Social Evolution, Progress and Teleology in Spencer’s Synthetic Philosophy and Freudian Psychoanalysis

Abstract

This article aims to compare notions of progress and evolution in the social theories of Freud and Spencer. It argues 1) that the two authors had similarly complex theories that contained mixed elements of positivism and teleology; 2) In its positivist elements, both authors made use of unified natural laws and, in its teleological aspect, they made use of notions of final cause in that progress and the evolution of civilization was understood as a linear path of progressive development with an aim, 3) that that aim was both ethno- as well as - in Freud’s case in particular – self-centric and, finally, 4) that such understanding of natural law led to ethical commitments to the individual.

Word-count: 7,880

Introduction

The idea of progress, though continually challenged by historical events, has been ubiquitous since the eighteenth century. In fact, in his extensive survey of ideas of progress across history, Robert Nisbet argues the case for a much broader chronology of the idea of progress, building the case that ‘[n]o single idea has been more important than, perhaps as important as, the idea of progress in Western civilization for nearly three thousand years’ (1994:5). From Plato’s early ideas about the subject, and his thesis elaborated in The Laws that human society evolved through time to more complex forms (680a-682d), to Steven Pinker’s most recent and controversial book (2011), authors have repeatedly sought to understand whether we as a species are approaching, or distancing ourselves from, a utopic ‘Golden Age’. As the anti-hero Ulrich, in Musil’s classic novel of fin-de siècle Vienna The Men Without Qualities
noted, ‘it’s an odd thing that one half of mankind is looking for salvation in the future and the other half in the past’ (Musil 1953:323).

As is intrinsic to any form of human activity, such speculations about the past and future of mankind take particular shapes that are informed by the social context where they were developed. From the end of the eighteenth, and increasingly from the mid-nineteenth century, ideas about progress became intertwined with the many doctrines on evolution available at the time. As a first objective, this paper aims to compare notions of social evolution and progress in the works of two authors who wrote extensively about this relationship: Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud.

By arguing that Freud was a social evolutionist in the same vein as Spencer, this paper attempts to bridge a gap in both the Freudian and sociological scholarship that seems to have disregarded this aspect of his work. Though substantial attention has been given to the impact of Darwinism in psychoanalysis, especially since Sulloway’s book (1979), this has generally focused on the influence on Freud’s individual psychology, overlooking its impact on his social theories. The influence of social evolutionist ideas on Freud is blatant in any of his main social works (Freud 1908, 1913, 1927, 1930, 1939), so this argument is not in itself controversial. The aim here is simply to systematize his body of theories on the development and evolution of civilization in relation to what is arguably its most similar counterpart, Spencer’s *Synthetic Philosophy*.

The comparative analysis further focuses on understanding the relation that the two authors established in regards to the problem of causes. This was a topic of central importance for psychology and the social sciences developing in the Victorian period. Since the positivist crusade against teleology in the early nineteenth century, authors in these disciplines couldn’t choose but to address the problem of causes and its influence on questions about which type
of science and methodology was most suited to approach phenomena in each discipline. It is further argued that both Spencer and Freud complicate the matter to a great extent, by acquiring a perspective which is akin to the positivist one but that resorts to teleological notions. This perspective could be called ‘natural teleology’, and was not exclusive to these authors or even to the two disciplines. Biology was at the time in a very similar situation (cf. Lenoir 1982).

If, as J.B. Bury argued in his classic *The Idea of Progress*, progress ‘is a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy for the future’ (2006 [1920]:2), this is also true of the work of the two authors studied more closely in this paper. Spencer is, these days, known mainly for his social and political writing, and for having coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’. This, however, narrows the scope of his *opus* to near insignificance. More than an account of the evolution of society, in his *Synthetic Philosophy* Spencer developed an entire cosmology. This paper argues that, with psychoanalysis, Freud had a similar conception.¹ In both authors, this involved speculation about the emergence of life, the descent of man, the evolution of civilization and, based on that genetic account, of a ‘prophecy for the future’ of mankind. For Spencer and Freud, this prophecy also prescribed an ethical commitment for the individual, binding them morally into the future progress of civilization.

¹ It is important to note, however, that we are not here making specific claims regarding the filiation of ideas. It is hard to evaluate with any level of precision how familiar Freud was with Spencer’s *Synthetic Philosophy*. None of his works are available in Freud’s personal library in London (Trosman & Simmons 1973) but it is possible that he left them behind during his emigration from Vienna, as he did quote Spencer in three of his writings (Freud 1900:1, 1905:145–6, 1913:74). However, Freud’s notions on evolution might have been more directly influenced by the English neurologist John Hughlings Jackson, who applied Spencerian ideas of evolution to the understanding of hierarchies in the brain (Hughlings Jackson 1884; Riese 1953; Steinberg 2009; York & Steinberg 2002, 2011; Franz & Gillett 2011).
In his *Evolution: the History of an Idea*, Peter Bowler argues that throughout history the relationship between social thought and biological theories has been marked by the absorption of biological theories into existing social debates as a form of providing further credibility and validity to pre-established ideologies. Because the relation between organisms to social formations is too complex to be precisely formulated causally, ‘in each case one aspect of the scientific theory was chosen to be stressed’, so that ‘far from inspiring new attitudes, biological ideas were exploited as a means of justifying ideological positions that already existed’ (Bowler 1983:283). One such prominent example is the linear account of evolution, which states that species evolved in a linear path from lower to more complex and intelligent organisms. This idea, used extensively as a scientific proof of racial superiority in the nineteenth century, was in fact popular even before the idea of biological evolution first appeared (Burrow 1966).

