



## MEDIA

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# Reassessing Freud's legacy

**T**HE month of May saw the 150th anniversary of Sigmund Freud's birth. This brought with it a wealth of media interest, with the man, his work and his legacy all being variously celebrated, debated and scorned.

Paul Broks, writing in *The Guardian*, commented that the language of Freud's work is firmly established in our discourse like that of no other writer since Shakespeare. The core ideas of his theories have become deeply enmeshed in our everyday life: 'Accounting for human behaviour in terms of unconscious thoughts and hidden motivations has become commonplace. We all know about wishful thinking, about denial and defence mechanisms, repression, narcissism, Freudian slips and the anal personality. We all scrape at surface reality for signs of deeper meaning.' Indeed, his work has

had such wide-ranging impact on Western society that for every discussion about his theories on neurosis, narcissism or Oedipus complexes there's a Woody Allen clip, a Seinfeld rant or a memorable Freudian slip of the tongue that springs to mind. W.H. Auden wrote about the magnitude of Freud's legacy after his death in 1939, saying that Freud had already become 'no more a person now, but a whole climate of opinion'.

Broks suggested that as well as being the father of psychoanalysis, Freud might also be considered one of the founders of neuropsychology, and that if he were working today he would doubtless be at the helm of an MRI scanner pursuing a career in cognitive neuroscience. Broks proposed that with modern neuropsychology providing compelling work on unconscious mental processing, neuroscience could learn from Freud's curiosity about the nature of human personality and selfhood, stating: 'We may know a good deal about specific domains of psychological function: about how the brain processes sensory information, how it organises language and memory, how it solves problems and guides behaviour. But we still have scant knowledge about how such processes give rise to a coherent sense of self, and that this is the greatest scientific and philosophical riddle of all.'

Max Pemberton, in the *Daily Telegraph*, pointed out just how radical Freud's ideas

were at the time they were published. That physical symptoms could be attributed to psychological disturbances caused by past events, or that childhood experiences were instrumental in influencing relationships and our determining psychological health, were truly revolutionary ideas. 'Freud opened our eyes to the complexities of the human mind. Thanks to him the notion of a mind without an unconscious level is unthinkable now, without Freud we would not be the people we think we are now.'

Will Hutton, writing in *The Observer* proposed that Freud is deserving of a place alongside Einstein, Newton, Darwin and Kant as one of the authors of modernity. He suggested that 'there would have been no sexual revolution without his insistence that the repression of our deepest primal urges can be profoundly costly'. Hutton also commented that Freud's work had taken cultural and intellectual hits from not being a quick-fix therapy in a quick-fix world, and that Freud 'believed that anything worthwhile and creative took time, effort and work – and nothing was more creative than reconciling and articulating the conflicts in one's head'.

However, within this atmosphere of celebration there was also an air of caution about buying wholesale into Freudian mythology. Many of his theories were derided for being fanciful and steeped in misogynistic language, such as his theories regarding female sexuality (penis envy, the inferiority of the clitoral orgasm). Indeed, Christina Patterson writing in *The Independent* suggested that even though Freud's work is shot through with real insight into human nature, Freud was unable to organise these insights systematically: 'Instead he relied on the aura and authority of scientific rationalism in order to create around him a "church" whose doctrine sought to subvert the very rationalism they invoked.'

Freud died at the age of 83. His love of cigars was his undoing. He continued to smoke even after a malignant cancer meant his lower jaw had to be removed – a macabre example of his own theory of oral fixation.

Jeremy Horwood

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