

# Psychohistory: ‘a new search for human essence’

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*“History is chaos and every attempt to interpret it is an illusion”.<sup>1</sup>*

*- Charles A. Beard*

Discuss the establishment of the psychohistorical discipline in relation to this statement.

Historians have been prescribed a range of roles over time; from teachers and storytellers to theologians and empirical analysts. They are none of these things in isolation, but rather all of them combined. Historians have, thus come to recognise the differing interpretations that encompass the field of history and in doing so, have acknowledged the notion that historical fact cannot exist objectively and independently of subjective interpretation.<sup>2</sup> “History is chaos and every attempt to interpret it is an illusion,”<sup>3</sup> however, historians have the ability to choose to ignore these issues or face them boldly utilising them as a tool of perception to illuminate the past.

Psychohistory is one such sub-discipline that assists in providing greater clarity amongst this chaos, revealing aspects of the human condition that can enrich historical accounts and interpretations. Since William L. Langer’s presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1957 in which he advocated for the “urgently needed deepening of our historical understanding through the exploitation of the concepts and findings of modern psychology,”<sup>4</sup> the field of psychohistory has been surrounded by contentious debate. The foundations of the arguments within this historiographical debate relate to its atemporal quality,<sup>5</sup> different methodological research approaches,<sup>6</sup> and the subjective nature of immersion in which the countertransference phenomenon is present.<sup>7</sup>

Through the critical reading of psychohistorian Peter Loewenberg’s ‘Decoding The Past’<sup>8</sup> as well as the analysis of other academic works, this paper provides a critical analysis of the predominant perspectives on psychohistory, addressing its methodological approach and key debates surrounding the field to draw conclusions about its ability to illuminate the past with greater clarity, reducing the chaos that encompasses the historical discipline.

Psychohistory is primarily an approach to understanding the past which amalgamates historical methodology with social science models, namely psychological theory.<sup>9</sup> Through this, psychohistorians seek to create and uncover a fuller, more rounded understanding of life in the past, often introducing notions about the influence of unconscious motivations and the effect these can have on individuals in the making of history.<sup>10</sup> Such examples include Vuyiswa Matsolo’s psychohistorical work on Joseph Stalin in which she explores the personal development of Stalin through the

application of psychological theories such as Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology.<sup>11</sup> Matsolo interrogated multiple sources of evidence such as speeches, dairies and other primary materials which were collated into a case study database and analysed in relation to psychological theorem.<sup>12</sup> This in-depth understanding of the man allows us to comprehend the masses around him, and what moved them, as well as the events that unfolded from their actions. In relation to Matsolo's work, her psychohistorical analysis revealed that Stalin's ambitions were significantly influenced by his social and cultural context which contributed to his desire for perfection and superiority, a consistent feature throughout his childhood years and into his leadership of the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> This study provides greater clarity of our understanding of historical figures, counter-balancing the chaos of historical enquiry by explaining Stalin's motivations, particularly in relation to his political decisions.

While psychohistory can illuminate our understanding, the discipline has prompted considerable controversy over concerns relating to its atemporal nature, thereby claiming it as unhistorical.<sup>14</sup> This objection has been raised by historians such as Peter Loewenberg who, despite claiming psychohistory as "one of the most powerful interpretative approaches to history"<sup>15</sup>, has explored how the application of time to the unconscious is unachievable as unconscious mental processes are in themselves timeless.<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud reiterates this noting that "everything in the unconscious exists as an intertwined web of simultaneous events that have no temporal sequence,"<sup>17</sup> thus adding to the chaos of historical investigation.

Psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel addresses the concerns of atemporality in his study of anti-Semitism in which he is aware of the inadequacy of a purely timeless unconscious approach to the study of one of the most prominent mass psychological phenomena in history. Fenichel disclaimed that "the instinctual structure of human beings has remained relatively unchanged in the course of historical times. It cannot be the chief factor needed to understand the changes within these times".<sup>18</sup> To exemplify his point, Fenichel comments on the relatively unchanged psychological structure of the average man in Germany between 1925 to 1935 and thus concluded that in order to study the evolutionary development of anti-Semetism during these years, "one must explore what happened contextually, not just their relatively unaltered conscious mindset during this time period."<sup>19</sup> It is therefore important to consider that while psychology can assist in giving greater clarity to history, the psychohistorical discipline has limitations and cannot be the sole lens through which we understand the past.

Fenichel's study thus reveals that while the atemporal nature of the field can hinder psychohistorical works, the analysis of other contextual factors can allow for the illumination of new ideas and perspectives, bringing more order and clarity to the study of history. This is consistent with the thinking of the Annales school which aspires to "break down the

boundaries between human sciences, with historians incorporating as many disciplines as possible in their work.”<sup>20</sup>

From the early 1970s this progressed into the establishment of *histoire des mentalités* in which the conscious and unconscious mental structures and collective belief systems of past societies were given greater emphasis in historical enquiry.

