Psychoanalysis as Innovative Technology

The Historiography of Psychoanalysis. By Paul Roazen (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2001) 480 pp. $49.95

For a host of reasons, the first and second generations of psychoanalysts were exceedingly protective of their discipline’s reputation. What distinguished early psychoanalysis from other systems of ideas was its widely repugnant assertion that repressed sexuality was at the root of most human psychological problems as well as high cultural achievements. If it were true, it stands to reason that many people would be affronted at having their defenses against their instinctual drives exposed and undermined, and if it were not true, many people might even have more strenuous objections to such a notion. The rejection of psychoanalysis could have been anticipated from the very nature and content of the psychoanalytic movement.

The early analysts dealt with this reaction to their ideas in a number of ways, not all of them useful, although probably inevitable. To the extent that psychoanalytic explanations of events emphasized the importance of defenses against instinctual drives, it was easy for early analysts to view their opponents’ arguments not as rational discourse but as irrational resistance based on crippling repressions that called for psychoanalytic treatment, or, at least, dismissal on psychodynamic grounds. The result was a bunker mentality that tended to dismiss all opposition and alternative views.

There was another basis for their wariness about ideological controversy. As Sigmund Freud must have realized, his early adherents, though intellectually adventurous almost by definition, were also prone to be adventurous in terms of their social and professional relationships. Too much personal adventure could easily...
cast doubt on the whole enterprise. In fact, with the wisdom of hindsight, the way in which the early analysts mixed up professional and personal relationships would now likely result in professional sanctions or, in some cases, even legal proceedings. Psychoanalytic ideas attracted creative people with loose psychological boundaries. The first two generations of analysts had to tread the kind of line between intellectual adventure and personal temptation that appealed to people prone to reckless behavior. This predicament was doubtless a source of the socially conservative trend that has persisted in analytic circles to this day.

The psychoanalytic method, in which the patient lies on a couch, behind closed doors, saying whatever comes to mind for long months of treatment, posed its own temptations to both patients and analysts, and must have contributed to the atmosphere of psychoanalytic reticence. That sexual misconduct by analysts with patients continues to be a problem for clinical practice, even though psychoanalysis has matured as a field, suggests what a problem this might have been in the early days of the field.

For more than thirty years, Roazen has assiduously pursued the history of psychoanalysis, investigating what went on backstage while psychoanalysis captured the limelight as a system of ideas and a clinical intervention. For Roazen, it was a courageous career choice to explore a realm of intellectual history that, from the beginning, had generated equal measures of enthusiasm and strenuous disagreement. Inevitably, he was caught up in the controversy himself, since his aim was to approach the subject as a neutral observer and avoid taking sides in the warfare of ideas. Like the peacemaker who steps into the middle of a bar fight, he took hits from both sides.

To add to his difficulties, his methods generated resistances and accusations. Exploring the story behind what appeared in the official psychoanalytic historical record, he interviewed as many of the early analysts as possible. He probed for information about their relationships to Freud and to each other. He found out how early analysts, including Freud, actually treated psychoanalytic patients in those early days, and he followed up the published case histories of patients treated by Freud and other early analysts by reviewing their later clinical records and by talking to people who knew them. Naturally, he found out a great deal that did not appear in the official, authorized psychoanalytic history.
Roazen painstakingly developed a picture of the complicated therapeutic and personal relationships among early leading figures, the most important being that between Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Roazen was the first to announce in print that Freud had analyzed his own daughter, Anna. He mapped the multiple connections between Helene Deutsch; Victor Tausk; Sandor Ferenczi; Ruth Brunswick, her husband, and brother-in-law; and Anna Freud, Dorothy Burlingham, and Burlingham’s children. The tangle of people analyzing the children of their lovers, their friends, and their relatives is reminiscent of the Bloomsbury group, another set of talented, creative, and psychologically complicated people. In fact, the two groups overlapped to some extent through the Strachey brothers, Lytton and James. In following up the patients whose cases were famous for having been reported anonymously in the early psychoanalytic literature, Roazen discovered that a number of them continued to have major psychological dysfunctions, including suicide, multiple addictions, and endless psychotherapeutic treatments, demonstrating the limitations of psychoanalysis as a treatment.

*The Historiography of Psychoanalysis* is a collection of essays, book reviews, and occasional pieces that pick up a variety of unfinished and partially finished threads in Roazen’s work. Reading it is like rummaging through a scholar’s study, discovering fragments of work done over many years. It is an enjoyable experience. Roazen is inherently gossipy, and he has a journalist’s instinct for a good story, comfortably blended with the historian’s judgment about what is significant. Reading Roazen, even when, as in this work, he is wide-ranging and somewhat scattered, is like eating peanuts; it is impossible to read only a page or two. Readers, especially from the field of psychology or psychoanalysis, will not be able to resist reading further to find out who did what, when, with whom, and with what outcome.

