

# How Does Psychoanalysis Help in Reconstructing Political Thought? An Exercise of Interpretation

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**Abstract**—The significance of psychology in studying politics is embedded in philosophical issues as well as behavioural pursuits. For the former is often associated with Sigmund Freud and his followers. The latter is inspired by the writings of Harold Lasswell. Political psychology or psychopolitics has its own impression on political thought ever since it deciphers the concept of human nature and political propaganda. More importantly, psychoanalysis views political thought as a textual content which needs to explore the latent from the manifest content. In other words, it reads the text symptomatically and interprets the hidden truth. This paper explains the paradigm of dream interpretation applied by Freud. The dream work is a process which has four successive activities: condensation, displacement, representation and secondary revision. The texts dealing with political thought can also be interpreted on these principles. Freud's method of dream interpretation draws its source after the hermeneutic model of philological research. It provides theoretical perspective and technical rules for the interpretation of symbolic structures. The task of interpretation remains a discovery of equivalence of symbols and actions through perpetual analogies. Psychoanalysis can help in studying political thought in two ways: to study the text distortion, Freud's dream interpretation is used as a paradigm exploring the latent text from its manifest text; and to apply Freud's psychoanalytic concepts and theories ranging from individual mind to civilization, religion, war and politics.

**Keywords**—Psychoanalysis, political thought, dream interpretation, latent content, manifest content

## I. INTRODUCTION

**H**UMAN and social sciences are increasingly using multidisciplinary approach and paradigm. Subjectivity and rationality have their own sphere of justification. The study of man is the prerequisite in constructing political thought. The works of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau and Marx illuminate this situation. Human predicaments between instinct and reason; between unconscious and conscious mind; and between self and political order search for a correlation to avoid disharmony. The application of psychology to politics has been discussed by several scholars [1]. Psychoanalysis provides new rules of interpretation. His approach involves the interpretive and emancipatory process. In other words he approach tried to interpret the utterances and dream material of the patient and to liberate the patient from his repression. The psychoanalysis helps political thought in two ways: to study the text distortion, Freud's dream interpretation is used as a paradigm exploring the latent text from its manifest text; and to apply Freud's psychoanalytic concepts and theories ranging from individual mind to civilization, religion and politics.

## II. DREAM INTERPRETATION

According to Freud, dream is the fulfillment of a wish and designed to take the place of some other process of thought. Dream as a whole is a distorted substitute for unconscious material.

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The distortion in dreams is the result of a censoring activity which is directed against unacceptable unconscious wishful impulses. Freud believed that the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind. The dream work is a process which has four successive activities: condensation, displacement, representation and secondary revision [2]. The first achievement of the dream work is condensation. The manifest dream has a smaller content than the latent one and an abbreviated translation of it. Condensation is brought about by the total omission of certain latent elements; by only a fragment of some complexes in the latent dream passing over into the manifest one; and by latent elements which have something in common being combined and fused into a single unity in the manifest dream. The second achievement of the dream work is displacement. It manifests in two ways: a latent element is replaced not by a component part of itself but by something more remote that is by an allusion, and the psychical accent is shifted from an important element on to another which is unimportant so that the dream appears differently centered and strange. By the operation of the dream work the latent dream which is condensed is distorted by the displacement of physical intensities and is arranged with a view to being represented in visual pictures; and besides all these, before the manifest dream is arrived at, it is submitted to a process of secondary revision which seeks to give the new product something in the nature of sense and coherence. Freud discovered in the expression of dreams that there are struggles between two trends, of which one is unconscious, repressed and strives towards satisfaction, while the other belonging to the conscious ego, is disapproving and repressive. The outcome of this conflict is a compromise formation in which both trends have found an incomplete expression. Freud described two different methods of dream interpretation: symbolic dream interpreting method and decoding method [3]. The symbolic dream interpreting method considers the content of the dream as a whole and seeks to replace it by another content which is intelligible and analogous to the original one. The decoding method treats dreams as a kind of cryptography in which each sign can be translated into another sign having a known meaning in accordance with a fixed key of sign and meaning. The decoding method takes into account not only the content of the dream but also the character and circumstances of the dreamer; so that the same dream element will have a different meaning for different person. The essence of the decoding procedure, however, lies in the fact that the work of interpretation is not brought to bear on the dream as a whole but on each portion of the dream's content independently. Freud also stated the limitations of these two methods. The symbolic method is restricted in its application and incapable of being laid down on general lines. It is difficult to decipher certain symbolic structure which has complicated unconscious tendencies. In the case of the decoding method everything depends on the trustworthiness of the sign meaning key. Freud also