Natalie Zemon Davis is one such historian who applies psychological and anthropological techniques established by the Annales School to her study of influential figures, stressing the importance of respecting the “mental universes of the past”<sup>21</sup> in an effort to “draw on situations, mentalities and reactions analogous or close to those one is trying to understand,”<sup>22</sup> to reduce the chaos of history. She achieves this through invented dialogues with chosen historical figures to enable the previously silent the opportunity to speak for themselves.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Zemon Davis is able to make a number of inferences about the motivations of historical personalities through the addition of anthropological insights. However, she is aware of the concerns that can arise from this methodological approach, arguing that historians should “consult psychological and anthropological findings not for prescriptions, but for suggestions; not for universal rules of human behaviour, but for relevant comparisons.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, in order for a historian to make inferences about historical events or personalities, one must inquire into other factors such as social context or culture in order to mitigate the chaos of history.

Examples of psychohistorical works that apply this inference methodological approach with reference to other contextual factors include the works of German-American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who after developing a passion for history and psychology from a young age became a pioneer in the establishment of the psychohistorical discipline.<sup>25</sup> Combining these interests, Erikson composed two psychobiographies that applied psychoanalytic theory to two significant historical figures; Martin Luther and Gandhi. His first psychobiography *Young Man Luther* (1958) examined how the 16th-century monk incited change in the existing religious paradigm to create a new way of looking at the world which marked the birth of the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism.<sup>26</sup> In this psychohistorical study, Erikson begins by investigating Luther’s internal identity (psychosocial, psychosexual and cognitive) and then progresses to the analysis of contextual factors (cultural, national, familial, social, religious) influencing Luther’s life. From this, Erikson was able to make a number of inferences about Luther and how his individual and contextual circumstances motivated him, resulting in one of the most significant social movements in history.

It is noteworthy that Erikson achieves this without being reductive in over-simplifying Luther’s life to a few unconscious puerile themes and thus the work produced is what many consider perhaps the best work of psychohistory done yet.<sup>27</sup> Erikson’s works exemplify the ways in which, despite its atemporal nature, psychology can be applied to

history through the integrated analysis of contextual factors which ensure valid and accurate inferences about historical individuals or events combined with internal motivators, thus giving greater clarity to the study of history.

Historians such as David Hackett Fischer have recently called into question the methodological rationality of the psychohistorian claiming that their approach “lacks logical rigour.”<sup>28</sup> This is primarily due to the psychohistorian’s tendency to speculate beyond known facts,<sup>29</sup> which subsequently raises concerns relating to methodological inconsistencies in psychohistorical creation.<sup>30</sup> The founder of the Institute for Psychohistory, Lloyd DeMause, notes himself that “to buy into psychohistory, you have to subscribe to some fairly woolly assumptions,”<sup>31</sup> which for Loewenberg is a cause for concern, especially in the historical field which emphasises the importance of empirical evidence.<sup>32</sup> Loewenberg notes that “one of the most serious objections is that too often psychobiographies make presumptive leaps from childhood to adulthood and vice versa, often without accounting for other external influences and developmental factors.”<sup>33</sup> This, in turn, raises the questions about the kind of psychohistory being written rather than its purpose as a historical method.

This is evident in the works of psychologists and historians who have utilised psychology as a tool to discredit and attack historical figures, making unfounded leaps from childhood traumas to public political decisions.<sup>34</sup> Such examples include Sigmund Freud and William C. Bullitt’s psychobiography of U.S President Woodrow Wilson which attempts to reveal the destructive effects of Wilson’s personal psychological experience on his public political life.<sup>35</sup> “Both Bullitt and Freud fell in love at first sight on the basis of their hatred of Wilson”<sup>36</sup> as they believed that he was responsible for the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and therefore constructed their interpretations around their negative perceptions of him. They utilised weak psychological theory as a tool to personally attack Wilson leveraging the jargon of psychology to give the impression of scientific and historical insight.<sup>37</sup> Psychohistorical works such as these are consequently often deemed “illogical”<sup>38</sup> and “unhistorical”,<sup>39</sup> further compounding the chaos of historical inquiry in which perceptions and interpretations of the past are constantly changing. There may be some sources that are considered objective or potentially verifiable but even that is multilayered.<sup>40</sup> Any attempt at creating a single coherent explanation will always involve some considerable distortions due to the lack of sources available to the psychohistorian which influences their ability to accurately infer influence, motivation and cause to historical personalities and events.<sup>41</sup>

Relativist historian E.H Carr comments on this methodological issue within the historical discipline, likening facts available to the historian in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish on a fishmonger’s slab. The historian can collect them, take them home, and cook and serve them in whatever style appeals to them.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the psychohistorian

chooses the information they want to use from their subject's life such as family influences, political decisions, contextual factors or behavioural patterns to provide an explanation for their decisions and actions which align with their personal interpretation. It is valuable, however, to remember that due to the subjective nature of the field, there will inevitably be a gap between what the psychohistorian can empirically describe as behaviour based on psychological theory and what they can infer about the experience or the motivation behind that behaviour.