The book is divided into sections that assemble short essays, book reviews, and other material under titles that impose a semblance of order: “Varieties of Discipleship,” “Freud Studies,” “Letters,” “Interviews,” “Neglected Stories,” “Biographies,” “National Receptions of Freud,” “Intellectual History,” and “New Documents.” Each of the pieces arrayed under these rubrics offers a mix of old and new facts about psychoanalytic history, specific topics and people, sources of information, and the
location of the subject on the map of intellectual history. There are numerous personal asides about Roazen’s own struggles to do his work, hindered as he was by the reluctance of many of his informants to cooperate with a serious historian who hoped for full disclosure. There are also frank discussions of Roazen’s view of the virtues and failings of other scholars working in the field. Thus, the personal element that Roazen brings to his study of psychoanalysis is also present in this account of his own work. Reading this book is like participating in a no-holds-barred discussion in a faculty club, lubricated by a couple of drinks, among academic colleagues who trust each other enough to tell the truth.

Although by no means an intellectual National Enquirer (“Woman Eaten by Her Fur Coat”), Roazen’s work has generated a number of startling stories about the vagaries of the people who created the psychoanalytic movement. The stories have illuminated psychoanalytic history as much richer in human frailties than the official version portrayed. It also earned him a reputation, at least in the early days, of being mischievous and “anti-analytic.” That he surmounted this reputation, and was able to continue interviews with significant figures in psychoanalysis, is a tribute to his personal qualities, his intellectual integrity, and perhaps to the maturation of psychoanalysts in modifying their earlier sensitivities. The reader of The Historiography of Psychoanalysis cannot help but regret that Roazen has failed to include information about how he managed to continue to interview leading analysts despite his reputation. An account of his personal working style and the interviewing techniques that made his success possible would be a valuable contribution to the technology of historiography.

The Historiography of Psychoanalysis reflects the personal perspective on which Roazen has focused his work and which has been his great contribution to the history of the movement. However, reading history as the result of personalities and behavior is only one part of the story. People with training in psychoanalytic psychology who find themselves in leadership positions are frequently surprised at how events influence behavior and character, as much as character influences events. The classic psychoanalytic assumption that (successfully analyzed) character can be “homeothermic,” resistant to outside influence despite the vagaries of circumstance does not prove to be useful by itself. At least as accurate, and more useful in vivo is the assumption that character is
“poikilothermic,” constantly being challenged, modified, and adapted to the context of demands, stresses, and relationships that make up the real world. Psychoanalytic theory itself has rediscovered reality as a potent driver of behavior and a cause of clinical syndromes. Experience with posttraumatic stress disorder—whether due to war, imprisonment, or sexual and physical abuse—has opened a new understanding of how powerful experiences can alter both mind and body.

Reading The Historiography of Psychoanalysis can stimulate complementary explanations of the causation that Roazen locates in personality factors and personal relationships. For example, the evolution of psychoanalysis could be viewed productively as a case of technological innovation with its own trajectory. In this formulation, the dynamics of technological innovation affected secondarily the character and relationships of the people involved. Concepts of the unconscious existed long before Freud. But the method of free association using the couch and a form of sensory deprivation was a technological innovation for gathering data about subjective experience that happened also to serve as a new way to treat emotional disorders. Inventors of technology do not necessarily know how to use what they have created.

The Wright brothers invented the airplane, but it took them time to learn to fly it. The accidents and injuries were the tragic consequences of the brothers’ attempt to master their invention. The conflicts, false starts, accusations and fumbling that characterized the early years of the United States could easily be understood as the result of clashes of personality and ideology. A number of well-known biographies of the protagonists of that drama have taken that tack. But it could as easily be suggested that the Founding Fathers had, like the Wright brothers, invented something that they did now know how to operate successfully. They had classic models of government and contemporary state constitutions to follow, and they knew that they did not want to copy the English monarchy and parliamentary system. But they had no exact templates for the government that evolved, and more important, no precedents to follow in particular situations. A political culture of representative government was forged from those tur-

2 Fred Howard, Wilbur and Orville (New York, 1987), 131–140.
bulent early years that is still being modified and adapted to changing conditions.

