a "bad experiment conducted by Providence." Americans were neurotic and hypocritical. Their manners were lax, their learning superficial, their speech garbled. Fortunately, the country was destined for extinction and, as Freud once told Marie Bonaparte, a Freud acolyte and distant relative of Emperor Napoleon I, "it serves her right. A country without even wild strawberries!"

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Freud's views on the United States became so unremittingly harsh, so prejudiced, that even he recognized the need for some explanation. In his mind, as he wrote on various occasions over the years, it all went back to the various physical ailments he had suffered during his visit: a mild case of appendicitis; an inflamed prostate (which made him experience the scarcity, inaccessibility, and grandeur of American bathrooms with particular resentment); and, above all, an attack of colitis, which he blamed on American cooking. (The offending meal was apparently a steak prepared, as if by "savages," over an open fire at Putnam's Adirondack retreat.) Freud even held America responsible for the deterioration of his handwriting.

His psychoanalytic disciples, while struck by his irrational hatred, offered no less superficial explanations. Jones believed that Freud's hostile reaction was in part that of "a good European with a sense of dignity and respect for learning which at that time was less prominent in America." But on "a more fundamental personal" level, Jones suggested, Freud's animosity "had nothing to do with America itself" but stemmed from his difficulties with American English, which may have revived painful memories of his awkward experiences with French while conducting research in Paris during 1885 and '86. Equally unpersuasive is Sándor Ferenczi's suggestion that Freud's anti-American animus was a defensive reaction against his "American vanity," inspired by the honors he received during his visit.

Freud's most recent biographer, Yale historian Peter Gay, points to the master's quite understandable exasperation with the constant bickering within the American psychoanalytic community but suggests that the ultimate source of his anti-Americanism was a volatile mismatch of cultural characteristics. Freud combined a stiff European sense of bourgeois propriety with distinctly anti-bourgeois attitudes toward sexual liberalization. The Americans he met during his travels, on the other hand, exhibited an equally unusual mix of materialistic egalitarianism and sexual prudery. In his recent book, *Freud, Jung and Hall the Kingmaker* (1992), Saul Rosenzweig of Washington University suggests that Freud's animosity was the product of a "displaced sibling rivalry" with his brother-in-law Eli Bernays, who had emigrated with his family to New York 17 years earlier. The two men were doubly related: Each had married the other's sister. But Freud had come to dislike Bernays intensely in Vienna, and he was further angered when his brother-in-law made it difficult for him to visit his sister Anna in New York.

While no doubt containing elements of truth, such explanations are inadequate to account for so passionate a hatred. How, for example, could an affront to European refinement in matters of learning and decorum lead to the kind of brutal attack that Freud and the American diplomat William Bullitt launched in their biographical study of Woodrow Wilson, America's exemplary progressive? Written during the 1930s but published only in 1967, in deference to the second Mrs. Wilson, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study* has been an embarrassment to Freudians. It is hard to justify its mean-spirited portrayal of "little Tommy Wilson," the weak and neurotic "mama's boy" and father-worshiper who identified with Christ yet ultimately lacked the moral strength either to live up to his ego ideal or to rebel in a "masculine" way against its impossible demands. Freud's defenders may be right in blaming Bullitt for much of the book's crudity, but its scorn and contempt for Wilson were also genuinely Freud's.

How then to explain Freud's loathing for America? His own writings and remarks following his visit offer a clue, for a new theme began to emerge in both his practical and theoretical works: the problem of authority. Freud saw in America something that he had not anticipated, a disturbing disregard for scientific, political, and familial authority that he, like Tocqueville, attributed to American egali-

tarianism. "The Americans," he later complained, "transfer the democratic principle from politics into science. Everybody must become president once, no one must remain president; none may excel before the others, and thus all of them neither learn nor achieve anything." Freud acknowledged in his *History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement* (1914) that "the absence of any deep-rooted scientific tradition in America and the much less stringent rule of official authority" had made it possible for psychoanalysis to gain more rapid acceptance there than in Europe, but he was dismayed to discover that this absence of tradition and authority also contributed to superficial understanding, inconstancy of allegiance, and incessant bickering among his American followers. Rejecting the American principles of equality and competition, which now seemed to Freud to stifle the independence of thought he had hoped to find, Freud wrote to Ferenczi after their trip to say he agreed with Ferenczi's assertion that "the psychoanalytic outlook does not lead to democratic equalizing: There should be an *elite* rather on the lines of Plato's rule of philosophers."

That Freud was not simply referring to the need for acknowledged authority—his own—within the psychoanalytic movement is made clear by his remarks to the Second Psycho-Analytical Congress in March 1910. There, as in his famous essay on Leonardo da Vinci, which he began writing within weeks of his return from the United States, Freud emphasized "the intensity of people's inner lack of resolution and craving for authority." As evidence of this vital human need for guidance and support, Freud pointed to the "extraordinary increase in neuroses [and "the impoverishment of the ego"] since the power of religion has waned." Only through a transference of "social authority" from religion to science in general, and to psychoanalysis in particular, could "the most radical prophylaxis against neurotic disorders" be achieved.