Psychohistorian Walter C. Langer comments on this methodological challenge which arose in his psychobiographical work 'The Mind of Adolf Hitler' in which the sources and literature on Hitler "although extensive, were highly unreliable."<sup>43</sup> He also questions how one can determine "fact from fiction, the relevant from the irrelevant, the significant from the insignificant without a point of reference or orientation,"<sup>44</sup> which consequently compounds the chaos of psychohistorical enquiry.

Hence, while psychohistorical works such as that of Freud and Bullitt make an attempt to uncover the psychological dimension of their subjects, they rely solely on diagnostic theory to create an unconvincing explanation, and as a result, are often perceived as psychologically simplistic and historically reductionist.<sup>45</sup> To this end, many psychohistorical studies do not meet the level of scholarship demanded by the historical profession and have been deemed 'unhistorical' due to their failure to sufficiently account for a range of influencing factors and provide a meaningful interpretation.<sup>46</sup> Contrary to this perception, if applied appropriately, analysing historical figures from a psychological perspective can make their actions more meaningful by gathering all pertinent data and subjecting them to dispassionate people who have clinical experience to draw upon<sup>47</sup> and thus produce meaningful interpretations that provide genuine clarity of the past.

The question of subjectivity has long preoccupied the historical discipline and is an underlying source of the 'chaos' that pervades its study. Due to the already pertinent subjective nature of psychohistory, the presence of the transference and countertransference phenomenon exacerbates this issue which is perceived to interfere with the historical process.<sup>48</sup> That is, the unconscious of the psychohistorian impacts upon that of the subject without ever passing through the conscious as pieces of the researchers own mental underworld slips unnoticed into their reading of a subject.<sup>49</sup> This is primarily attributed to the psychohistorian's deep immersion into their subject's feelings, attitudes, loves, and hates in an attempt to search for their inner determinants to comprehend the past.<sup>50</sup>

Psychobiographer Leon Edle emphasises implications of unconscious transference for the psychohistorian, noting that "what they often struggle with is their own resistance to discovering unpleasant truths, and what their secret selves are

up to in shaping materials.”<sup>51</sup> Edel uses his own experience in writing psychobiographies of American author Henry James whose works assessed the qualities and dangers of American and European culture in the 19th century.<sup>52</sup> He connotes that his attachment to his study of Henry James is “an infatuation not with the subject, but the story and its telling,<sup>53</sup> yet he is adamant in his ability to be an objective observer in which empathetic responses are absent.

Loewenberg validates this notion, due to his belief in the psychohistorian’s ability to “turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of their subject, adjusting themselves to them just as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, rather than rendering a psychohistorical interpretation invalid, these countertransference feelings can assist in guiding the historian in perceiving thoughts from the subject’s unconscious and translating them into reliable explanations.

Theodor Reik labelled this notion ‘the third ear’ with which the psychohistorian listens for internal unconscious communication.<sup>55</sup> Depending on the nature of the psychohistorian’s reaction and ability to become aware of their own unconscious responses, the psychohistorian can mitigate some of the chaos of history, allowing for the illumination of unique ideas and concepts which enhance greater clarity of the past. Yet the question remains as to what factors determine when a historian’s countertransference is healthy, appropriate, and useful and when it is neurotic, distorted and obstructive.

The essence and purpose of history is to understand the vast range of events, individuals and influences which have contributed to our conflicted and multi-faceted present. Historians have applied psychohistory both crudely and well, both daringly and conservatively. While the complex nature of the application of psychology to history makes it a controversial discipline, the powerful lens of psychological knowledge allows for a new and unique perspective that provides deeper insight into the past. Psychohistorical works of both ingenious individuals, as well as those at psychological risk, have enabled current generations to connect with those from the past, informing the public about historical figures who have shaped the society that they live in today, for good or bad. By disregarding the conscious and unconscious minds of historical individuals, one is ultimately confined only to the narrow examination of what happened to take place rather than understanding the underlying unconscious factors which gave rise to mass historical movements and events.<sup>56</sup>

Psychology is vital to this perception because history is essentially the acting out of individual psychologies and therefore, through the interrogation of these unconscious motives, we are provided with an enriched perspective which accounts for more than the preliminary level of information that is available to historians. Thus, the creation of the

psychohistorical discipline allows for a stronger, richer and more robust understanding of the human condition and their respective conscious or unconscious motives to provide an explanation for significant historical events. While criticisms such as the atemporal nature of the field, perceived methodological inconsistencies, and the subjective nature of immersion are justified, the exploration of the psychological dimension is a legitimate subject of historical inquiry, reaffirming that “to study history means submitting to chaos and nevertheless retaining faith in order and meaning.”<sup>57</sup>

## Endnotes

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- <sup>21</sup> Elliott, Lisa, ‘A Passion for History: Natalie Zemon Davis’, *Parergon*, 201, pp. 211-213
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