recognized the inevitability of subjective factors in each provisional understanding of themselves. When questions confront them they block the flow of experience and set reflection in motion. The process of reaching understanding by establishing shared meanings through dialogue can be represented in the image of a circle. The text becomes intelligible through a scrutiny of all the individual words of which it is composed and of the way in which they are connected together and yet the full understanding of the individual parts of the text already presupposes some prior or anticipatory comprehension of the whole. Understanding then is circular because in the complex interrelatedness of parts and whole meaning comes to exist. Hermeneutics also emphasizes the awareness of interpreters' historical and cultural position. Gadamer argued that the encounter of tradition with its parts and whole and the whole and the parts would unravel the mystery of understanding [8].

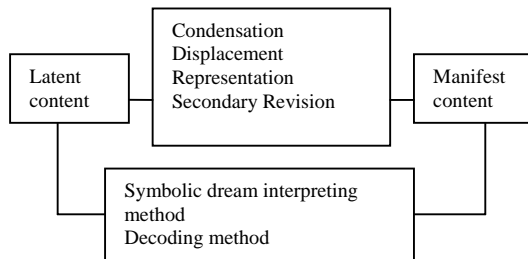


Fig. 1 paradigm of dream interpretation

Freud's method of dream interpretation draws its source after the hermeneutic model of philological research. It provides theoretical perspective and technical rules for the interpretation of symbolic structures. Freudian interpretation reduces all thoughts to objectification and all objects to symbols. The task of interpretation remains a discovery of equivalence of symbols and actions through perpetual analogies. The product of a text can be studied in analogous with the dream work process. In text, the messages are systematically distorted and the distortions, omissions are put by the author intentionally so that his own product becomes unintelligible to him [4]. The task of psychoanalytic interpretation is to work back through expressive statements to the repressed motive hidden especially from its carrier. Lacan argued that one can never mean precisely what one says and never say precisely what one means. The unconscious is a sliding of the signified beneath the signifier, as a constant fading and evaporation of meaning, a bizarre modernist text which is almost unreadable and which will certainly never yield up its final secrets to interpretation [5].

### III. HERMENEUTICS

Psychoanalytic interpretation and hermeneutics have certain resemblance [6]. The aim of hermeneutics is to increase the human understanding by questioning how one comes to misconstrue, misunderstand, disagree, agree and reach consensus. It also seeks an understanding of the present and future in terms of the past which is a fundamental inclination of human consciousness. The paradigmatic hermeneutic situation is the interpreter questioning a text. The aim of hermeneutic procedure is to understand the author better than he has understood himself, a proposition which is the necessary consequence of the doctrine of unconscious creation. It is concerned with reading the text of unconscious by uncovering the process of dream work. For that, it focuses in particular the symptomatic places in the dream-text distortions, ambiguities, absences and elisions which may provide a mode of access to the latent content or unconscious drives, which have gone into its making [7]. Hermeneutics, like psychoanalysis, is concerned with self reflection and its method assumes that people individually and collectively carry on a continuous dialogue about themselves and by

recognized the inevitability of subjective factors in each provisional understanding of themselves. When questions confront them they block the flow of experience and set reflection in motion. The process of reaching understanding by establishing shared meanings through dialogue can be represented in the image of a circle. The text becomes intelligible through a scrutiny of all the individual words of which it is composed and of the way in which they are connected together and yet the full understanding of the individual parts of the text already presupposes some prior or anticipatory comprehension of the whole. Understanding then is circular because in the complex interrelatedness of parts and whole meaning comes to exist. Hermeneutics also emphasizes the awareness of interpreters' historical and cultural position. Gadamer argued that the encounter of tradition with its parts and whole and the whole and the parts would unravel the mystery of understanding [8].

