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On Aggression: Psychoanalysis as Moral Politics in
Post-Nazi Germany

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Abstract

The heyday of intellectual and popular preoccupation with psychoanalysis in the West reached from the 1940s to the 1970s, from post-Nazism through Cold War consumerism to the anti-Vietnam War movement and the sexual revolution. In each country the ensuing debates over the truth about how human beings are took unique form. Only in West Germany did debates about the value of psychoanalysis as a system of thought circle so intensely around the question of whether or not aggression was an ineradicable aspect of the human animal and whether or not it might best be conceived as a “drive” comparable in strength and form to libido. This paper analyzes the wholly unexpected consequences set in motion by the publication of ethologist Konrad Lorenz’s *On Aggression*, not only on the oeuvre of the preeminent West German psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich, but also on the eventual shape taken by the New Left’s politics and theories of human nature.

Keywords

Konrad Lorenz, Alexander Mitscherlich, New Left, politics of psychoanalysis, post-Nazism

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I.

In 1967, the physician and psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich, with his wife Margarete, also an analyst, published what is still the most influential and internationally known product of West German psychoanalysis: *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (The Inability to Mourn).¹ The Mitscherlichs argued that what Germans had proven themselves unable to mourn was *not* the multiple millions of murdered Jews of Europe that had been killed in their name and in all too many cases with their assistance, but rather their own erstwhile passionate love for Adolf Hitler. Yet while this has not generally been noted, another persistent theme in the book was the question of how best to understand the phenomenon of human aggression. This included the need to develop a more complex theoretical framework than Sigmund Freud had produced.

Aggression, this second great vital force beside libido, had been seen by Freud variously – at least since the topic forced itself upon his attention with the events of World War I – as an equally powerful and parallel drive to libido, *or* one at odds with libido and providing a countervailing pressure, *or* one which got peculiarly mixed up with and fused with libido, *or* a phenomenon which grew in proportion as libidinal aims were thwarted.² Subsequent to Freud's death in 1939, the topic went in and out of focus in the internecine debates roiling the global psychoanalytic diaspora that had been set in motion by Nazism's brutal ascent. When the topic showed up at all, it was mainly in the interstices of discussions of early childhood – prompted not least by the controversial emphases of (by that point Britain-based) Melanie Klein on greed, rage, and envy in babies. It also appeared, albeit in a stringently depoliticized form, in American ego psychologists Heinz Hartmann and Ernst Kris' efforts to systematize Freudian ideas about normative stages of development. But the topic resurfaced with peculiar force in post-World War II West Germany.

In no other national context would the attempt to make sense of aggression become such a core preoccupation specifically for psychoanalysts and allied professionals. And, conversely, in no other postwar national context would the wider public reception of psychoanalysis as a whole, in its dual nature as a clinical and culturally critical enterprise, be so strongly shaped by debates *not* over sex, or anxiety, or narcissism (the themes which would, in sequence, obsess the postwar American public in its ambivalent but titillated engagement with psychoanalysis), but rather over the vagaries and vicissitudes of human aggression. Although the topic of sex did ultimately reenter the West German debate about aggression as well, the main emphasis of the controversies remained on the subject of aggression itself.

This, in turn, had everything to do with the unanticipated but absolutely tremendous excitement with which the work of a non-analyst, the Austrian-German ethologist and ornithologist Konrad Lorenz was received in the West German media. (Ethology is the study of animal behavior.) Lorenz was a specialist particularly on parental "imprinting" in graylag geese, but also devoted observer-reporter of the vast repertoire of behaviors of other animals, from monkeys to rats to fish to dogs.

From quite early on in the postwar years Lorenz was a household name in West Germany due to his beguilingly folksy tales of animal doings, *Er redete mit dem Vieh, den Vögeln und den Fischen* (He Spoke with the Cattle, the Birds, and the Fish, 1949) and *So kam der Mensch auf den Hund* (Man Meets Dog, 1950). And he was well known among research professionals, including among psychoanalysts on both sides of the Atlantic, for numerous scholarly essays on instincts, evolution, and behavior. British and American analysts were particularly fascinated by what they saw as the

¹ Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: Piper, 1967). The English translation was published as *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverly R. Placzek (New York: Grove Press, 1975).

² Sigmund Freud, "Zeitgemässes über Krieg und Tod" (1915), in *Gesammelte Werke*: X, 324-355; Sigmund Freud, "Jenseits des Lustprinzips" (1920), in *Gesammelte Werke*: XIII, 3-69; Sigmund Freud, "Das ökonomische Problem des Masochismus" (1924), in *Gesammelte Werke*: XIII, 371-383; Sigmund Freud, "Das Unbehagen in der Kultur" (1930), in *Gesammelte Werke*: XIV, 421-506.

implications of his research for demonstrating the importance of early mother-child bonding, but – often enough status-anxious and pleased to find support for their own claims about human nature – psychoanalysts followed many other aspects of Lorenz’s work, and he was footnoted in numerous postwar psychoanalytic texts. Yet it was the book appearing in 1963, *Das sogenannte Böse: Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression* (The So-Called Evil, subtitled: On the Natural History of Aggression, published in the U.S. in 1966 as *On Aggression*) that was the truly blockbuster hit which secured Lorenz’s international reputation.³ His point: To study animals was to understand humans.

