

## The Political Mind: A Deeper Cut | Michael Rustin

### 6 Seminar Series

Each of the six seminars in this series will examine the work of specific psychoanalytic social critics, outlining some of the principal arguments they set out, and showing how they are grounded in fundamental psychoanalytic ideas. The writings to be discussed are by Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Juliet Mitchell, Franz Fanon, and Slavoj Žižek. Each seminar will be introduced with a presentation of 45 minutes, with the remaining 45 minutes devoted to discussion. A core reading will be suggested for each seminar, and a fuller background reading list provided.

#### **Seminar 1 | Theodor Adorno and Totalitarianism.**

Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), a leading member of the Frankfurt School of Social Research, was one of the most fundamental critics of the late capitalist order, and its totalitarian development. Freud and psychoanalysis were one of the intellectual resources on which he drew in developing his critique. His (1951) essay "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" is one of the best psychoanalytic political analyses ever written. Adorno's larger project, especially in his writings about culture, music and art was to explore the conditions for authenticity in human experience, and the many sources of its negation. He viewed psychoanalysis ambivalently, as both having the potential to achieve a truthful relation to experience but as sometimes becoming a mere instrument of conformity. In this presentation, I will seek to clarify some of Adorno's crucial arguments.

#### **Seminar 2 | Herbert Marcuse and Consumer Capitalism.**

Marcuse 1898-1979 was a Frankfurt School contemporary of Adorno, who wrote his most influential work after he had migrated to California. Where Freud had theorised the influence of unconscious repression on social life, Marcuse was to recognize the consequences of the lifting of repression in post-war consumer societies, of which California was a leading example. For Marcuse, this was far from a scene of unqualified liberation. Marcuse was a leading theorist of the critique of consumer society in the late 1960s - he was one of the speakers at the Dialectics of Liberation Conference at the Round House in London in 1968. This seminar will examine Marcuse's psychoanalytically-informed critique of consumer capitalism.

#### **Seminar 3 | Juliet Mitchell and Psychoanalytic Feminism.**

In 1974, before she became a psychoanalyst, Mitchell published *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, which became one of the central texts of the feminist movement. This book examined the unconscious foundations of gendered social relations, locating these in the early Oedipal situation, and the

unconscious identifications to which this gave rise. Its implication was that patriarchy and gender inequality were inescapable consequences of the institution of the bourgeois family, and its proposal was for its overthrow. (Mitchell has subsequently written substantially about the omission of sibling relationships from psychoanalytic theory.) Some psychoanalytic feminists after Mitchell, such as Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein, recognised the force of Mitchell's explanatory theory, but proposed less radical pathways to gender equality. This seminar will examine the place of psychoanalytic theory in addressing these issues.

#### **Seminar 4 | Franz Fanon, Race and Racism.**

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), is perhaps the most influential analysis of racism and its psychological consequences written from a psychoanalytic perspective. It draws on the philosophy of Hegel and Sartre, as well as the psychoanalytic ideas of Freud and Lacan, to understand the damage to the identity of black subjects which is the consequence of the "white gaze", or of the misrecognition of people of colour. Fanon was a psychiatrist from Martinique, whose argument was founded in his account of his own traumatizing experience of going to live and work in France. This seminar will critically examine Fanon's thesis, and its psychoanalytical presuppositions.

#### **Seminar 5 | Slavoj Žižek.**

Žižek is one of the most widely read of contemporary psychoanalytic social and cultural critics, whose work brings together the perspectives of Hegel, Marx and Lacan. Lacan's distinctions between the orders of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real are central to Žižek's accounts of how the dominant capitalist order imposes its deceptions and falsehoods on its subjects. One of the most interesting features of his work is his deconstruction of the misrepresentations of liberalism, in its different forms of fantasy and ideology. The revolutionary politics sometimes advocated by Žižek arise from his insistence on recognizing and confronting what he regards as the "real" or essence of capitalist society. The implications of this view of political action will be reflected on this seminar.

#### **Seminar 6 | The Tavistock Tradition and the British School.**

From the 1940's onwards, social scientists and psychoanalysts at the Tavistock Institute developed their own programme for the development of social institutions, drawing on psychoanalytic ideas to do so. Their approach was developed through many different inquiries and interventions. Among these were the arguments for democratic work organization, set out by Eric Trist and his colleagues; the invention of the "therapeutic community", one of whose first milestones was Bion's Northfield Experiment in the British Army; and the understanding and critique of social defences against anxiety, in Menzies Lyth's and Elliott Jaques' work. Although these perspectives drew on the ideas of Freud (e.g. the struggle between the life and death instincts, the role of the superego) and Klein (the pervasive role of unconscious phantasy and the difference between paranoid-schizoid and depressive anxiety), it is Bion's theory of thinking that provides a unifying theoretical perspective. Its central assertion is that the capacity for thought is the outcome of relational preconditions, at each stage of the life-cycle, and in all social institutions. The problem to ensure that these relational pre-conditions are sustained, against all the pressures which undermine and pervert them. The final seminar in this series will aim to set out core elements of a "Tavistock" social programme.