### IV. DIALECTICS

Freud's conceptual framework is fundamentally dualistic which might contribute to a conception of reconciliation. His concepts were formulated as a pair of opposites which generate conflicts: the conscious and the unconscious mind; the ego and the id; the life and the death instinct; and the reality and the pleasure principle. Freud was able to formulate a general theory of psychoanalysis, as he himself called meta-psychology, out of his case histories and clinical facts. Freud believed that the unconscious mind determines human behaviour and its manifestation profoundly influences all social phenomena. The division of the mind into conscious and unconscious is the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis. The concept of unconscious is derived from the idea of repression. The repressed is the prototype of the unconscious. Freud described two kinds of unconscious; one which is latent but capable of becoming conscious called preconscious; and the other which is repressed and which is not in itself capable of becoming conscious. Freud stated that in the descriptive sense there are two kinds of unconscious, but in the dynamic sense only one [9].

### V. STRUCTURE OF MIND

Freud proposed a new structural account of the mind in which the uncoordinated instinctual trends are called the 'id', the organized rationalistic and realistic part of the 'ego', and the critical and moralizing function of the 'superego' [10]. Freud believed that the driving energy innate in man is libido which has, sexual and aggressive tendencies lying dormant in the 'id'. The 'id' is governed by the pleasure principle. i.e., it seeks pleasure indifferent to morality and restrictions. The unconscious is attached to the 'id' and the conscious is attached to the 'ego'. The 'ego' operating according to the reality principle, supervises all its own constituent processes and exercises the censorship on dreams. From this ego proceed the repressions, too, by means of which it is sought to exclude certain trends in the mind not merely from consciousness but also from other forms of effectiveness and activity. Freud discovered that the ego, which begins to develop in the infant at about the age of six months, mediate between the pure drive of the id and the reality of external environment. The ego, though it operates according to the reality principle, seeks the mode of expression that would gratify the 'id' and at the same time not endanger the

organism or the environment. The ego is also capable of postponing the immediate pleasure hoping to gratify in the near future. The superego which develops much later is the conscience and internalized morals learned primarily from the family. It is the remnant of the Oedipus complex which was eradicated by the fear of castration and by sublimation of sexual drive. The superego serves the function within the ego of demanding restriction and rejection, and it therefore follows that repression is the work of the superego. It expresses the child's moral imperatives, ideals and makes the child feel guilty. The 'id' and the 'superego', both represent the influences of the past the id is influenced by heredity and the superego is influenced by what is taken over from other people. Whereas the 'ego' is principally determined by the individual's own experience, that is by accidental and contemporary events. The operation and fixation of libidinal energy can be explained by Freudian theory of instinct and libido which in turn explains the theory of personality development and character formation.

TABLE 1  
STRUCTURE OF MIND AND PRINCIPLES

Structure of mind	Principle	Component	Energy
Superego	Reality	Moral	Critical, moralizing
Ego	Reality	Reason	Legal, logical
Id	Pleasure	Instinct	Eros, thanatos

## VI. EROS AND THANATOS

According to Freud, man has fundamentally two kinds of instincts: one, the life instinct or the eros and the other, death instinct or thanatos. The 'id' provides the reservoir of these instincts, while the life instinct strives for the binding of living substance into ever larger and permanent units, the death instinct strives for the annihilation of life, the desire to regress into inorganic matter. Freud discovered that the psychic dynamic takes the form of a constant struggle of three basic forces: the life instinct, the death instinct and the outside world. Corresponding to these three forces are the three basic principles which determine the functions of the psychic apparatus, the pleasure principle, the nirvana principle and the reality principle. If the pleasure principle stands for the unlimited unfolding of the life instinct, and the nirvana principle for regression into the painless condition before birth, then the reality principle signifies the totality of the modifications of those instincts compelled by the outside world and it signifies reason as reality itself. Freud argued that the analogy of eros and death instinct extends from the sphere of living things to the pair of opposing forces attraction and repulsion which rules in the inorganic world. The eros and the thanatos or death instinct originate from the energy of libido [11]. Libido is regarded as a closed energy system regulated by the physical law of conservation of energy. Libido, withdraws from one area, and must inevitably produce effects elsewhere. It is centered on a specific erotogenic zone and has a specific aim of gratification. Each component instinct is unalterably characterized by its source. They are also able to replace one another and to transfer their libidinal cathexis to one another, so that the satisfaction of one instinct can take the place of the satisfaction of others. The most important vicissitude which an instinct can undergo seems to be sublimation; here both object and aim are changed, so that what was originally a sexual instinct finds satisfaction in