The final argument this essay makes is that the ‘prophecy for the future’ provided by both authors is deeply ideological. In the case of both authors, but with Freud especially, not only was this culture taken as a model towards which all others should aspire, but their own personal dispositions and roles in society were taken as goals towards which all people must strive. Freud’s perspective was not only ethnocentric but also self-centric. In his account of the progress of mankind, Freud not only made use of teleological notions of finality but placed himself and his culture as the exemplars of that ideal.

**The Social sciences and the problem of causes**

One aspect in common to both the social sciences and psychology is their epistemological location at the edge of the two traditions classically described as galilean and aristotelian. The early years of both disciplines in the nineteenth century was marked by fierce
methodological debates surrounding the questions of which tradition they belonged to. The contrast is one between two distinct views on scientific explanation and in particular about two notions of cause. This distinction is commonly defined as one between causal versus teleological notions. The first type is also called mechanistic, the latter finalistic. One aims to predict and explain (Erklaeren) phenomena as prescribed by the methodological ideal provided by the natural sciences, the other to make facts teleologically or finalistically understandable (Verstehen) along the tradition of the Geisteswissenschaften.

As it is generally understood, the development of modern science has been characterised by the progressive elimination of final causes from its modes of explanation. As von Wright describes, ‘the Aristotelian tradition today represents merely the fading survival of obsolete elements from which science is gradually becoming “liberated”’ (1971:2). Ernst Mayr, in his many writings on the problem of teleology in the biological sciences (1992, 1998) argues that biology only moved into the realm of the natural sciences through the elimination of teleological thinking. His role model is Darwin, whose theory of evolution by natural selection has, in Mayr’s philosophy, been responsible for replacing other evolutionary ideas based on notions of forces driving evolution towards a final stage, such as Lamarck’s.

Teleology presupposes a tendency or purpose towards a given endpoint. The endpoint, of course, is the aristotelian ‘final cause’. This tendency, initially identified with the will of God, was in the eighteenth and nineteenth century ascribed to essential natures or forces. A grown oak tree is the purpose or final cause of a seed; a seed contains within itself life forces that will transform it into a mature oak. In applying this to organisms, deviations from the purpose are read as marks of pathology. If organisms don’t fulfil their purposes this happens (following this perspective) due to some form of arrest in their natural development.
This type of thinking led to several incongruities, in particular circularity. Molière in The Imaginary Invalid famously mocked the character of the doctor in his play for subscribing to such circular arguments: ‘why does Opium produce sleep?’, he is asked. To which he answers: ‘Because there is in it a Virtus dormitiva’, i.e., a ‘dormitive power’ (Molière [1673] 2004: Act III, sc. iii.). Nietzsche in turn references Molierè’s play in order to ridicule Kant and the philosophers of Romanticism for similar reasoning:

“How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?” Kant asked himself, - and what was really his answer? By virtue of a faculty [Vermöge eines Vermögens], which is to say: enabled by an ability. Unfortunately, though, not in these few words, but rather so laboriously, reverentially, and with such an extravagance of German frills and profundity that people failed to hear the comical niäiserie allemande [German stupidity] in such an answer. […] The honeymoon of German philosophy had arrived; all the young theologians of the Tubingen seminary ran off into the bushes – they were all looking for “faculties”. […] There had been dreamers: first and foremost - the old Kant. “By virtue of a faculty” – he had said, or at least meant. But is that really – an answer? An explanation? Or instead just a repetition of the question? So how does opium cause sleep? “By means of a faculty”, namely, the virtus dormitiva – replies the doctor in Molière. (Nietzsche 2002 [1886]:12–3)

Appeal to essential powers is therefore potentially misleading and tautological. If opium produces sleep it can indeed be said to have ‘dormitive powers’. However, when one asks ‘why does opium cause sleep’, one is in fact enquiring as to the mechanisms by which such an effect is produced. These are discovered by understanding the (efficient) causes, which entails breaking the phenomena into its elementary parts and explaining how these interact so as to produce the effect under study. This is broadly the methodology prescribed by the natural sciences.