Similarly, although Freud and his early followers had constructed a system of theory that had clinical implications, actually applying the theory to the treatment of patients was another story altogether. They had to learn to conduct psychoanalyses. It is hardly surprising that Freud’s technique and that of his colleagues differed from what analysts do now. Current practice is the result of nearly 100 years of experience; the accidents and casualties along the way are lamentable, if not surprising.

Rogers in *Diffusion of Innovations* aptly describes the dynamics of such innovation. He sorts people into ideal types according to the role they play in promulgating new discoveries. A small number of individuals—2.5 percent—are “innovators.” Obsessively venturesome, they are daring, enjoy risk, and welcome new ideas that lead them out of local relationships into cosmopolitan settings where they can interact with other innovators. Undeterred by geographical distance, they associate themselves with other daring individuals willing to cope with uncertainty and failure. In unwitting confirmation of this finding, in the 1970s, Greta Bibring, a first generation analyst, in her eulogy at the funeral of a friend who was a pioneer of neurobiology, stated that if she were a young person now she would be exploring the neurosciences as the contemporary frontier, rather than psychoanalysis, which was the new frontier in her youth. Rogers also notes that such innovators are able to deal with intellectual complexity, and they often are possessed of financial resources that make it possible for them to take chances and follow their passions. This description captures many of the attributes of Freud’s first set of associates—wealth, social position, and dedication to other avant-garde pursuits.

The second group of innovators Rogers calls “Early Adopters.” They tend to be less cosmopolitan. As opinion leaders within their own circle, they are known for their astute judgment about the validity of new ideas. They are extremely valuable to innovators because they provide an essential link to the next group, the “Early Majority,” who are much more deliberate in their decisions to join. The Early Majority do not lead, but, together with the first two categories, they make up 50 percent of the total

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group of potential adherents to an innovation. Roazen documents Freud’s keenness to interest both Early Adopters and members of the Early Majority in his ideas. Those who were hesitant or who rejected psychoanalysis would likely fall into Rogers’ categories of “Late Majority” and “Laggards.” Both of these groups are cautious and skeptical. They are often hampered by scarce resources; the weight of public opinion has to be heavy for them to adopt new ideas.

Christensen in The Innovator’s Dilemma offers a formulation that describes another of the problems that Freud faced in promoting psychoanalytic ideas and treatment. As technological innovations mature, they become increasingly elaborate. Rules, conditions, technical variations, expanded capabilities, and complexities are added to the original version. Eventually, they can do more things than the average user needs; they become more difficult to operate and more expensive. In the meantime, a second wave of innovators, often working informally, with little infrastructure, develop alternative innovations aimed at the same problems. Their second-generation innovations are simpler, more limited in scope and not as effective as the original technology, but they are good enough, and cheap enough, for mainstream users. Christensen terms them “Disruptive Innovations,” and the sequence of their evolution, “the Innovator’s Dilemma.”

An example of this sequence occurred in the manufacturing of computer disk drives, as the large disks that were designed for huge mainframe computers were replaced by smaller and smaller drives that first made desktop computers possible, then portable laptops, and finally notebook computers. Within a few years all of the manufacturers of large disk drives were gone. Another example is the mini-steel mills that used European technology to take a substantial share of steel production away from the traditional steel companies. Another is discount retailing, in which Korvette, Kmart, Woolco and, more recently, Target challenged traditional department stores by adopting a novel business strategy. Reducing overhead by displaying large quantities of merchandise in simply decorated stores, and reducing prices on established merchandise that did not need expensive advertising, these stores prospered by accepting lower profit margins and turning over their merchandise.

4 Clayton M. Christensen, The Innovator’s Dilemma (Boston, 1997).
six times a year rather than four times. A great many customers found the low prices on standard merchandise good enough to fill their needs despite the lack of amenities. By 1966, discount stores had captured 40 percent of the retail market from department stores.

The same dynamic is evident in what some have termed the privatization of war. Rapid internet communication, the ready availability of information about manufacturing weapons of mass destruction, the hunger of the media for dramatic events, and the willingness of terrorists to commit suicide have decisively altered methods of pursuing international conflict. At least some of the initiative has shifted from nation-states to small groups or individuals armed with dangerous weapons. It remains to be seen how well the countries that rely on the sustaining technologies of traditional warfare will be able to adapt to the challenge of these lethally disruptive new technologies.