of a higher social or ethical valuation. Freud understood the character formation in terms of libidinal drives which under the influence of social pressures, have changed their aim or been otherwise modified by learning in the course of upbringing. He explained the character formation in three stages: oral, anal and phallic. The oral stage extends from birth to second year and the mode of pleasure finding is expressed in sucking and swallowing or incorporating, i.e., symbolically making objects part of oneself. At early stages, the infant makes no distinction between world and ego. Libidinal energy is entirely narcissistic and directed toward himself but without awareness that there is a separation of self and the world. Self and social awareness develop hand in hand, when the world and ego begin to be distinguished from each other when the child's needs are not met immediately. During the second year, in the anal stage, pleasure is obtained from the sheer act of expelling and from the feeling of retaining a full lower intestine. The child's ego, equipped with self awareness by the oral stage extends its powers in the anal stage away from passive function toward actively directing his own behaviour according to his changing environment. The child no longer must induce others to do for him, but begins to do for himself. He learns to keep clean, to walk and to talk. Freud argued that the triad of characteristics that are associated with the anal character is orderliness, parsimoniousness and obstinacy. The libidinal energy is shifted to the genital zone at about at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth year in the phallic stage. In this stage, the child experiences Oedipus complex, i.e., the child loves one and becomes jealous and strong hostile feelings towards other. Due to castration anxiety, his feeling of hostility is replaced by identification. For girls, castration has already occurred. In this way the situation of ambivalence is produced. Freud classified three libidinal types of personality. The man who is predominantly erotic will give first preference to his emotional relationships to other people. The narcissistic man, who inclines to be self sufficient, will seek his main satisfaction in his internal mental processes. The man of action will never give up the external world on which he can try out his struggle [12]. Freud believed that neurosis was the result of regression of libido which had been damned up by a frustrating environment and therefore flowed back to an earlier stage at which during the course of development it had been partially fixated.

## VII. GROUP PSYCHOLOGY

Freud analyzed the group mind like the individual mind. His *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* is concerned with the individual man as a member of a race, of a nation, of an institution or as a component part of a crowd of people who have been organized for some definite purpose. Freud began with a premise that in the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved as a model, as an object, as a helper or an opponent. Following Le Bon's ideas, Freud argued that a group is characterized by the eruption of unconscious desires and by intense emotional ties which deprive individual's independence and initiative. He added that a group is an obedient herd, which could never live without a master. The leader, acting like a hypnotist, must himself be held in fascination by a strong faith and he must possess a strong and imposing will, which the group can accept from him. Eros provides to bind the