Toward this end Freud had suggested to Jung two months earlier that psychoanalysis ally itself with the International Fraternity for Ethics and Culture, a secular movement for the promotion of public morality. The suggestion set off an emotional explosion in Jung, bringing to the surface the strong religious, "racial" (Jewish versus Aryan), and theoretical disagreements growing between the two men. Jung bristled at Freud's tepid vision of the public role of psychoanalysis. The idea of scientific moralizing appalled him. Jung longed for an antinomian rebellion led by psychoanalysis, a "drunken feast of joy" in which "ecstatic instinctual forces" would be reawakened and a new myth, or a new religion, would be born. "Must we not love evil," he asked Freud, "if we are to break away from the obsession with virtue that makes us sick and forbids us the joys of life?" Deeply disturbed, Freud urged the younger man to sublimate his unmet religious needs into more practical, and safer, pursuits. Privately, however, Freud turned his attention to unmasking psychoanalytically such religious cravings—both the craving for an authority to submit to and the craving for ecstatic release from its demands—in order to defuse their destructive potential. During the next two years, the split between the two widened, culminating in their break in 1914.

In October 1910, Freud took up the problem of authority once again, this time in the realm of the family. Freud the therapist might have sought to weaken his neurotic patients' irrational ties to parental authority, but Freud the social theorist came to fear challenges to authority. America represented a realization of these fears. Against the suggestions of his Viennese disciples, who believed, not without reason, that they were following their master's lead in arguing that intense parent-child bonds were pathogenic and needed to be diminished through a variety of means—a cooling of the family's emotional climate, a transference of "the essential part of child-raising... to a place away from home," and an emphasis on coeducation—Freud pointed

to the disastrous example of America. The American educational system, he argued, citing Hall as his authority, was based on "downgrading the influence of the family" on the character and values of children as much as possible. In addition, Freud said, the American experiment with coeducation had proved harmful: "The girls develop more rapidly than the boys, feel superior to them in everything and lose their respect for the male sex. To this must be added the fact that in the United States, the father-ideal appears to be downgraded, so that the American girl cannot muster the illusion that is necessary for marriage." A weakening of parental, and particularly paternal, authority might have reduced the incidence of neurosis due to sexual repression, Freud suggested, but the cultural costs were great. They could be seen in the Americans' slavishness to public opinion, their embrace of mediocrity, and their antipathy to excellence.

The shift in Freud's critique of America after his visit was paralleled by a significant change in his diagnosis of contemporary Western civilization. He began to move away from his old emphasis on the pathogenic effects of failed sexual repression, a theme he continued to articulate as late as 1908 in his essay, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness." Instead he became more and more concerned with the impoverishment of the individual psyche as a result of its detachment from strong ego and cultural ideals and from the social institutions (such as churches) that support them. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), he began to argue that neurotics were not just the victims of excessive sexual frustration but of failed social institutions and an erosion of "social feeling" that compelled the hapless individual to "endeavor to achieve by private means what is effected in society by collective effort," namely, "the problems of compensating for unsatisfied wishes."

America, in short, came to represent for Freud a dangerous cultural condition toward which all of Western civilization was headed. He believed that this condition—which he came to call "the psychological poverty of groups"—with its threat to individual health, social order, and cultural achievement, developed in societies such as America where "individuals of the leader type do not acquire the importance that should fall to them in the formation of a group." This posed an obvious question, which Freud did not address: Was not such a society made more likely by his own teachings, which unmasked the father of childhood behind the leader of men, thereby breaking the spell of authority?

After 1910, the origin of this "social feeling" and the causes of its decline became the central question in Freud's writings on social theory. Freud identified a number of sources of social cohesion apart from fear and necessity—love (both homosexual and heterosexual), identification, narcissism, guilt, cultural ideals, envy, coercion, and even reason. But he focused most of his attention on the individual's ambivalent bond to the leader, a bond wrought out of a complex amalgam of love, hostility, and guilt which he first explored in *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (1921).

Freud recognized, of course, that solidarity with others could be based on the recognition of any common quality or situation—such as race, class, creed, or nationality—but he believed that the strength of such bonds paled before those formed on the basis of a shared and intense emotional bond to a powerful leader like Moses or Napoleon. Even after he is long dead, Freud argued, such a leader is able to weld individuals into a group and even reorder their personalities, partly through the force of his ideas but especially through the power of his personality. The leader serves as a kind of "substitute father," not for the actual father of childhood but for the "paramount and dangerous personality" of childhood fantasy, "to whom one's will [and conscience] has to be surrendered." En-

thralled by such a figure or ideal, individuals recognize their commonality in their shared love for and bondage to it, and are motivated to master their mutual envy and hostility through the countervailing forces of "communal or group feeling." Most remarkably of all, in their love of the leader they may internalize his ideals and demands, making them their own, thereby achieving greater unity within their psyches and with one another.