Such methodology worked to great success in the sciences of the inorganic. When applied to organisms, however, problems are encountered. How can it be said that the hand was not made for grasping, that a bird doesn’t build a nest for laying eggs, or that a squirrel isn’t
preparing for winter? In fact, similar criticism to that of Nietzsche’s can be made of mechanical explanations. ‘Why are there sex differences?’, one might ask. ‘Because of hormones’, a mechanist would reply. Although true, it cannot be said that the answer has addressed the question. When one asks the question at hand, as the philosopher Robert Brandon pointed out in his classic essay on teleological explanations, one is asking what are there sexual differences for, what’s the purpose of it (1981:91). Mayr, as mentioned before, saw in Darwin the knight who delivered the final blow to teleological thinking in biology. Darwin, however, did not share the same opinion of himself. In 1894, Asa Gray wrote an appreciation of his work in the journal Nature, where he commended, ‘Darwin’s great service to Natural Science in bringing back to it Teleology: so that instead of Morphology versus Teleology, we shall have Morphology wedded to Teleology’, to which Darwin responded shortly after: ‘What you say about Teleology pleases me especially and I do not think anyone else has ever noticed the point’ (cit. Lennox 1993). In fact, the problem of teleology is still central to the philosophy of biology today, as illustrated by the variety of perspectives in the collection of essays edited by Allen, Bekoff, and Lauder (1998).

As for the social sciences, the model established in the writings of Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill in the 1830s and 40s formed an ideal that was extended into the beginning of the twenty-first century. The aim of both authors for the social sciences, in the Course de Philosophie Positive and the System of Logic respectively, was to eliminate, as much as possible, the role of teleological thinking in the discipline and thus pave the way for it to become a science (Turner 2003a, 2003b). Comte’s most famous contribution, the ‘Law of the Three Stages’, has as its inherent goal the elimination of final causes. According to the law, each science moved successfully through three stages of development. The ‘theological stage’ is the first, and is marked by an appeal to ‘fictitious entities’ – gods, spirits and so on. This is followed by the ‘metaphysical stage’, where explanations called for abstract forces –
such as momentum and cause. In the final stage, those ideas were eliminated, and purely predictive laws formed the whole of what was taken to be scientific in each domain.

The law did not speak of ‘forces’ that assured the inevitability of this process. Comte, instead, theorized about the conditions for progress. The positive mind no longer asks why events unfold – it ceases to speculate on the hidden nature of things. Instead, it asks how phenomena arise and which course they take. Newton was the model for this positivity. His description of motion and attraction no longer speculated on the ‘essence’ of matter or movement, but simply aimed at describing the laws governing these phenomena. Questions about the causes of gravitation no longer made sense, for asking such questions would invariably involve resorting to metaphysical or theological notions. Physics was, however, the only science to have, for the most part, arrived at the positivity stage. Biology, on the other hand, had not yet moved that far. Were ‘life’ and ‘organism’ metaphysical notions? Could such notions be freed from their metaphysical connotations? Social science was even further from liberation. Comte took this on as his task.

His English counter-part, John Stuart Mill, discovered in Comte’s Course ‘one of the most profound books ever written on the philosophy of the sciences’ (Mill cit. T. R. Wright, 1986, p. 41). This relationship was made clear in his most important work, A System of Logic. He intended it to oppose the influence exerted at the time by the ‘German, or a priori view of human knowledge’, in particular that of the Naturphilosophie, with ‘a text-book of the opposite doctrine – that which derives all knowledge from experience, and all moral and intellectual qualities principally form the direction given to the associations’ (Mill 1969:135). The book was aimed at demonstrating how universal truths could be discovered solely via experience and association – therefore, these must be discovered via inductive reasoning. This however required the assumption that nature is governed by universal laws. Underlying all laws of nature was a single principle, the ‘Law of Causation’. This was nothing but ‘the
familiar truth that invariability of succession is found by observation to obtain the very fact in nature and some other fact which has preceded it, independently of all considerations respecting the ultimate mode of production of phenomena’ (Mill 1973:327). As there are no exceptions to the causal order, this also was also the case in humans – both in individuals (psychology) as in social formations (sociology).

Mill was, however, aware of the difficulty of the task. Events happening to both individuals and groups are at most times incapable of being determined causally. This is the case, not because they are not governed by causal laws, but due to their complexity: the ‘effects of the separate causes […] are intermingled with, and disguised by, the homogenous and closely allied effect of other causes […] some of which cancel one another, while others do not appear distinguishably, but merge in one sum […] there is often an insurmountable difficulty in tracing by observation any fixed relation whatever’ (Mill 1973:443). The solution is thus to resort to statistics instead, studying many cases and thus producing approximate generalizations: ‘Social science, for Mill, thus resembled the science of tides, which can never be reduced to a general theory. Although the main effects are understood, and predictions from these main effects are both possible and valuable, they are nevertheless subject to local causes of diverse kinds’ (Turner 2003a:64).

