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Shrinking History: On Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory by David E. Stannard

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A sure sign that a book is making some kind of impression is the number of reviews it receives. Shrinking History has received more than its share, and not without reason. Few books in recent years have made a more convincing case (if you accept it) for the abandonment of a major, though relatively new, historical methodology. Because so much time has passed since this book’s publication, it seems that a review of the most useful reviews is in order.

Publication notices found inside and on the back cover of the paperback edition would lead one to believe that all reviewers are agreed on the unqualified virtues of Shrinking History. But as usual, these selections are misleading. Reviewers do, however, agree on one major point, that Shrinking History is a “cogent critique of the present state of the newly developed field of psychohistory.”¹ What cogent implies is another matter. To those critics who had rejected psychohistory before reading this book, it is the death knell for a floundering field. To those who believe that psychohistory is a worthy new means of discerning the past, Shrinking History is little more than a clever polemic. Few reviewers, however, have been able to discount its contents and arguments without careful consideration of Stannard’s major points.

What are his major points and what, briefly, is the controlling idea of the book? “The central point of his thesis is,” according to critic Irving E. Alexander, “that much of the work in psychohistory uncritically and mistakenly utilizes the tenets of psychoanalysis as explanatory principles. The exposition then unfolds in five polemical chapters exposing the weaknesses of Freud’s theory, followed by a chapter essentially restating the case.”²

²Ibid.
I have observed that a reviewer's perspective on whether the work is simply a polemic depends on previous intellectual commitments. Psychologists (of nearly all varieties) seem not to care for Stannard's thesis, which is, simply stated, that Freud's work was seriously flawed and therefore could not serve as a solid scientific foundation for psychohistory. Reviewers from the psychology side almost universally take issue with Stannard's broad sweeps and general lack of depth in understanding how far and in how many different directions psychology has come since Freud. If there is one outstanding criticism, it is that Stannard throws the psychohistoric baby (although somewhat spotted) out with the bath water, and, as one reviewer has said, with the kitchen sink as well.3

Psychohistorians also find Stannard's approach too limited. He 'relies on certain presuppositions. He accepts a narrow view of psychology,' writes reviewer Nathan C. Hale, Jr.4 Stannard often overgeneralizes and oversimplifies.

If the book has such major shortcomings, why have so many scholars paid attention to it? One reason is that it is a well-written, entertaining book. A reader cannot help chuckling from time to time at the seeming naivété of some Freudian positions. Stannard has selected his material carefully in order to destroy his opposition; his case seems tight and well reasoned. In fact, from a limited view, it is. In Hale's words:

Stannard is at his best exposing the flaws of psychohistory: the reductionism and oversimplification, the presumption of traits and events for which little or no evidence exists, the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy, the attribution to the past of viewpoints parochially rooted in the present, the assumption of psychological causes for matters better explained by social custom. Each objection is ably argued, with illustrations ranging from Erik Erikson's Luther to Fawn Brodie's Jefferson.5

However, it has been noted widely that Stannard devotes only one chapter to close examination of a psychohistorical work, Freud's Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood, which was written in 1910.6

The real issue of Stannard's book comes down to whether or not the word psychohistory means 'Freud based psychoanalytic history' or whether it means history supplemented by the various insights of the psychological disciplines. Stannard clearly believes it means the

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5Ibid., p. 889.
former and carefully destroys psychoanalysis as a basis for historic insight. His point seems well taken: many historians do believe psychoanalysis is the basis of psychohistory. Many psychohistorians, however, do not accept a Freudian foundation for their work, nor do the majority of empirical psychologists still accept Freud's theories, his historic contributions to psychology notwithstanding.

Psychologists and psychiatrists who have analyzed *Shrinking History* find Stannard's debunking passé. They point out that his arguments have long been discussed within their professions. Has he nothing new to add? From the historian's point of view, perhaps he has. He clearly makes the point, one so often overlooked, that applied psychology—whether one refers to psychoanalysis, counseling in all its forms and schools, or some other name for delving deeply into the unconscious part of man—requires direct interaction between the practitioner and the subject (that is, the client, the patient, or whatever the revealer of inner motivations might be called). Herein lies a major weakness in psychohistory. No historian, no matter how skilled, can probe into the inner depths of his subject's mind without that subject's direct response. Without that interaction there can be no psychoanalysis, there can be no free association, there can be no self-revelation or personal insight, and that is what psychoanalysis is all about. Stannard implies that psychohistorians are trying to do what psychiatrists would generally be loathe to attempt, that is, to psychoanalyze a corpse. 7

Nevertheless, Stannard seems not to recognize that there are other realms of psychological knowledge (as well as other behavioral and social science disciplines) from which it is possible to borrow legitimate methodologies. As Rudolph Binion wrote: "Ever more psychohistorians are working directly from full and straight facts with ever less regard for clinical theory.... For, Freudianism aside, historians out for explanations cannot escape psychohistory. History is what people did, singly or collectively. Why people did what they did means motives both conscious and, like it or not, unconscious." 8 Finding the basis for people's motives is the heart of most historical inquiry. Certainly psychology can lend insights into the reasons for personal actions, and psychoanalysis is not necessary to accomplish this task.

Aside from Stannard's blind spots, *Shrinking History* is a useful study. It makes clear the weaknesses in the field of psychohistory and

causes its readers to think carefully about what they do and do not believe about historical methodology. As a result of reading this book, I do not believe in long-distance psychoanalysis. However, I do believe more strongly than ever that it is possible to use the psychological disciplines for research in history, especially biography. But this conclusion I did not get from Stannard’s book; rather, it was substantiated by the reviews.