

Psychohistory: A Challenge to Conventional History

Syed Anwar Husain

History is generally considered a discipline with fixed boundaries and focal points—periods, countries, regimes, dramatic events and great leaders. In terms of procedure and methodology also, History enjoys a distinction as being defined, clear and unambiguous. But starting from the mid-twentieth century up to date History has demonstrated itself to be an amorphous discipline with its frontiers and contours in constant shift under a cross-discipline impact. Historians were once found to be followers of such mentors as Gibbon, Macaulay, Ranke and Toynbee; they now seem to demonstrate more attraction for Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Levi-Strauss. Until sometime in the past, History was more or less a concatenation of events, now it is primarily, and even entirely analytic in an interdisciplinary perspective.

Historical analysis is now based on answering a question: why did a certain event happen? Rather than, as the case in the past, what happened? Or how did it happen? One of the ways to answer the question 'why' in history is to use psychoanalysis, and the history thus produced becomes psychohistory.

This paper discusses the phenomenon of psychohistory in three sections. The opening section deals with an attempt to put across a precise definition of this sub-discipline. The second section is illustrative and draws attention to some psycho-historical works. Inherent in this section is an indication of the methodology used in constructing psychohistory. The third section is a critique of this still amorphous sub-discipline.

I

What Psychohistory is all about?

Contrary to what appears at first sight psychohistory is not merely the use of psychological explanation in historical descriptions. Indeed, there is nothing new in such an approach; historians have always used such explanations in appropriate contexts

and with sufficient evidence. As Hegel has pointed out, all historical facts are psychological facts. But this is not exactly what a psycho-historian does; he uses a kind of eclectic and pragmatic methodology. He uses a particular theory of psychology—psychoanalysis; and in doing so he may be committed to Freudianism or its variations as found in Jungian, Kleinian and Lacanian traditions. In doing so he deviates from the path of conventional historical analysis. Unlike conventional historians a psycho-historian derives his ‘facts’ not from happenings only, and deduces his theories not from this or that instance but from a view of human nature that conditions and transcends historical happenings. Psychohistory denies the basic criterion of historical evidence: that the evidence be publicly accessible to, and therefore assessable by all historians. Moreover, this kind of historical exercise violates the basic tenet of historical method: that the historian be alert to the negative instances or counter-evidence that would refute his thesis and to alternative explanations that would make his own more tenuous.

Psychohistory is thus a formalized sub-discipline, practitioners of which are committed to psychoanalysis as their principal explanatory device. Despite the dramatic growth of interest in the recent past, especially in the United States, in psychohistory, and where large history departments have had distinctively patronizing role, critics still regard this sub-discipline with suspicion. Erik H. Erikson, for example, although a pioneer in this kind of exercise, with a pronounced self-defensive gesture accepts for psychohistory a status of “an in-between field”. Moreover, he uses a hyphenated spelling for the field (psychohistory) because, as he goes on to explain, “Such a hyphenated name usually designates an area in which nobody as yet is methodologically quite at home, but which someday will be settled and incorporated without a trace of border

¹ Erik H. Erikson, On the Nature of Psycho-Historical Evidence: In Search of Gandhi”, in **Philosophers and Kings: Studies in Leadership** (Excerpted from **Deadalus**, vol.97, No.3) (Bombay, n.d.), p.14.

² William L. Langer, The Next Assignment”, **The American Historical Review** vol. 53, No. 2, January, 1958, pp. 283-304; H. Stuart Hughes, History and Psychoanalysis: The Explanation of Motive” in his **History as Art and as Science** (New York: 1964); Bruce Mazlish (ed.), **Psychoanalysis and History** (Englewood Cliffs, 1963).

disputes and double names.”¹ But at the same time such self-confidants as William Langer, Stuart Hughes, and Bruce Mazlis have unhesitatingly called for closer cooperation between history and psychoanalysis.² An awareness or imperative for such a close cooperation has resulted in the proliferation of historical works with a marked impact of the use of psychoanalysis as a device.³

II

Examples of Psychohistory

To say that Hitler has a personal obsession with Jews and that this was an important fact in the history of Nazism is not an exercise in psychohistory, although statement such as this may have the traces of psychological input to historical exercise. A psycho-historian goes on to explain the precise psychic mechanism that caused that obsession and to make this psychic mechanism responsible for the precise nature of the historical events resulting from the obsession.