The picture of the world put forward by Comte and Mill became a divisive one within the discipline, but one that could not be simply neglected – and authors in the social sciences after them could be placed in a spectrum in relation to two extremes: the positivist causal view of the two authors at one end, and teleological understanding at the other. Along this spectrum, authors such as Marx and Hegel, whose emphasis in discovering single-factor laws of historical progress aim to make phenomena teleologically intelligible rather than predictable through knowledge of the efficient causes, would occupy the other end of the spectrum. Weber occupies a moderate teleological position, and Durkheim a moderate causal
one. It is more difficult to classify Spencer. He assumed both views, so his perspective can be said to be mixed. While subscribing to the universality of natural law and explicitly rejecting teleology, he also believed that these laws revealed a purpose in nature.

Spencer: Organic analogy and the teleological law of progress

Spencer’s approach to determinism in his *Synthetic Philosophy* looks at first similar to that of Comte and Mill. He wants to show that there are no exceptions to scientific explanations, in the form of natural laws, for all phenomena in the universe. Implicit in his project, however, is the goal of demonstrating that a thorough explanation of the laws guiding the universe – from the inorganic to the organic, and including the mind and the social world – would reveal that these phenomena lead inexorably to progress. This reveals a debt of a different nature, in particular to philosophers of the *Naturphilosophie*: ‘widely different as they are from my own, they are conceptions of the same class, and may very possibly have had some suggestive influences’ (Spencer 1904:489). Thus, in similar fashion to the positivist authors, Spencer believed in a law-based universe. Contrary to them, and from a perspective akin to teleology, the lawful universe was vested with value and meaning.

This second aspect might have been a direct influence from his father, George Spencer, who advocated a form of evolutionary deism that Thomas Mozley, a member of the Chapman Circle in which Herbert was also a participant, argued was the direct ancestor of the *Synthetic Philosophy*. Evolutionary deists saw God’s providence as operating in the form of natural laws, with the purpose of engendering progress through natural development. Because these

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2 Although Spencer seemed to be at least familiar with the works of Hegel and Schelling, *Naturphilosophie* might have impacted him more directly via the writings of Lorenz Oken, a follower of Schelling who, in his “*Physiophilosophie*” from 1810, interpreted nature as self-developing towards increasing levels of organisation and, in a way very much like Spencer, made extensive use of analogy between findings of different sciences – from astronomy to psychology – in order to demonstrate his theories (Taylor 2007:45).
laws were believed to be initially set by God – or rather by the ‘GREAT FIRST CAUSE’ (sic), as Erasmus Darwin, another evolutionary deist, preferred to called it – they should lead to maximum happiness (Taylor 2007:38–42). Herbert Spencer explicitly rejected any appeal to theological explanations, but one can easily identify in his description of nature’s striving for perfection elements that would, in Comte’s terms, belong to the metaphysical rather than the positivist stage. As Turner argued, ‘his discussions of the law have little to do with the incidence of conditions’, as was the case with Comte, ‘and much to do with “general laws of force”’(2003a:66). Spencer tends to see social stages as the fulfilment of a pre-existing disposition, which if not explicitly, is tacitly teleological.

Natural law is, for Spencer, the law of evolution. He sees it everywhere, from the development of the earth, to life, society, morals, commerce and language. In its most simple form the law states: ‘all things are growing or decaying, accumulating matter or wearing away, integrating or disintegrating’ (Spencer 1897:292). This fragment, however, conceals the arrow of nature: progress. This, for him, consists of the passage from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, from the simple to the complex. And for Spencer, though regression and dissolution into simpler forms does occur under special circumstances, evolution, heterogeneity, complexity and progress are the rule rather than the exception in the grand scheme of things. The logic behind it was rather simple and was explored in his essay on progress: ‘every cause produces more than one effect’ (Spencer 1857:466). That being the case, then ‘each kind of progress is from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, and this is because each change is followed by several changes’ (467).

Progress and evolution refer thus to increasing heterogeneity. Spencer sees it in the formation of the universe (from singularity to plurality), of the solar system (an organised hierarchical system consisting of a star, planets and satellites), the surface of the earth (changing from a mass of matter of homogeneous consistency and temperature, to the heterogeneity of the
environments found today), in the development of early forms of life which progress into increasingly heterogeneous flora and fauna, in man (‘the most heterogeneous of animals’, given the variety of races), societies (from aggregates of homogeneous individuals to heterogeneity in forms of authority), and to the subdivision in labour in industry, language and the arts.

The transition from the study of the organic to the social is made via Spencer’s *organic analogy*. In the second part of his *Principles of Sociology* (1885) Spencer outlined five points of similitude between the organic and social aggregates, which aimed at demonstrating that these are two phenomena both regulated by the same law of increasing heterogeneity. First (1) they both ‘exhibit augmentation in mass’, i.e., they grow. The increase in size is supplemented by (2) the development of structure. ‘The progressive differentiation of structures is accompanied by (3) the ‘progressive differentiation of function’, i.e., heterogeneity. This differentiation gives rise to (4) the mutual dependency of parts. This is the ‘fundamental trait’ through which ‘a social organism and an individual organism are entirely alike’. Because of the differentiation of functions, in both cases the aggregate exceeds its elemental units.

