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Michael S. Roth

Wesleyan University, mroth@wesleyan.edu

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Michael S. Roth

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Energizing the Elemental: Notes on a Conversation with Carl E. Schorske

In the late summer of 2011 I made my way down to southern New Jersey to spend some time with Carl and Elizabeth Schorske. I hadn't seen the Schorskies in some time, though we speak every so often by telephone. Given the occasion of this issue of *American Imago* in his honor, we were to talk about his early encounters with the work of Freud and psychoanalysis. These encounters took place during the Second World War, when Carl worked at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and in the 1950s, when he taught at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. Freud and psychoanalysis fell in and out of focus as our conversation meandered amongst the memories we have in common—especially with regard to Wesleyan, where I was his student (and am now the president). I began my historical studies with Carl there in 1976 and completed my Ph.D. under his guidance at Princeton seven years later. I first listened to Wagner and Mahler in his classes, and I still teach many of the books he assigned to me. I've written about his historiography and edited a collection of essays in his honor.¹ Having a conversation with Carl for *American Imago* was for me a real pleasure.

The last time we had discussed Freud and psychoanalysis in any depth was more than fifteen years ago when I was named the curator (at his suggestion, I think) of a Library of Congress exhibition on the subject.² But Freud has been there from the very beginning of our relationship. I was a freshman at Wesleyan and already interested in Freud when Carl returned to the university as a visiting professor. I talked my way into his seminar on Vienna. I was in way over my head, but I saw this as a great opportunity to do a research project on Freud. This intense interest in Freud was unusual for a frosh in the mid

My thanks to Louis Rose for asking me to be part of this issue of *American Imago*, and to Kari Weil and Charles Salas for the helpful comments on this essay.

1970s, but the professor's only objection was that my German was much too elementary to do serious work. I plunged ahead, challenged by the reservations of this much-admired historian.

My topic was the impact of the First World War on Freud's theory of the instincts, and I'll always remember the grilling I received in class. In the end, Professor Schorske expressed some admiration for my research and my arguments, but he told me that I had "an awkward, wooden style." The most important thing I could do, he emphasized, was to work on my writing. I didn't know what to make of this mixture of encouragement and criticism. It was only later as a graduate student that I came to realize how important it was for Schorske that historians learn to present their work in a mode that was in harmony with their subject matter. His own historiographical project, as I put it years later, was to develop a form of history writing that explored culture in crisis in a rhetorical form that reflexively illuminated and questioned its subject matter (Roth, 1995).

When I handed him my first paper on Freud, Schorske had been engaged for decades in rethinking the relationship of the instincts to struggles in the public sphere. "Instincts," though, is probably too narrow a term to describe Schorske's interest in the propulsion of the archaic, in how the distant past can be activated for political aesthetic and religious purposes in the present. As we sat in his living room, our conversation turned to some of his close friends who also tilled this soil, especially in the decade following the Second World War. The most famous of these, Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse, harvested the first crop of these efforts in the second half of the 1950s. Marcuse published *Eros and Civilization* in 1955, and Brown followed in 1959 with *Life Against Death*. Both books broke away from the American psychoanalytic community's accommodationist view of Freud as a thinker who could help one fit into the mainstream, and imagined him instead as a thinker whose insights into the unconscious could be wed to radical politics. Still, they were moving away, it seemed, from a direct engagement with the public sphere. As Schorske put it, they moved from "Promethean to Epimethean cultural heroes," from Marx to Freud (1980, p. xxiv).

Marcuse historicized Freud's theories of the instincts so as to conceptualize a society in which "surplus repression" could

be eliminated and Eros could find much fuller expression. Brown's Freud uncovered the contradictions—bodily, psychic and spiritual—that drove us further into senseless labor, dangerous aggression, and painful dissatisfaction. *Life Against Death* was a call away from the thin gratifications of contemporary social life and towards the ecstatic possibilities that were opened up by acknowledging the force of our desires. Both thinkers argued that only by liberating the erotic from the grips of an economy of repression could we begin to reduce the risks of violent self-destruction.

