

DONALD TRUMP'S AUTOCRATIC ROOTS

According to Alex Ross in "The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming" (*The New Yorker* on-line edition, Dec. 5, 2016) during the 1950s an intellectual enclave existed in Frankfurt Germany that constructed a psychological and sociological profile of the authoritarian personality. Influenced by their own national experiences, these scholars suggested that the mass media poses particular danger to democracy by blurring the line between truth and fiction, making the public susceptible to psychological manipulation, political conformity and "mass hypnosis. According to the work of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno:

Lies have long legs: they are ahead of their time. The conversion of all questions of truth into questions of power, a process that truth itself cannot escape if it is not to be annihilated by power, not only suppresses truth as in earlier despotic orders, but has attacked the very heart of the distinction between true and false, which the hirelings of logic were in any case diligently working to abolish. So Hitler, of whom no one can say whether he died or escaped, survives.

The roots of psychological manipulation and surrender of intellectual freedom were deep, perhaps not as much in Frankfurt during the 1950s as in Leipzig a century earlier. Have you ever heard of William Wundt? As described by Paolo Lionni, in his slender book *The Leipzig Connection. The Systematic Destruction of American Education* (1980) Wundt's ideas were responsible for a profound transformation in American education that ultimately effected both the national psyche and its concept of ethics.

Wilhelm Wundt (1832 - 1920) received a medical degree in Heidelberg in 1856 and stayed on there as a professor of psychology for seventeen years before accepting a position at the University of Leipzig where he remained for the remainder of his long and prolific academic career. Wundt is acknowledged as the founder of experimental psychology that was disseminated throughout the western world - and it should be noted that he worked at a time when Germany was the center of civilization; its scientific and technological advances unsurpassed.

At Leipzig Wilhelm Wundt set up the world's first psychological laboratory in a conscious attempt to "mark out a new domain of science." His approach was to gather data to support his assertion that man is devoid of spirit and self determination but is the summation of his experiences. If there is nothing to begin with except a brain and a nervous system, this raw physiological material can be conditioned (educated) by experiences to make the "correct" response - this preceded Pavlov who studied physiology in Leipzig five years after Wundt established his laboratory there. In effect, man is but a stimulus-response animal.

During the 1880s and 90s Leipzig became the Mecca of students who wished to study the "new" psychology - no longer merely speculative theory but, as described by Lionni, "a novel, daring, exciting way of studying mental processes by experimental and quantitative methods as with other sciences." Wundt's students carried forward his idea that man must adapt to his environment instead of adapting the environment to suit his ethical needs and those of society. The product of such education would be "well-adjusted" (conditioned) children and soon these ideas were imported into the American educational system. (However, it was contrary to the work of Maria Montessori which emphasized individuality.)

Although personally Wundt was not charismatic and no single brilliant contribution can be attributed to him, he was authoritative and patriarchal - as one historian said, "almost toward the papal." His influence and prestige were unparalleled and because some of his words could have been interpreted as being anti-Semitic or racist he has been accused, probably incorrectly, as being a proto-Nazi. If not that, his concept of Folk (*Volk*) Psychology was used by latter day American eugenists to justify public policy based on the public good rather than on individual rights.

Wundt's first American student G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924) became the first president of Clark University, the first president of the American Psychological Association and a leading authority on child psychology. He envisioned a totalitarian state led by a class of super-leaders and argued that America had to tighten-up and discipline itself. Every

institution - church, state, literature, science - needed to be restructured in order to serve the collective good. This could be achieved by selective breeding, “genetic psychology” and reform of the educational system. Physically or intellectually inferior youth should not be educated at all, girls belonged in the home not the work place and male adolescents in their formative years should be taught to follow commands. “The nation that breeds best will rule the world...a pound of heredity is worth a hundred-fold weight of education.”

In 1909 President Hall organized a four day conference on “Liberal Education” at Clark University to celebrate the school’s 20th anniversary. It was attended by twenty-seven of the world’s leading social scientists including Sigmund Freud (on his only visit to America), Carl Jung, Abraham Brill, William James and Adolf Meyer. In his five lectures there Freud called for greater sexual freedom but he suspected that American prudishness would curtail the reception of his ideas. Before they departed Europe, he wrote to Jung that once the Americans “discover the sexual core of our psychological theories they will drop us.”

Freud didn’t enjoy his three week stay in America. He disliked not being understood when he spoke in German and resented the lack of Old World manners. He didn’t tolerate the rich food which caused his “colitis” to flare and a prostate condition caused an embarrassing public episode of urine incontinence. Years later, after World War I, Freud wrote, “Is it not sad that we are materially dependent on these savages who are not a better class of human beings?...This race is destined to extinction.” (For more on this read “When Freud Visited New York City - And Wet His Pants” on my website, michaelnevinsmd.com).

Another scholar who was indirectly influenced by Wundt was John Dewey, sometimes considered to be the “Father of American Education.” In 1884 he spent a year studying for his doctorate with G. Stanley Hall at Johns Hopkins. To Dewey, as to Wundt, man is an animal entirely dependent on his experiences. The purpose of education is to teach students to adapt to the specific behavior required in order to conform in his group, instead of

learning how to ethically adapt the environment to suit his needs and those of society.

And finally, here's a Trumpian footnote: It took huge amounts of money to turn American education around and most of this depended on private philanthropy. Perhaps the most generous donor of all was John D. Rockefeller who at age 41 remarked, "I have ways of making money you know nothing of." Later he attributed his powers to a divine gift:

I believe that the power to make money is a gift from God - just as are the instincts for art, music, literature, the doctor's talent, yours - to be developed and used to the best of our ability for the good of mankind. Having been endowed with the gift I possess, I believe it is my duty to make money and still more money and use the money I make for the good of my fellow-man according to the dictates of my conscience.

Of course concepts of altruism and social conscience and references to culture are not evident features of our current real estate mogul's psyche, but to explore that would require deep analysis. Nevertheless, this look back on history seems relevant to our current situation for, as Santayana's famous epigram suggested, "He who fails to learn from history is destined to repeat it."

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Much of this material was adapted from Paolo Lionni's *The Leipzig Connection* (1980).