group as well as the leader. Freud also distinguished between homogenous, heterogeneous, artificial, primitive and highly organized groups, with or without a leader. Freud described 'identification' as the mechanism for emotional ties. The emotional tie will be in two ways and it depends upon whether the subject or the object of the ego. The object choice tie is 'to have' and the identification is like 'to be' that has been taken as a model. Freud explained with the concept of ego ideal which comprises the conscience, a critical attitude towards the ego, gradually gathers up from the influences of the environment the demands which the environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to; so that a man when he cannot be satisfied with his ego itself; may nevertheless be able to find satisfaction in the ego ideal which has been differentiated out of the ego. In a group the individual is brought under conditions which allow him to throw off the repressions of his unconscious instinctual impulses. The conscious personality has entirely vanished and the will and discernment are lost. The suggestion of leader turns the feeling and ideas in an identical direction. Freud also analyzed the herd instinct in studying group psychology. The individual feels incomplete if he is alone. The fear shown by the infant would seem already to be an expression of this herd instinct. The herd instinct would appear to be something primary which cannot be split up. Thus the libidinal ties, the unconscious wishes and identification, ego ideal, the suggestion of the leader and the herd instinct explain Freudian idea of group psychology. Freud further argued that, the in group ties can be strengthened by channeling the hate and aggressive instinct to the other groups. In the formation of a group accepting the leader and his authority as a father image is also due to archaic heritage of the mind, i.e., the memory traces of the past generation and a sort of mass psyche through which the sense of guilt and psychic determination occurred. Fixed symbols found in mythology, fairy tales, art and religion have been acquired by man through this archaic heritage.

#### VIII. ARCHAIC HERITAGE

Freud analyzed the psychic determinism in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. It was devoted to study the symptomatic acts, the unconscious significance of common errors; forgetting names, errors in speech and writing, forgetting intentions, etc., and Freud called these acts as parapraxes. For Freud, these accidental acts seem meaningful expressions of unconscious aims. The unconscious process is intentional human action enacted unconsciously. Determinism in the psychical sphere is carried out without any gap. Freud frequently spoke of persons choosing to repress certain unpleasant ideas in order to evade anxiety or preserve self esteem. The human agent is very often lived by the unconscious myths and metaphors that in a fundamental sense determine the very definition of the situation upon which he leases the actions in which he chooses to engage. While explaining the concept of archaic heritage, Freud developed the concept of cultural superego in an analogous way to the individual superego. According to Freud, just as the individual mind preserves all its past experiences, so the cultural superego retains elements remembered from the dawn of civilization. Freud described that the prehistoric man lived in small hordes and one powerful leader dominated them by force. The primal father or group leader tyrannized all the males and monopolized all

the group males joined together and killed the primal father as well as the authority and domination. But this physical liberation from the authority of the primal father was not accompanied by a psychological liberation. Since the primal father was loved as well as hated by the group or primal brothers. Eventually the conflicting emotions of triumph and remorse within each brother are resolved by the introjections of the dead primal father. In this way the primal father became the first ego ideal and the source of sense of guilt. This archaic heritage also determines the foundation for religion and state. Freud inquired the scope of psychic determinism and the freedom from the determinism. He discovered one mere phenomenon called 'repetition compulsion.' The unconscious repressed offers no resistance whatever to the effort of the therapy. The patient is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past. The compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed. This perpetual recurrence of the same thing repetition compulsion would find expression in all areas.

#### IX. CIVILIZATION AND REPRESSION

The basic theme of Freudian theory is the conflict between the psychic structure and the external world. Civilization and its Discontents highlights the constant struggle between man and civilization, i.e., between pleasure principle and reality principle. Freud assumed that society arose out of the need to curb man's unruly sexual and aggressive drives. The work of civilization is to repress these primordial drives but these nevertheless continue towards satisfaction and fulfillment. Civilization, by an ever increasing tendency to repression, makes man more and unhappy and he seeks relief in substitute gratification. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud argued that religion is a substitute gratification which tries to reconcile man's unconscious wishes and the reality by way of creating an illusion. He tried to explore the possibility of a way out of the endless progress and endless Faustian discontent of man. He warned that the repression required establishing social order also leads to a vast and potentially dangerous accumulation of unconscious forces which would make destruction. Freud argued that the liberation of an individual from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results of development. Freud warned the possibility of continuous repression by saying 'where id was, there shall ego be.' Therapy believes in the liberating power of self understanding and dispossessing the self of community, of tradition, religion and of the oedipal sources of family. Freud expected the patient to understand one's self in the past and the present contemporary world. He believed that the liberation depends on rational reconciliation of reason and desire. Freud also argued that civilization not only repress but sublime the destructive forces into creative and socially acceptable way.