Progress, therefore, ‘is not an accident, not a thing within human control, but a beneficent necessity’ (Spencer 1857:484). Civilization being part of nature, its modifications result from the law of evolution, and the ‘modifications mankind have undergone, and are still undergoing, result from a law underlying the whole organic creation; and provided the human race continues, and the constitution of things remains the same, those modifications must end in completeness’. The law of evolution has therefore a normative, moral finality: ‘As surely as the tree becomes bulky when it stands alone, and slender if one of a group, . . . so surely must things be called evil and immoral disappear; so surely must man become perfect’ (Spencer 1901:156). For Spencer, therefore, not only are the laws of morality natural laws –
nature itself is moral. It thus follows that the study of nature and social formations has ethical consequences.

With regards to the ethical implications of the natural law, his message was one of radical *laissez-faire*. Real and long-standing progress is only brought about through evolution, which is beyond the control of humans. Following the spirit of radical liberalism, the force that drove progress and social transformation was the socialization of the individual. Trying to mould evolution through mechanisms of social control (such as welfare) could only disturb the evolutionary process of through which the individual and its environment are in equilibrium. Individuals needed to become habituated to the demands of living in a social state, by developing the good habits required for new forms of social formation and eliminating those that ceased to be adaptive. As a believer in Lamarckian use-inheritance, Spencer saw it as the duty of each generation – understood as each individual in that generation – to maximise adaptation so as to transmit the qualities needed for posterity, thus slowly building the path for perfection. In his *Social Statics* he warned his readers that reaching perfect equilibrium would take infinite time, but allows for that state of homeostasis of the individual to the environment to become approximate to the ideal.

With these laws of nature, Spencer was providing a guarantee for ideologies widely shared in Victorian society. Britain and America are regarded as the nations most closely representing the liberal ideal of his system. His notion of the linear development of societies, based on a deeper law of evolution that included all phenomena in the universe, was particularly useful for defending colonial practices in the expanding British empire. This helped to make Spencer the most notorious and revered philosopher of his time in Britain, the impact of his ideas extending to authors in Europe and America.
Freud: From organic to the libidinal analogy

The linear understanding of the evolutionary process was central to most social evolutionist theory in the nineteenth century. Bowler is emphatic in arguing that ‘[d]espite Darwin’s emphasis that development is a branching rather than a linear process, the vast majority of his followers continued to believe that evolution of man consisted of a single line of ascent from the apes. The idea that the “lower” races might represent intermediate stages in the chain of being linking the apes to man had been developed in the eighteenth century and was still popular in the early nineteenth century’ (1983:302). This was true of the most eminent proponent of social evolutionism, Herbert Spencer, but also of Sigmund Freud.

Social evolution for Freud thus takes a linear form, following a pre-existing disposition. From the state of nature to civilization there are certain stages common to all cultures. This assumption is present throughout his writings on the genesis and development of groups and cultures, from Totem and Taboo (1913) to his last book, Moses and Monotheism (1939). In brief, his account of the descent of men starts with (1) the human hordes, with men in a Hobbesian state of nature. In this mythical period the individual lived in a state of complete narcissistic omnipotence, regulated solely by the pleasure principle, i.e., with no restriction of instincts, but at the same time in complete dependence on others, and with feelings of total helplessness against the oppressive forces of nature (1930: 123), which drove these proto-people, who would otherwise live in solitude, to gather in groups. The ‘tyrannical father’, the strongest and most powerful male leader of the horde, had the monopoly of women in the group, but at some point in pre-historic time he was killed and devoured by his oppressed children, thus generating guilt and the development of the first social contract (Cf. 1939: 82-

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3 This fact alone provides some evidence that the advent of the death drive did not shift Freud’s ideas on the evolution of society as deeply as is considered by most classic interpretations of Freud’s social theories (e.g Schorske, 1991). A proper exploration of this perspective is both necessary and timely. However, this is a complex subject in its own right, and will be dealt with in a separate article (Nascimento, forthcoming).
3). This act inaugurates the (2) totemic societies (in fact, it could be said that this act inaugurates culture itself), marked by the establishment of animal gods representing the dead father and by women's occupying the positions of power.

The next step (3) in the development of civilization was the humanization of the forces of nature in a pantheistic manner (Cf. 1939: 83). With this stage a deeper mastering of reality is gained. Since the forces of nature now behave in a way similar to humans, we are able to comprehend it. Nature stops being so terribly frightening and becomes more familiar (1927: 14-15). This stage is followed by the appearance of (4) monotheistic religion. The polytheistic gods progressively withdrew from nature, and 'morality becomes their true domain' (1927: 18). Now the gods serve two purposes. They defend men 'against the dangers of nature and Fate, and against the injuries that threaten him from human society itself' (ibid.). At last, all gods are condensed in one, and monotheism is instituted (1927: 19). The primal Father, who was always present in civilization’s unconscious, returns. There is one last step in this process, usually neglected by Freud scholars: (5) the establishment of a rational society, based on the scientific Weltanschauung. There is no further stage, for 'there is no appeal to a court above that of reason' (1927: 26). Reason – which Freud refers to as 'secondary process' – is the final aim of civilization. The transition to the last stage has just started, and the process is expected to be long, but 'in this process there is no stopping; the greater the number of men to whom the treasures of knowledge become accessible, the more widespread is the falling-away from religious belief' (1927: 38).