Brown, Marcuse, and Schorske were close friends, as I had discovered when I invited Marcuse to Wesleyan in 1977, some months after having made a pilgrimage to Santa Cruz to meet Brown. In my recent conversation with Schorske, he told me that the three had first met in the OSS, and it was probably in that context that their mutual explorations of Freud began. Schorske had been a graduate student of William Langer's at Harvard, and Langer's brother Walter was a psychoanalyst who had trained under Anna Freud and accompanied the family into exile. Head of the OSS William Donovan asked Walter Langer to produce a psychological profile of Hitler in 1943.³ Meanwhile, working in what Schorske recalls today as the 'morale unit' of the OSS, German émigrés and American intellectuals like himself were using psychoanalytic concepts to try to understand the social-psychological dynamics that made Nazism so attractive to so many Germans. After the war, many found standard historical interpretations inadequate because they neglected either the deep wounds of collective trauma or the vicissitudes of conflicting, hidden instincts.⁴ They turned to Freud for new ways to understand the dynamics of desire and the eruption of violence.

When he joined the OSS, Schorske had planned to write his Ph.D. dissertation on the origins of National Socialism. After the war, he would later write, he "could not bear to go back to that topic" (1998, p. 25). Instead, he turned his attention to German Social Democracy (Schorske, 1955). When I asked him recently whether this change of subject matter was because of the impact of the horrors of the war, Schorske shook his head. "It was just that the topic had come to seem unworkable, pretentious. I didn't have the right approach," he recalled.

Schorske also became involved briefly with the Council for Foreign Relations, writing a policy-oriented monograph that taught him only that this was not the genre of history in which he wanted to be working (Price & Schorske, 1947).

In our conversations about his first teaching post at Wesleyan and the intellectual camaraderie with Brown and Marcuse, another element kept coming up, and that was music. I'd known how deeply engaged with music Schorske had always been, but in our conversation I was struck by his emphasis on the link between music and other elemental cultural forms. Our talk turned to another Wesleyan colleague, David McAllester. McAllester was an avid researcher into diverse musical forms from around the world, with particular interests in Native American music. Schorske told me that McAllester had built a sort of compound—replete with wigwam, tepee and plenty of places to explore—in Monterey Massachusetts, a small town in the Berkshires. The Schorskes had spent some significant time there, and we all had a good laugh at the serendipity of my having recently bought a house within a few miles of the McAllester place. When we got back to talking about the study of Freud and culture in the fifties, Schorske also reminisced about a bicycle trip he and his wife Liz took through the Berkshires that led to the McAllester compound in Monterey. Our free-flowing conversation about Native American music, deep cultural forms, and concerts with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood was bound up with his recollections of how the intellectual pursuits of Brown and Marcuse were finding links between the instinctual and the adventurous. As Schorske spoke again about the importance of music, he reminded me of how John Cage entered the Wesleyan mix, and, along with Richard Winslow, Schorske and McAllester, wed the exploration of the deeply traditional with the most experimental. Freudian paths to the dynamics of culture were just some of the trails on which Schorske and his friends were traveling.

As we talked about this absorbing mix of heady cultural exploration, I found myself recalling Schorske's 1967 essay on William Morris and Richard Wagner, two very different 19th-century figures each of whom sought to energize the archaic in the service of path breaking artistic production and political

rebellion.⁵ Both of them saw how in particular cultural contexts myth could become the energized archaic. For Wagner this would eventually lead away from politics, whereas for Morris it led to renewed political engagement. Freud, too, was energized by the archaic, even as he diagnosed the perils of succumbing to its attractions. One way of understanding his break with Jung is in regard to the Swiss psychiatrist's total embrace of myth's potency. For Freud, that potency was never purely positive.

Schorske has been intensely interested in Freud's changing relationship with the archaic in particular and with the past in general. In Freud's younger years, Schorske wrote, historical understanding was ascendant in his thinking, but as he developed psychoanalysis as a universal doctrine based on ahistorical notions of the structure of the psyche, Freud left history behind. "Clio was in eclipse in psychoanalysis," Schorske wrote, "but she had not vanished from Freud's mental life" (1998, p. 14). In his last major project Freud would depart from his anti-historical modernist psychologism in order to come to terms with the triumph of National Socialism. With *Moses and Monotheism*, Schorske wrote, "Freud not only resumed thinking with history, but became a historicist himself" (p. 15). He did so under the pressure of events, giving the Jews a heroic, if fraught, role as the protectors of *Geistigkeit*, a term that combines spirituality and intellectuality:

Thanks to their intellectual and ethical strength, the Jews as *Kulturvolk* (cultural people) par excellence would always be attacked whenever repressed instinct broke loose in civilized society; thanks to the same masculine virtues, they would have the power to endure in adversity.⁶

This "power to endure," according to Schorske, came at the cost of repressing *Sinnlichkeit*, the realm of the senses.