#### X. LIMITATIONS

Freudian psychoanalysis has been criticized as conservative, reductionist, positivistic and also unscientific [13]. Freud writes, "Psychoanalysis is nothing more than a particularly well disguised and particularly effective form of

suggestive treatment. Anyone who has himself carried out psychoanalysis will have been able to convince himself on countless occasions that it is impossible to make suggestions to a patient in that way. For his conflicts will only be successfully solved and his resistance overcome if the anticipatory ideas he is given tally with what is real in him. Whatever in the doctor's conjectures is an inaccurate drop out in the course of the analysis; it has to be withdrawn and replaced by something more correct" [14]. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he announced the discovery of the death instinct and from then onwards, human psyche and by extension, human society and history are seen as the warring instincts of eros and thanatos rather reducing everything to sex instinct.

#### XI. AN EXAMPLE

The writings of Karl Marx have been understood and interpreted by scholars in different ways. Psychoanalysis has its own attempt to interpret his theories. The paradigm of dream interpretation claims that the text distortion can be eliminated by understanding the latent content of the text. When political theory is constructed on a philosophy of subjectivity and rationality, the validity of theory requires a search for a correlation of psyche and polis. The symptomatic reading of the text discloses what is ignored, omitted, unexplained, intended and over-projected or repeated. One can examine with the help of psychoanalytic insight, the incomplete theory of human nature; problems in the formation of class consciousness; internalization of social and political control and the conformity to the established system; and political beliefs without representing economic interests. The major argument in this case is how to retrieve the latent content. First, the normative-emancipatory tendencies of the latent content of Marx's thought has been condensed and displaced into manifest contest by embracing Hegel's dialectics and economic reductionism. Having constructed the texts on fragmentary empirical evidences and fused with deterministic nature of methodological premises, the validity and universality of Marxism have been challenged. Second, Marx's conception of man is incompatible to comprehend the phenomenon of alienation, since Marx did not study the relationship between human rationality and instinctual substratum. Freud maintains that repression is carried throughout life and human beings are hardly compatible with any kind of system. Third, the emergence of class consciousness and class conflict requires a careful sublimation of eros and death instinct. The conflict depends upon the expansion of the love-hate relationships of the oedipal sources. The irrational longing of pleasure submits itself to manipulation and instrumental rationality or the dominant class. This would result in the creation of an authoritarian character rather than a revolutionary character. Fourth, the unconscious repressed wishes and the non-rational tendencies undermine the determining relation between the economic structure and the superstructure. There exists a link between instinctual repression and capital accumulation process. Finally, the continuity of state can be justified as the state being an object of identity or personified authority for the eros longing for libidinal ties. The eros may provide hope for a classless society but not a stateless society. Freudian psychoanalysis would suggest that besides material well-being, communist society requires a certain amount of repression and creating its own ego-

id to legitimate the system. Freudian theory perceives certain limits to social and political change and often emphasizes finding a mediation and reconciliation [15].

#### XII. CONCLUSION

Political psychology has its own impression on political thought ever since it deciphers the concept of human nature. More importantly, psychoanalysis views political thought as a textual content which needs to explore the latent from the manifest content. In other words, it reads the text symptomatically and interprets the hidden truth. This paper has explained the paradigm of dream interpretation applied by Freud. The dream work is a process which has four successive activities from latent to manifest contents: condensation, displacement, representation and secondary revision. The texts dealing with political thought can also be interpreted on these principles. It provides theoretical perspective and technical rules for the interpretation of symbolic structures. The task of interpretation remains a discovery of equivalence of symbols and actions through perpetual analogies. Psychoanalysis can help in studying political thought in two ways: to study the text distortion, Freud's dream interpretation is used as a paradigm exploring the latent text from its manifest text; and to apply Freud's psychoanalytic concepts and theories ranging from individual mind to civilization, religion, war and politics. The application of psychoanalysis is in other words an exercise of interpretation which implies a system of critique and reconstruction of ideas. However, if political texts contain in-depth social and economic ideas rather artistic and literary nature, it is difficult to follow all the rules of interpretation based on psychoanalysis.

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