

SECRETS OF THE SOUL:
*A Social and Cultural History
of Psychoanalysis.*

By Eli Zaretsky. Knopf. 429 pp. \$30

According to a widely told if unconfirmed story, Sigmund Freud, while on the boat to America in 1909 to deliver a series of lectures at Clark University, discovered a cabin boy reading *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901). Freud had an epiphany: He was about to become famous. He spent the rest of the voyage simplifying his planned lectures on *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) so that they might appeal to the masses, “at times condensing his theories almost to the point of caricature,” writes Eli Zaretsky, a professor of history at New School University. Something similar might be said of Zaretsky’s own book, which simplifies ruthlessly—at one point summarizing a thousand-page work in a half-page—without quite lapsing into caricature.

Zaretsky aims not merely to recount the tumultuous history of psychoanalysis, from before Freud coined the word in 1896 to the present, but to explore its relationship to the larger sociopolitical world. “Almost instantly recognized as a great force for human emancipation,” he writes, “it played a central role in the modernism of the 1920s, the English and American welfare states of the 1940s and ’50s, the radical upheavals of the 1960s, and the feminist and gay liberation movements of the 1970s.” Art, architecture, philosophy, foreign affairs—all, he argues, were influenced by psychoanalytic concepts, most notably the idea that a person’s inner life is organized through symbols, narratives, and motivations particular to that person alone. To Zaretsky, such concepts reflect the era of their birth, which saw the Victorian family crumble, class-based identity weaken, and individualism and consumption become paramount.

In the United States, the practice of Freudian psychoanalysis peaked around 1950 and then began a slow decline. The introduction of cheap and effective psychotropic drugs—above all, Prozac in 1987—proved all but fatal. In 1988, the

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psychoanalytically oriented Chestnut Lodge in Maryland was found liable for having unsuccessfully treated with analysis a depressed patient who was later cured with medication. By 1993, a *Time* magazine cover was posing the question, “Is Freud Dead?” Though it’s tempting to say yes, remnants of Freud’s thought actually survive all around us. To take but one example, Michel Gondry’s recent film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is built on Freud’s theory of the unconscious: Memory fragments are most powerful and enduring when the incident that left them behind is not perceived.

Freud’s ideas remain more vital in Europe. “Every intellectual in France today reads Freud seriously,” Zaretsky writes, perhaps overstating the case. This continued popularity is largely attributable to Jacques Lacan, whose seminars on Freud, starting in 1951 and continuing until his death three decades later, attracted Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault. Such was Lacan’s charisma that many of his disciples were evi-

dently untroubled by his methods as a psychoanalyst, which ranged from the unorthodox to the unethical: He tried to explain the psyche mathematically, ate dinner while seeing patients, and conducted five-minute sessions while billing for a full hour.

In the introduction to *Secrets of the Soul*, Zaretsky writes that modernity promised autonomy, the emancipation of

women, and democracy. He sees little basis for hoping that the three promises will be fulfilled anytime soon. “When we search for optimism today, we need to look inward,” he writes. It’s at once good advice and bad: We may discover the formula for freedom but be left emancipated only in the realm of thought.

—ERICA CROWELL

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

PREACHING EUGENICS: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement.

By Christine Rosen. Oxford Univ.
Press. 286 pp. \$35

There’s a special thrill of disgust that comes from contemplating how close one’s own society came to adopting ideas later identified as among history’s most repellent. Christine Rosen, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, courts this thrill in her account of how some American clergymen in the first decades of the 20th century took up, preached, and ultimately discarded a range of ideas that went under the name *eugenics*. The linking of clerics, particularly liberal clerics, with eugenics is certainly provocative. Even more provocative is Rosen’s thesis that liberal clerics were especially susceptible to eugenic ideas because they had forsaken solid theology in favor of the Social Gospel—the idea that religion should strive not just to change individual hearts but to combat social injustice. A belief in the perfectibility of society, this argument runs, led naturally to an interest in perfecting the human material that composes it.

But did American preachers endorse anything like the eugenics that the Nazis later made notorious, or for that matter the eugenics that enthusiastic laypeople were espousing in the United States? Rosen’s otherwise interesting book suffers badly from its vagueness on this point. On the one hand, we are told, American eugenicists “called for programs to control human reproduction. They urged legislatures to pass laws to segregate the so-called feeble-

minded into state colonies . . . they supported compulsory state sterilization laws aimed at men and women whose ‘germplasm’ threatened the eugenic vitality of the nation; they led the drive to restrict immigration from countries whose citizens might pollute the American melting pot.” On the other hand, branches of the eugenics tree “grew to include . . . health reform, sex hygiene, radical sex reform, marriage counseling, antivice campaigns, ‘fitter family’ contests, the child-rearing advice industry, and, eventually, the birth control movement.”

In the vast majority of Rosen’s examples, it’s these latter, milder “branches” to which the clergy clung. She’s not entirely forthright in distinguishing root from branch, either: A whole chapter is devoted to clergymen’s support for mandatory health certificates for couples wishing to marry, a measure not only not “eugenic” (Rosen eventually concedes in passing that it’s closer to “hygienic”), but still considered unremarkable today. She catalogues prominent liberal ministers, Reform rabbis, and even a few Catholic priests who lent their names to organized eugenics groups or took part in a national “eugenics sermon contest”; again, though, they seem mostly to have confined themselves to the gentler forms of social direction and the scientific-sounding flourishes that the eugenics vocabulary gave their rhetoric.

“Unlike the pitched battles over evolutionary theory,” Rosen observes, “in the eugenics movement, religion and science met on common ground.” But that common ground, the desire to purge society of