Personality and Ideology

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Personality and Ideology

Towards a Materialist Understanding of the Individual

Peter Leonard

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MACMILLAN

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This book is for **Lynne** with my love

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Preface

The origins of this book could be traced to a time, nearly twenty-five years ago, when, like most social workers, I lived in a professional culture dominated by social reformism and Freudian theory. It was after an education in sociology and social administration that I gained my introduction to psychoanalytic theory and the practice of psychiatric casework. Some time later I contributed to the teaching of subjects called 'Human Growth and Development' and 'Social Influences on Behaviour', subjects which were based on a psychoanalytic conception of the human life cycle injected with a mild dose of structural-functional sociology.

All of this took place before I became disillusioned with the social reformism which was the explicit political culture in which I had worked. As I gradually became committed to Marxism as a politics, a theory and a method of historical analysis, I re-evaluated all my previous intellectual allegiances. Apart from rejecting much of the mainstream sociology and social administration of which I had previously been part, I felt impelled to turn aside from the psychoanalytic-based insights and skills which I had developed over many years of professional practice. I wished to avoid the reductionism and liberal pessimism with which such insights and skills were often associated.

In more recent years, partly under the strong impact of feminism, I have been forced, like many others, to return to Freud once more. Despite its obvious limitations as a view of human beings and the reactionary purposes to which it has often been put, perhaps it still has, I thought, some possibilities when it is interrogated from the perspectives of Marxism and feminism. At the same time, I have been introduced to the

beginnings of a theory of the individual in Marx's work, and to the potentials which lie in symbolic interactionism, first revealed to me as a possibly progressive approach at the National Deviancy Conferences of the early 1970s. It is from immersion in this heady mixture of frequently conflicting approaches to the individual that this book breaks to the surface.

Apart from the more obvious theoretical and technical problems posed by writing this book comes a specifically political one. A book which attempts to give some account of the material existence and psychological experiences of others, even at a very general level and from what attempts to be a socialist perspective, runs the danger of appearing both to *psychologise* their situations and *appropriate* their experiences for purposes outside their particular interests. Feminists have rightly resisted the attempts of men to colonise their work, from a similar standpoint to that of people with disabilities who are beginning to resist the definitions of their situation produced by able-bodied 'experts'. I hope that in this book I have been able to avoid these particular dangers: the reader must judge.

As this book represents, for me, a settling of accounts with my professional and academic past, attempting to acknowledge all the influences on my writing would be a major task. Instead, I shall mention just one name from over twenty years ago – Donald Winnicott, paediatrician and psychoanalyst, who taught me how a theory could be integrated into a practice that was supremely sensitive, imaginative and reflective. More recently influential was the impact on me of the students who participated in my postgraduate seminars on Marxism and psychoanalysis and on personality development and social structure at Warwick University. My colleagues in the Department of Applied Social Studies have been immensely encouraging in their support, Lena Dominelli, Eileen McLeod and Janet Read in particular contributing helpful criticisms of drafts of the book. A former fellow-student of many years ago, like me exposed then to a powerful psychoanalytic influence, Elizabeth Wilson, also provided me with valuable comments. My special thanks must go to Janet Sayer of the University of Kent and Mike Seltzer of Norges Kommunal-Og Sosialhøgskole, Oslo, for their unstinting and detailed criti-

cisms and comments on the book, a combination of scholarship and commitment which I found inspiring. Without Lydia Thorpe, who so faultlessly typed from the handwritten manuscript, my task would have been much harder. Finally, I must express my appreciation to my wife, Lynne, for providing so much encouragement and support, especially during the final weeks of rewriting when we were not sure which would be produced first, the book or our second child.

University of Warwick
September 1983

Peter Leonard