

Why War? And Other Burning Questions: An Invitation to Psychohistory

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of the field of psychohistory, with an emphasis on deMAUSE's psychogenic theory. It includes an introduction, a discussion of origins, methods—particularly the trauma model, resources, and contact information.

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1. Introduction

Have you ever wondered why wars are fought? Have you ever pondered humankind's inhumanities to itself? Have you ever been dissatisfied with answers to historical and metahistorical questions? [1]

I shall borrow an analogy from the writings of SCHOPENHAUER (1976, p.549) about two Chinese travelers who attended a play while traveling in Europe. They did not speak the language of the play, but desired to understand what they could of the experience. The first traveler contented himself with an examination of all of the stage equipment; the second tried to get at the meaning of the play. Employing my own particulars as to what these travelers represent, I should liken the first to the traditional historian, and the second to the psychohistorian. If the task of the latter seems too daunting, bear in mind that he can analyze non-verbal data and may not be too handicapped by not having a literal understanding of the play. However, I do not wish to press the analogy too far. [2]

Suffice it to say that the conventional historian has paid little attention to psychology and to the irrational nature of human behavior, while the psychohistorian seeks the emotional motives behind human actions. Where the conventional approach is not merely narrative, it has left implicit psychological motives which upon examination usually prove banal. For example, people fight wars because man is aggressive—that is, has a propensity to fight—or people accumulate wealth because they are acquisitive, or horde things because they are covetous. The psychology in traditional historiography, where it is not merely this kind of self-referring, usually comes down to the theory that people act in

their "rational self-interests." This is a tenuous assumption which does not hold up to scrutiny—as acknowledged by the old adage that nobody wins in war. Yet we are ever in search of them! [3]

Psychohistory provides a fresh perspective on these and many other issues. Psychohistory is a new social science and the only one to be founded in the Twentieth Century. It explores the hidden motives behind historical events, the irrational in history, the history of childhood, and sheds new light on the other social sciences. Psychohistory continues to explore the origins of war and holocausts, of political and economic cycles, and the history of childhood and of childhood trauma. It also explores the group fantasy content in art, movies, and media. [4]

Psychohistory demands a rethinking of much of our established ideas. The "discovery" of the prevalence of childhood trauma in all ages and places sheds new light on anthropology, archeology, history, sociology, economics, psychology and all fields concerned with human behavior. If you are interested in why we can't stand prosperity, or why we conduct purity crusades, or why we sacrifice countless youth in wars; you'll be interested in psychohistory. [5]

2. Origins

Henry LAWTON wrote of the origins of psychohistory:

"Psychohistory can trace its antecedents as far back as Vico and Dilthey. Our prehistory extends back to those early workers, principally in the psychoanalytic movement, who, over the years, advanced applied psychoanalysis to the point where it could begin to become psychohistory. Usually, we date our formal emergence as a field from the late 1950's with the publication of Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1958), Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959), and William Langer's famous 'Next Assignment' speech to the American Historical Association in 1957. Over the next 10-12 years there was an increasing proliferation of work in psychohistory. Pioneers such as Bruce Mazlish, Erik Erikson, Lloyd deMause, Rudolph Binion, David Beisel, Charles Strozier, and Robert Jay Lifton either began or extended their psychohistorical works." (1988, p.7). [6]

3. Trauma Theory

"Psychohistory," wrote Lloyd deMAUSE, "is the study of historical motivation—no more, no less" (1982, p.i). The tools which have proved most fruitful in uncovering these motives are an array of post-psychoanalytic concepts and the student of psychohistory would do well to be acquainted with some of the basic concepts of psychoanalysis. I use the term "post- psychoanalytic" to bring attention to a paradigm shift, which is occurring in psychoanalysis, from drive theory to trauma theory. [7]

To appreciate the significance of this shift, consider a simple question: Are the ways in which peoples rear their children pertinent to an understanding of history?

I shall put this question more fully: Does it make a difference in the character of individuals, their societies, and the interactions between their societies, whether or not as children they saw their siblings killed, or they were abandoned by their parents, or objectified, or neglected, or nurtured? It seems strange that this question should be answered in the negative—that child rearing should be considered irrelevant to cultural evolution or history. However, we must bear in mind that it was not until the middle of this century that we acquired the tools for, and were able to begin the process of, looking candidly at childhood. Even drive theory, by positing essentially innate conflicts which do not derive from the child's environment, did not fully appreciate the relevance of child rearing. [8]

"The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken," wrote Lloyd deMAUSE (1974, p.1). In the psychogenic theory of history, the kinds of trauma inflicted upon infants and children are central determinants in the evolution of human culture. Lloyd deMAUSE delineates six historical modes of childrearing (<http://members.xoom.com/childhistory/psychgen.htm>, Broken Link, FQS, October 10, 2001] which largely determine what kinds of group fantasies and what kinds of restaging of childhood trauma will be prevalent in a society. Fetal traumas are also crucial determinants. [9]

4. Further Methodology

Besides trauma theory and the tools of psychoanalysis applied to groups, psychohistorians also employ, inter alia, family systems theory, the study of group processes, neuro-biology, and fetal psychology. Using these tools, history and current events are examined through diaries, photographs, cartoons, art, biographies, and other materials. At times psychohistory overlaps anthropology, sociology, and political science, but views this material from a unique perspective. [10]

As an illustration of the psychohistorical approach, consider xenophobia and scapegoating. People who have been reared abusively, develop a self-loathing. [11]

As adults, they "split-off" their victimized self and look for groups onto which they can project their feelings of shame and unworthiness. They may select a minority, such as "dirty foreigners," whom they then denigrate and abuse, thus reenacting their past traumas from the point of view of the aggressor. The group fantasy of foreigners "polluting our environment" is a restaging of the experience of toxins in the placental environment—the poisonous placenta. The fetal experience is also responsible for political cycles which deMAUSE divides into stages which reenact fetal experience. The psychogenic theory of history posits an evolution in the direction of greater human compassion because of improvements in child rearing. The evolutionary trend in parenting has been from parenting which uses the child to serve the parents (unconscious) needs, to parenting which serves the child's needs. [12]

5. Resources

The best places to begin exploring the psychogenic theory of history are Foundations of Psychohistory (Lloyd deMAUSE, 1982), and The History of Childhood (Lloyd deMAUSE, 1974). Scholarly articles on sundry subjects of psychohistorical interest by scholars from many disciplines are published in the quarterly "The Journal of Psychohistory". Issues of The Journal of Psychohistory have been devoted to such topics as: The History of Child Abuse, Female Genital Mutilation, Japanese Group Fantasies, Human Sacrifice: Yesterday and Today, Backlash Against Psychotherapy, Childhood Punishment and Political Attitudes, Psychopathology of Nations, and The History of Sexuality. [13]

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The International Psychohistorical Association publishes a newsletter and holds an annual conference at which distinguished scholars present papers on psychohistorically relevant topics. Past presenters include Alice MILLER and Arno GRUEN. For more information, articles, and links about psychohistory, visit the [website](#). [15]

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