In *Group Psychology*, written shortly after World War I, it is clear that what Freud feared most was the destructive power of this "craving for authority." When satisfied, it threatened to produce both psychological and social regression—a loss of intellectual rigor and individuality; a "predominance of the life of phantasy" over reality (amply demonstrated in a gullible world's belief in the "fantastic promises" of President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points); and a release of hostility, even brutality, toward those outside the group. When this craving is frustrated, or when the spell of authority is broken by the death of the leader or disenchantment with him, intolerance and cruelty toward outsiders may subside, but the cost is psychic and social dissolution. The disastrous war just completed offered many cases of both neurosis in individual soldiers and mass panic on the battlefield caused by the loss of a commander. With the "undeniable weakening of religious feelings" in his age, both possibilities, melancholia and mania, seemed to Freud to lie before humanity as it struggled to throw off old ideals and objects while desperately grasping at new ones, among them socialism and nationalism.

Freud's preferred means of breaking this destructive cycle of enchantment and disenchantment was to unmask what he believed was the "infantile" nature of the craving that drove it: the child's love, dependence, and guilt transferred to others. By revealing this transference and using it, Freud hoped that psychoanalysis would dissolve it, thereby producing true individuals inoculated against communal enthusiasms and capable at last of independence. In a study of Freud's thought, Philip Rieff put the matter succinctly: "A follower can never be as ardent after he recognizes his leader as a father-image."

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud elaborated his ideal of human independence, citing as an example the "cautious business-man" of pleasure carefully utilizing a variety of "techniques of living"—such as love, work, fantasy, and sublimation—rather than foolishly seeking happiness "from a single aspiration," and particularly from the mass delusions of communal life. But once again America loomed in Freud's mind as a warning of the opposite danger, a danger to which his own theory might contribute. In a society of individuals freed from the submission to any authority, each pursuing his or her own pleasure and security, each "has no hesitation" in using, "injuring," "insulting," and "slandering" others. Thus, "Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestation of them in check by psychical reaction-formations . . . identifications and aim-inhibited relationships of love." In other words, there was a need for authority in all walks of life. Envy must be transformed into group feeling, aggression toward others into guilt for such temptations, and erotic love into generalized affection. The coercive power of the state and "the interest of work in common" were not enough, in Freud's view, to bind a society (and individual souls) together, particularly as societies become increasingly large and heterogeneous. Small ethnic communities and cultural groups enjoyed the advantage of the "narcissism of minor differences," creating cohesion within the group by expressing hostility toward neighboring peoples. But what could weld together psychologically a society as diverse as America?

It is the weakness of such psychologically binding forces that Freud referred to when he warned of "the psychological poverty of groups." American individualism, egalitarian-

ism, and hostility to personal and communal authority undercut the formation of fellow feeling, the mastery of envy and aggression, and even independence of thought itself. But its greatest danger for Freud was that it failed to inspire and to reconcile such impoverished individuals to the demands and ideals of civilized life and to the sufferings and sacrifices that such a life entails, leaving them exposed to neurosis, discontent, and, as in the case of Jung, a potentially explosive "hostility to civilization" itself in the name of some chimerical redemption. "The present cultural state of America," Freud warned in *Civilization and its Discontents*, amply demonstrated "the damage to civilization which is thus to be feared."

As a theorist, Freud sought to unmask the fantasies and illusions behind both our lowest desires and our highest aspirations. Evil is but a return of the infantile; the sense of justice is but a "reaction-formation" against envy; ideals are only idealizations; the attachment to authority is nothing but the guilty child's longing for protection. Yet Freud, fully aware of the requirements of civilized life, remained personally committed to what he attacked theoretically in the name of individual freedom and social order. Whenever it was brought home to him, Freud attempted to reconcile this fundamental tension with brave words. "What is moral is self-evident," he said. "To understand all is not to forgive all." He boasted of his own high ideals even in the absence of religious faith. He clung, in other words, to the positivist belief that the ethical demands of civilization could indeed be placed on a rational, scientific basis, at least for the cultural elite. Among these few, civility and the rule of reason had become virtually innate through long practice. What of the masses, in whom "no love for instinctual renunciation" had yet been cultivated? Only through their recognition of authority and their emulation of their leaders could they be raised and "induced to perform the work and undergo the renunciations on which the existence of civilization depends."

The spectacle of an American elite, personified by Woodrow Wilson, crippled by neurosis and moral weakness and thus incapable of leading—and of a people hostile to all authority—must have seemed to Freud to make a mockery of this final hope. Indeed, the dissemination of Freud's own psychoanalytic theory made both moral leadership and moral elevation increasingly suspect. No wonder Freud hated America. It was a symbol of his worst fears and a challenge to his fondest hopes. But above all, it was a portent of precisely the kind of world that his own theoretical and therapeutic efforts might bring into being.