The parallel to Comte’s stages is immediately noticeable. If one takes into account the fact that Comte breaks the theological stage down further into three sub-stages - animism, polytheism and monotheism – the similarity is even more striking. Thus there are almost direct parallels between Comte’s animism and Freud’s totemic stages, between the first’s polytheism and the latter’s pantheism, and so on, all the way down to the positivity stage –
the main dissimilarity perhaps being that Comte did not provide for an initial stage of nature in the same way as Freud, and that Freud merged the monotheistic and metaphysical stages into one. This parallel has been curiously overlooked in most of the literature. Philip Rieff is one of the few authors who have stressed the impact of Comte’s positivism in Freud’s social theories, in particular where he argues – against Sulloway and others who claim that the impact of evolutionism on Freud was primarily effected via Haeckel’s version of recapitulation – that ‘Freud did not much employ this [i.e., Haeckel’s] biological version of analogy between individual and racial development […]’. A more nearly sociological version, familiar through the variety of uses to which it was put by Herder, Herbart, Comte, and Spencer, is the one more often employed’ (Rieff 1979:188). However, he says nothing there about the specific set and order of stages, which is similar only in the cases of Comte and Freud. The only other author who has touched on the similitude between the schemes as presented here seems to have been Jean Laplanche. In his ‘Court traité de l’inconscient’, after discussing Comte’s stages, Laplanche argues that ‘Freud in turn endorses a succession [of stages of civilization] which is not very far from [Comte’s], despite somewhat different terms: animistic, religious, scientific worldview’ (1993:94).

Despite the similarities between the two systems there is one striking difference that distinguishes them. Where Comte talked about the conditions for progress, Freud affirmed its inevitability: ‘in this process there is no stopping’, he says. While for the former progress is not necessary and certain, but a consequence of certain states of affairs being fulfilled in determinate groups, for Freud progress was understood as the aim of any civilization, evolution being the underlying force that drove this process forward. By understanding

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4 There is a surprisingly small body of literature on the influence of Comte on Freud. One article focuses exclusively on his influence on metapsychology (Domenjo 2000), which is outside of our purposes. Freud himself only seems to have mentioned Comte once, in an early letter to his friend Eduard Silberstein where he says that the reading of it had been recommended by Brentano (Freud, Boehlich, and Pomerans 1875). The most plausible answer to the question of how Freud was influenced by Comte was given by Rieff, who argued that this happened especially via the anthropological literature (1979:188).
progress as inevitable and as a consequence of the law of evolution, Freud is aligned with Spencer’s position that I have here called natural teleology.

In that sense, Freud follows his contemporaries by equating evolution with progress. The novelty introduced by the social evolutionists was to apply this moralizing evolution to societies. From the moral character - that societies are more or less developed from each other - follows a normative one. The more advanced societies are taken as models to which the others should aim. For Freud, western culture is the point of reference from which ‘primitive societies’, not usually distinguished from each other, are measured. In fact, ‘savages’ are constantly compared to children (Freud 1913:62, 1920:117), while intellectualized westerners of the higher classes are adults. The western civilization, being more developed than the others, has shown the path that all other cultures would take independently of western civilization’s existence itself. Evolution is a single road, and western civilization is ahead only because it travelled this path earlier than others.

In Freud’s social evolutionary framework, not only are there more and less developed societies, there are also more and less developed social classes. The ‘masses’, says Freud, ‘are lazy and unintelligent; they have no love for instinctual renunciation’ (1927: 7). James Strachey, Freud’s translator, who normally translated the German Masse as ‘Groups’, decided in this instance to keep the denigrating tone of the original. Individuals inside a determinate social class are also more or less developed. The figure of the intellectual, taken by Freud as the ideal example of that ‘minority’ which achieves ‘higher cultural aims’ (1908: 193) through sublimation, achieves the highest standards in civilization, and is therefore taken as the role model to which all other individuals should ideally adapt in order to build a more fulfilling society. Thus not only is Freud’s culture taken as a model for all others, his social role is ascribed as the goal towards which all people within his culture must aspire.
Each stage marks a new form of mastering of reality, a new mode of defence against nature, for this is the main task of civilization (1927: 15). The stages have not been arbitrarily chosen: those stages of civilization, says Freud, mirror the psychosexual stages of libidinal development. Where Spencer used the organic analogy, Freud makes use of what could be called the *libidinal analogy*. By comparing the psychological development of the individual – from auto-eroticism to the post-oedipal adult - to the evolution of civilization from state of nature to a rational civilization, it becomes possible for Freud to sketchily map the stages in individual and group psychology. One such example is found when he argues that ‘[r]eligion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father’ (1927: 43). He is here referring not to pathological obsession in adults, but to a hypothetical neurotic phase in normal development, which is spontaneously overcome in the course of development. That is, monotheistic religion indicates a particular stage in the development of civilization which, in the individual, happens at about the oedipal period. This is also the central point of Freud’s criticism of religion. In the same way that this infantile neurosis must be overcome on the individual level, it must also be surpassed at the social level. Humanity must reach maturity, and maturity entails replacing neurotic phantasies by secondary-process: ‘Those historical residues have helped us to view religious teachings, as it were, as neurotic relics, and we may now argue that the time has probably come, as it does in an analytic treatment, for replacing the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect’ (1927: 44).