The experience of the Second World War and the confrontation with Nazism's particular mobilization of the archaic on behalf of violence and control was crucial for Schorske and his intellectual cohort in the 1950s. Could they re-imagine a connection to the deep past that would be in the service of life, of music, of Eros? In the introduction to his *Vienna* book, and

throughout *Thinking With History*, Schorske reminds his readers that this effort at “re-imagination” was undertaken “under the pressure of new, uncongenial turns in the world of politics” (1980, p. xxiv). The turn to the psychological was part of an effort to understand why the world of politics had turned out so wrong, and why the political dreams of deep-seated change had run aground so badly. Political disappointment in late 19th-century Vienna and in mid 20th-century America was Schorske’s context for understanding the modernism’s retreat from the historical. In writing about Vienna’s past, he was also engaging with the decline of the public sphere in his own present.

Schorske published “Politics and Patricide in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*” in the *American Historical Review* in 1973, around the time that he was leaving the University of California at Berkeley for the calmer environs of Princeton University. He would later comment that he made the move to “save, if possible, my scholarly work” (1998, p. 33). Having spent the decade of the sixties in Berkeley, Schorske acutely felt the tension between scholarly work and activism, between intellection and action. I remember well his stories about teaching during the student strikes. He felt it was crucial to keep the class going, but he respected the strike by moving the venue for the course off campus. His passion, political and scholarly, was expressed in teaching, and so he continued to meet his students. In an article in *Time* magazine in 1966 on America’s best professors, Schorske is portrayed as pulling his intellectual passions together in his lectures:

The humanist must be involved in studies that are “really relevant to where the action is,” Schorske holds, and research cannot be separated from teaching. “If I lecture on social democracy,” he explains, “well, that’s a subject I have finished with. I’ve written my book. It’s out of my system. But if I lecture on 20th century culture, my work now; I really cook with gas—this is what I am still involved with intellectually (*Time*, 1966, May 6).

The cooking of intellectuals was certainly on a high flame in Berkeley in those days, and as an assistant to the Chancellor

for faculty development, Schorske was feeling the heat. In our recent conversation, Schorske stressed that activism was always a powerful current in his life, that it was “mother’s milk” in the family (though passed down from his father’s side, he said with a laugh). At Berkeley, his activism was energized, and teaching itself had a political frame. Here is Schorske again in the *Time* magazine article:

A lecture is only a demonstration of “how a person thinks about a problem,” says Schorske, and the lecturer should always assume the student is “informed, intelligent, and committed. You then talk to him as a peer—as your companion in learning—and he begins to behave like one.” Schorske does not, however, believe in “being buddy-buddy, or in a libidinous relationship such as they have at Sarah Lawrence.” The teacher should be neither “lofty nor authoritarian,” but his enthusiasm for communicating a subject should command “a natural respect” (1966, May 6).⁷

Looking back those almost fifty years, Schorske emphasized to me that, “I certainly felt myself a scholar in Berkeley, but also an activist whose activism was connected to the scholarship I was doing.”

Schorske’s “Politics and Patricide” essay is a bridge between his Berkeley and Princeton years. He published it in 1973, and he had already given a version of it at the American Psychoanalytic Society meetings in 1971. The argument is that Freud abandoned politics and developed psychoanalysis as a counter-political mode of thinking because of his frustrations with the public sphere. In the final sentence of the essay, Schorske concludes: “Freud gave his fellow liberals an a-historical theory of man and society that could make bearable a political world spun out of orbit and beyond control” (1980, p. 203).