The early history of psychoanalysis witnesses a similar sequence, which has continued to play itself out in the more recent incarnation of psychoanalysis as a treatment method. Psychoanalysis started as a disruptive technology, emerging at a time when the outpatient treatment of mental disorders was largely the province of neurologists. Termed “neurasthenia” or “hysteria,” these conditions were treated by a hodgepodge of quasineurological methods—electrical stimulating machines, “the rest cure,” opium derivatives, and advice.\(^5\)

Psychoanalysis, which relies on talk in a strange clinical setting, dramatically altered the ground of outpatient treatment in the fashion of a disruptive technology. However, once psychoanalytic treatment was established, it had immediate challenges from “wild analysis” emphasizing therapeutic leaps into the unconscious, and a variety of short-term treatments based on the theories of Jung and Alfred Adler and, later, Karen Horney and Melanie Klein. These conceptually diverse approaches may not have been as deeply analytic as classic analysis, but they offered short cuts that promised quicker results, or results that fit better with the patient’s ideology, than full-blown psychoanalysis.

In response, Freud and the early analysts were forced into the position of defending psychoanalysis as a “sustaining technology”

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that offered a better result but at higher cost of money, time, and depth of probing. Thus, the early analysts not only had to defend their ideas from opponents who resisted psychoanalytic theory; they also had to deal with the proponents of disruptive technologies that offered a product that might actually be good enough for individuals who wanted some relief but who, for various reasons, did not wish to bear the multiple costs of full-fledged analysis.

This challenge from disruptive technologies has been a significant feature of the last fifty years of psychoanalytic history, driven by the arrival of psychopharmacological agents on the scene in the 1950s. In psychiatric training in that era, for young psychiatrists to deprive patients of the best treatment—psychoanalysis or psychodynamic psychotherapy—by giving Thorazine and, soon after, anti-depressants was considered a character flaw. The guiding principle was that psychiatric medications were inferior to analytic therapy because they prevented patients from delving into, and resolving, the intrapsychic conflicts that were thought to be responsible for episodes of psychosis as well as neurotic difficulties. Yet, even then few people could afford the time and expense of deep psychoanalytic exploration, and a certain number of people were not comfortable with those methods even when no obstacles to it were apparent. Freud himself had serious doubts about the effectiveness of psychoanalytic treatment when it was applied to seriously ill psychotic patients, and in the 1950s, data began to support a biological explanation for serious psychotic illnesses.

Corroborating Christensen’s observations about the evolution of technological innovations, medications that started as disruptive innovations have now captured a good deal of the psychiatric treatment market. As they have been elaborated and improved, they have become “sustaining technologies” in their turn, vulnerable to attack from a new wave of disruptive technologies. As Christensen might have predicted, psychologists in recent years have vigorously challenged psychiatrists’ exclusive privilege to prescribe medication. In a number of states, they have sought legal permission to prescribe psychoactive medications, despite their lack of medical training. In early 2002, the New Mexico legislature passed a law making it possible for psychologists with special training, and with special supervision, to do so. The law went into effect notwithstanding strenuous efforts by organized
psychiatry and organized medicine to defend the sustaining technology of prescription only by medical practitioners.

Other challenges to classic psychoanalysis include a great variety of short-term psychotherapeutic treatments, including various kinds of counseling, herbal remedies, acupuncture, complementary and alternative therapies, hypnosis, et al. In the meantime, at least some of the proponents of sustaining technologies defend their products against disruption while continuing to elaborate the classical versions, making them less able to compete in the market because of expense and complexity.

Christensen argues persuasively that those who provide sustaining technologies have great difficulty creating disruptive innovations. Analysts during the past forty years, however, do not corroborate his findings. Despite ideological wars that have been vigorous and rancorous at times, psychoanalysts have been able to go beyond their sustaining technology and develop a considerable set of variations on classical technique. Most of them also do psychoanalytic psychotherapy without the couch, or use the couch flexibly to respond to the special needs of patients. Analysts with medical training use antidepressants and other medications in conjunction with psychotherapy and, in appropriate cases and at appropriate times, as an adjunct to psychoanalytic treatment. They see couples and families, and they vary the timing, frequency, and duration of treatment. Psychoanalysts have exercised much more technical heterogeneity and theoretical promiscuity than would be suspected from reading the official literature on psychoanalytic clinical theory.

Roazen performed a valuable service to history and to psychoanalysis by exploring the personal elements in the history of psychoanalysis. He did it with courage and an engaging style, which changed the views of analysts and the intellectual community about the genesis of the psychoanalytic movement. His work made apparent a hidden, yet vital, component of the reality of discovery and adoption of psychoanalysis as a theory and as a clinical method. That the history he discovered can also be viewed in the broader context of technological innovation in no way detracts from his achievement, an achievement that is documented so winningly in *The Historiography of Psychoanalysis*.