Freud mainly pursued this line of thought in his writings of the 1910s’s whilst in active correspondence with the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi – *Totem and Taboo* from 1913 being perhaps the exemplary publication of that period. However, perhaps nowhere has Freud taken such speculative enterprise so far as in his ‘phylogenetic phantasy’, i.e., his unfinished and posthumously published metapsychological paper on the transference
neuroses, written in 1915 (Freud 1987). There – in particular in the second part – he attempts to trace parallels between three levels of evolution and regression: that of society according to the stages, that of libidinal development in the individual, and of regression in different types of psychopathology. If the evolution of the individual recapitulates the evolution of civilization, and psychopathology represents a psychic regression to some stage of development in the individual, Freud hypothesizes there that ‘it is legitimate to assume that the neuroses must also bear witness to the history of the mental development of mankind’ (ibid., 11). Here he even goes so far as to hypothesize that the disposition to hysteria and compulsion must present regressions to a stage of development that occurred during the Ice Age (ibid., 13).

This analogical mapping however was never carried through by Freud. He would get back to this project from time to time, but with less emphasis on completing the task as he became increasingly more aware that this was beyond his means. In Civilization and its Discontents, he seems to pass on the task to one of his readers, when he says that ‘It would be a tempting task for anyone who has a knowledge of human civilizations to follow out this analogy in detail’ (Freud 1930:140).

Progress and the ethics of psychoanalysis

This process of social evolution, according to Freud, happens at a cost: ‘the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt’ (1930: 135). For each new stage man enters, a toll must be paid in the form of instinctual repression. All those accumulated repressions, the base of our civilization, are still present and active in every individual, who resents them: ‘we have found to our surprise that these privations are still operative and still form the kernel of hostility to civilization’ (1927: 10).
The individual is therefore ambivalent in relation to civilization. He is at the same time its enemy and guardian, because although the end of civilization might bring him unrestrained pleasure, it would also signify the return of the tyrannical father: ‘and so in reality only one person could be made unrestrictedly happy by such a removal of the restrictions of civilization, and he would be a tyrant, a dictator, who had seized all the means to power [...] how ungrateful, how short-sighted after all, to strive for the abolition of civilization!’ (1927: 15).

Because Freud made conflict between the individual and society intrinsic to the human condition, the scholarly work on Freud has classically placed his social theories in a pessimistic tradition stemming from Schopenhauer. This, however, overlooks the evolutionary aspect of his work highlighted here. Unlike Schopenhauer, Freud’s pessimism does not translate into nihilism. Following from his linear understanding of social evolution, it is expected that in the last stage of development (scientific Weltanschauung), in a society where individuals are regulated solely by the reality principle, conflict between the individual and the social environment would cease. Not even the advent of the death drive in 1920 seems to have changed his belief that this would eventually happen: ‘the primacy of the intellect lies, it is true, in a distant, distant future, but probably not in an infinitely distant one’ (1927: 51).

It is possible in this sense to imagine a world in which civilization would produce little or no harm. The problem lay for Freud with our present constitution, i.e., the fact we are at the same time rational and irrational, social and narcissistic. Evolution would bring more adapted beings in the future, together with other forms of social organisation that would be more fulfilling for the individuals living in them. In this sense, if for Freud ethics represents the need for ‘delimiting the rights of society as against the individual, the rights of the individual as against society and those of individuals as against one another’ (1939: 121), it can be
argued that, for him – in a form that deeply resembles Spencer – evolution is itself an ethical process because nature itself has an ethical teleological goal.

Freud’s pessimism is therefore of a practical and not metaphysical nature. This point has been identified by Joshua Dienstag in his book tracing the philosophical tradition of pessimism. There, he says, ‘indeed, in repeatedly identifying the pleasure principle with infancy and animality, Freud means to encourage our efforts to replace it more fully with the reality principle. To accept the limitations of our time-bound conditions is for Freud the mark of emotional and intellectual maturity; to resist them is childish. Where Schopenhauer’s philosophy [...] teaches us to leave this world behind to the greatest extent possible, Freud’s psychotherapy attempts to give us the tools with which to engage it’ (Dienstag 2006:101). Our individual actions are effective and do have the power to produce a positive change in the world, or the idea of analysis itself would be vain.