With his conclusion, Schorske re-inscribed Freud’s ahistorical theory into the warp and woof of temporal connection—historicizing his subject’s anti-historicism. In order to do so, it seems, Schorske himself had to get out of the hotbed of campus activism to the calmer environs of Princeton. The action was in

Berkeley, but Schorske moved to Princeton to recalibrate the mix of intellection and activism in his own life. At Berkeley, he told me, campus activism had made it difficult to maintain his commitment to scholarship. At Princeton, he would have the time to finish his *Vienna* book while still maintaining his intense engagement with students through lectures and seminars. Perhaps Schorske had his own itinerary in mind when near the close of “Politics and Patricide” he quoted Freud: “One must look somewhere for one’s salvation, and the salvation I chose was the title of professor” (p. 203).⁸

However, unlike Freud in his portrait of the Jews as the defenders of *Geistigkeit*, Schorske continued to make a place for the realm of the senses, for *Sinnlichkeit*. In the intensely experimental intellectual community of Wesleyan in the 1950s, the hothouse of political passions of Berkeley in the 1960s, or the more measured scholarly interdisciplinarity of the Seventies and Eighties in Princeton, music remained an elemental part of Schorske’s life and work. He continued to play in string quartets with friends, and in recent years, he told me, his singing voice had returned. He took pleasure in showing me a program of lieder that he had recently performed with some neighbors in his retirement community. As I persisted in asking about the importance of Freud in his life and work, about the friendly, collaborative exploration of the psychological that he began in the 1950s with Marcuse and Brown, my teacher kept reminding me about the centrality of music to his understanding of culture. If you cannot shake the higher powers, to recall Freud’s quotation of Virgil in the epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, you may stir up the depths. Music was always a route to those depths for Schorske.

And teaching seemed to be an arena in which Schorske balanced *Geistigkeit* and *Sinnlichkeit*, ideas and aesthetics, intellection and action. I remember well the “optional evening class” on Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* when I felt myself opening to an experience of music that was totally new to me. The connections to politics, psychology and culture only added to the powerful aesthetic pleasure of the encounter. There was nothing passive or counter-political in this teaching. The “natural respect” that Schorske generated from students and colleagues, the affec-

tion that was perfectly compatible with criticism, provided a political education by example. The solidarity in inquiry and the shared experience of the power of the arts—these were great gifts to his students, especially those of us who went on to be teachers ourselves.

Those of us fortunate enough to study with Schorske at Wesleyan, Berkeley or Princeton, experienced his “cooking with gas,” his extraordinarily energetic balance of the scholar and teacher, the intellectual and the activist. Whether it was in the 19th-century intellectual history survey course, or in smaller seminars dealing with architecture, archaism or the arts, the passion he brought to the material ignited the interests and imaginations of his students. These were often moments of political engagement, but they were always mediated through a care for and attention to the texture and meaning of historical material. Under his guidance, history wasn’t just an inert substance waiting for students to get interested in it. We learned from Carl Schorske how to ignite the past in order to create meaning for the present.

Notes

1. See Roth (1994).
2. See Roth (1998).
3. Walter Langer would publish this study in 1972 as *The Mind of Adolf Hitler: The Secret Wartime Report*.
4. In his introduction to *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, Schorske mentions William Langer and Lionel Trilling, as well as Marcuse and Brown, in regard to the growing American interest in Freud (p. xxiv). Trilling had been Schorske’s undergraduate instructor at Columbia University.
5. See “The Quest for the Grail: Wagner and Morris” in Schorske (1998), pp. 90-104. Schorske published the essay originally in *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse*, edited by Kurt H. Wolff and Barrington Moore, Jr. (1967).
6. See “To The Egyptian Dig: Freud’s Psycho-Archeology of Cultures” in Schorske (1998), p. 209.
7. In the subsequent week’s issue of *Time* (1966, May 13), Schorske explained that he hadn’t meant to offend those at Sarah Lawrence: “I was discussing not sex mores, but teaching ethos. I expressed my belief that it is better for teaching to be problem-centered than, as at Sarah Lawrence, person-centered, and that the basic tie between teacher and student should therefore be intellectual, not libidinal. The discussion focused on how to encourage the love of learning, not on the learning of love. Sarah Lawrence, please excuse!”
8. Schorske quotes from Freud’s letter to Wilhelm Fliess of March 11, 1902.

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