Rudolph Binion has demonstrated the use of psychoanalytic device in explaining Hitler’s anti-Jewish policies and pogroms. He traces not only the Holocaust but the specific use of gas chambers to the treatment of Hitler’s mother by a Jewish doctor.⁴ A Dr. Bloch had operated on her breast cancer, removing the breast, and then, when the cancer recurred, had vainly tried to arrest its progress by the use of the iodine compound called iodoform. Hitler, who had “loved Bloch like a kind father”, unconsciously blamed him for his mother’s untimely and tragic death, as well as for the “huge terminal bill paid on Christmas Eve”. This experience of childhood, and traumatic at that, was the

³ See, for example, E. Eriksson, *Young Man Luther. A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (London, 1959), *Gandhi’s Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (London, 1970); P. Loweberg, *Fantasy and Reality in History* (New York, 1995); and *Decoding the Past: The Psycho-historical Approach* (New York, 1980); D. Stannard, *Shrinking History: On Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory* (New York, 1980); *The Psychohistory Review: Studies of Motivation in History and Culture* (1972); L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994) (this work throws much light on the use of psychoanalysis in history); W. Runyan (ed.), *Psychology and Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1995).

⁴ See his *Hitler’s Concept of Lebensraum: The Psychological Basis”, History of Childhood Quarterly* vol.1, 1973, pp.187-215.

root of his latter rage against “the Jewish cancer, the Jewish poison, the Jewish profiteer.” When Hitler was hospitalized for gas poisoning in 1918, the gas burned through his skin “just like iodoform”, and he naturally “associated” his own condition with that of his mother’s. Shortly afterward, in a hysterical relapse, he experienced the hallucination in which he was called upon to undo Germany’s defeat, the Germany he was going to avenge being “transparently his mother”. The gas chambers of World War II, similarly “associated” with the iodoform episode and his own gas poisoning, completed Hitler’s psychological continuum. As Rudolph Binion concludes: “the futile surgery performed on his mother’s cancer (the expulsion programme), yielding to representation of her death as mercy killing (the Euthanasia programme), and this in turn to his retaliation against Bloch (the Final Solution)”.

A more specific correspondence between psychic and historical phenomena may be seen in that part of this article which explains Hitler’s *Lebensraum* policy. In appealing for living space for Germany, Hitler is said to have been re-experiencing his mother’s trauma, a trauma induced by the death of three infants before Hitler was born and communicated to the infant Hitler literally at his mother’s breast.

That is, even as he spoke to Germany’s emergent need to relive a traumatic experience, his message was shaped by his oral-aggressive fixation and by the traumatic experience that his mother was reliving as she fixated him. His major premise was strictly oral-aggressive; that all history was a fight for feeding ground. His minor premise, that Germany could not feed her children adequately, expressed his mother’s maternal trauma as it had come through to him in her compensatory overfeeding of him. And his conclusion, the eastern land-grab, pointed beyond itself toward world conquest, which points back to that satiety at the breast when self and world were one.

Erik Erikson in his classic study *Young Man Luther (1958)* demonstrates psychoanalysis by tracing Luther’s rebellion against the Pope to the childhood trauma he had suffered under a domineering father and his consequent identity crisis of his youth.

III

Critique of Psychohistory

A general objection to psychohistory is that it does not observe the rules of the historical craft. But history is more than mere presentation of facts and recreation of a phenomenon; it is essentially a scientific exercise in understanding episodes and phenomena all of which are rooted in human motivations and actions. Conceived and conceptualized in such a context historical exercise ought to be an endeavour to understand the psyche of creators of episodes and phenomena. Conventional history may remain half-history without understanding or analyzing human minds.

There are two other commonly voiced objections. The first is that this is an individual-specific method unworkable in a group or societal context. An individual may be an object about which a good deal may be known; but it would be difficult to collect psychoanalytic data about a group. These criticisms may be right, but certainly not pointing to impossibility. In fact, many analysts, building on earlier psychological work, have thought about collective psychology and psycho-historians have addressed precisely this issue in studying how totalitarian leaders can command support, for example.

The second criticism is that it is wrong, if not downright impossible, to psycho-analyse the dead. If sufficient psychological data relating to dead are available there is no reason why he cannot be psycho-analysed; and this is why there is a widely held view among the sympathies of psychohistory that this kind of objection is obtuse.⁵

Concluding Observations

It is undeniable that psychohistory is still an amorphous sub-discipline awaiting confirmation by the general body of history fraternity. But it is also evidentially true that it has passed its embryonic stage, and the progress registered over the past half century has been remarkably steady, although quantitatively not phenomenal. The unique strength of psychohistory is that it seeks to get straight into human motivations that are at the root of human actions the aggregation of which is history. Psychohistory is poised to add strength, and challenge to conventional historiography.

⁵ See, for example Ludmila Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), p.57.