It is interesting to note that, as was the case with Spencer, Freud placed the burden of social progress onto the individual rather than on mechanisms of social change. The latter should follow as a consequence of the former, not the other way around. This is shown with greater clarity in a paper by Richard Sterba, where he describes the discussions that took place in the Wednesday Group meetings at Freud’s house in Vienna, of which he was a participant. In one of these meetings, Wilhem Reich gave a passionate presentation of how some recent social experiments taking place in post-revolutionary Russia would – according to his theories – free mankind of neurotic suffering.\(^5\) Freud was extremely sceptical on this point.

\(^5\) As Sterba lets us know, the ‘experiment consisted of taking infants away from their families and of bringing them up in special centers, with the intention of preventing strong attachments to the parents, thus furthering the development of intensive group ties instead. Reich embraced this idea enthusiastically because, according to his theoretical model, he expected that the rearing of children without families would prevent the development of the oedipus complex with its concomitant defenses and inhibitions against free sexual expression and perfect genital gratification’ (pp. 180).
and, according to Sterba, this was one of the reasons that led Reich to break with the group (Sterba 1978).

Social change could in this sense only be achieved via the development of the individual, by helping them overcome their neuroses which are characteristic of this transitional stage between monotheism and the establishment of a scientific Weltanshauung. One should also not overlook the fact that Freud was a believer in Lamarckian use-inheritance (Sulloway 1979; Young 2006). In this sense, each individual achieving greater maturity meant a further step in the process of development of society as a whole. Psychoanalysis, in this sense, could be seen as constituting an ethical project, aimed at accomplishing progress in civilization, one individual at a time. In order to accomplish such task, Freud provided his readers not only with a framework to understand themselves and their personal development, but also with a technique with which to achieve the maturity required for progress. By technique is meant not just the process of analysis ‘on the couch’ itself but, above all, the tools for self-analysis presented in all clinical case materials and especially in the interpretation of dreams. With his dream book and case studies, Freud presented his readers with a manual on how to conduct a self-analysis (Forrester 2006, 2013), thus developing themselves, and society with them.

Conclusion:

As Taylor summarized in his recent book on Spencer:

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6 As mentioned before, Freud thought of this stage as equivalent in the individual to the overcoming of the Oedipus Complex. As would be familiar to psychoanalytic readers, Freud grew increasingly sceptical that the latter could be achieved. However, Freud seems to adopt a strategy here similar to that of Spencer, who in the Social Statics said that reaching perfect equilibrium would take infinite time, but allows for that state of homeostasis of the individual to the environment to become approximate to the ideal. In both authors thus, the absolute final stage might be out of reach, but one can approximate it nevertheless.
[T]he synthetic philosophy held two very different worldviews in an uneasy balance. One of these was positivism, the notion that the universe could only be explained by natural laws, and that there was a radical separation of fact and value. [...] At the same time, however, Spencer also made use of a normative concept of nature (he almost always spelled it with a capital letter) as not merely a physical order, but also a moral one. As such, his philosophy was implicitly, if not explicitly, founded on a rejection of the fact-value distinction that was central to the scientific positivist account of the universe (Taylor 2007:7–8).

This was so, it was argued, because of his teleological understanding of natural law. It was further argued here that Freud had a similar conception. Both authors should be seen as subscribing to a position we here called natural teleology.

Where Spencer based his organic analogy on cherry-picked elements of the sciences of his time, in order to validate the ideology embedded in his social theories, Freud relied instead in his metapsychology of drives and libidinal energy to provide a libidinal analogy. Drives are abstract elemental parts of human motivation, and therefore concepts belonging in principle to what the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars called the Scientific Image of Man (1963). In that image, man is seen as an object, composed of elementary parts (neurons, cells, and so on) that interact causally so as to construct who we are. This contrasts with the manifest image, where explanations are based on personal intentions, beliefs and desires. In the personal level, teleology and intentionality play a major role in explaining action. The best explanation for the action of a man drinking water is, along these lines, not mechanisms regulating homeostasis, but simply thirst – that is, his wish or desire for water.

As elementary parts of personhood, drives should be ascribed to the Scientific Image. Freud however let teleology creep into metapsychology. In Instincts and their Vicissitudes, he gave
us his classic description of drives, along with their four main features. Particular focus is given there to their aim: satisfaction (Freud 1915:121). If drives have aims, they exhibit teleology.

Drives being teleological, it is only natural that a social theory based on them would also exhibit that feature. This leads Freud to appeal to explanations of social phenomena which are very much in line with those defended by the doctor in Moliere. ‘Why war?’, Einstein asked Freud in their notorious letter exchange. ‘Because of the death drive’, that is, due to a faculty of aggression, is what Freud’s response essentially amounted to.

**Bibliography**