Both in the Anglo-American and in the West German context, Lorenz’s book on aggression would often be read in conjunction with two further books exploring the animal origins of human behavior published a few years later: the American playwright (and student of behavioral science) Robert Ardrey’s *The Territorial Imperative* (1966) and the British zoologist Desmond Morris’ *The Naked Ape* (1967). One strand of public fascination with these texts clearly had to do with a wave of interest in biological as opposed to sociological explanations of human nature – and not least with a desire to re-secure traditional notions of gender in an era of rapidly changing social roles for men and women. However, there was something distinctively post-Nazi German about the glowing appreciation and fervor with which Lorenz’s specific contribution to the wider project of analogizing from animals to humans was embraced.

Das sogenannte Böse – “The So-Called Evil” – after all, as the German title indicated, was a vigorous defense of aggression as by no means always a force for evil. The short take-home message – amidst all the witty, cheerfully chatty accounts of animal conduct – was welcome indeed. It had two main components. 1. Aggression is ubiquitous in animals and in people (i.e. it is not just a German specialty; everybody is aggressive). 2. Aggression is a force for *good*. All cultural progress and effective activity, as well as, and however counterintuitively, the treasured bonds of deep friendship and of marital love, had roots in the aggressive instinct.

It was also Lorenz who did more than anyone else to introduce Sigmund Freud into the national conversation on aggression. Lorenz had situated himself, at the very opening of *On Aggression*, as someone who had long been resistant to psychoanalysis, not least because he could not agree with – quote – “the concept of a death drive, which according to a theory of Freud’s is a destructive principle which exists as an opposite pole to all instincts of self-preservation.”⁴ But then, as Lorenz reported, he had been delighted to find, in his travels across the U.S., that many American psychoanalysts did not agree with the idea of its existence either. What Lorenz did find useful, however, was Freud’s belatedly found conviction that aggression, like libido, *was* a drive. The difference was that Lorenz was eager to see the aggressive drive as life-preserving and life-enhancing.

However unintentionally, what the publication of *On Aggression* set in motion was an outpouring of debate in 1960s-1970s West Germany over whether or not aggression was indeed best understood as a drive (or “instinct” – West Germans were alert to the confusions that had been caused by some early translators of Freud into English), and also, more generally, whether Freud was a useful resource or a problem. No other text caused more people to start wondering what Freud himself had actually argued. Not just Lorenz and his supporters, but also Lorenz’s critics – and they were increasingly vociferous – contributed to the reformulation of what Freud was thought to stand for.

By the later 1960s and early 1970s, at least three new versions of Freud were circulating in the West German media and wider public discussion. One was a sex-radical version, which restored to public attention Freud’s own erstwhile commitment to seeing libido as the force that explained almost everything in life. Another was the far more conservative Freud who had insisted that humans were not by nature good; this version, however paradoxically, was a co-production of Lorenz’s supporters with those of his critics who could not accept the idea of aggression as a drive at all and instead proposed alternate models of human behavior which more strongly emphasized social and political factors. And the third was the complex effort at compromise that Alexander Mitscherlich formulated.

³ Konrad Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse: Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression* (Vienna: G. Borotha-Schoeler, 1963). The English translation was published as *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Latzke (London: Methuen, 1966).

⁴ Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse*, 10.

Henceforth, the public and professional arguments about Freud in West Germany would no longer be about whether or not to take psychoanalysis seriously. Rather, the question became *which* Freud would be promoted and invoked in order to advance a variety of political agendas. At the same time, all the previously assumed alignments between theoretical framework and political implications got scrambled. An important subplot involved the Frankfurt School re-émigré sociologist-philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. They were significant figures in the effort to return psychoanalysis to the residually anti-Semitic culture of post-World War II Germany. They were instrumental in promoting and encouraging Mitscherlich, even as they were not consistently impressed with him and sometimes found his work to be derivative of their own ideas. Certainly Horkheimer cooperated closely with Mitscherlich in bringing prominent emigrated analysts back to West Germany to speak. But as late as 1965, Horkheimer was lamenting the West German public's ongoing disinterest in psychoanalysis.⁵ Not least due to the polemical stimulus provided by Lorenz and then to the rise of the New Left – and to the mediating efforts of Mitscherlich – that situation would soon change.

II.

Alexander Mitscherlich succeeded in his life project of returning psychoanalysis to post-Nazi Central Europe – and securing for it far greater social prestige than it ever had in Freud's own day – primarily by advancing a highly idiosyncratic version of psychoanalysis as a secular moral-political language. Mitscherlich became, on the one hand, *the* main West German representative of the psychoanalytic enterprise: through his editorship of the journal *Psyche*; his clinical and theoretical work especially in psychosomatics; his activism in bringing emigrated psychoanalytic celebrities back to address the West German public; and, after an early postwar stint in Heidelberg, his directorship of the Sigmund Freud Institute in Frankfurt/Main. On the other hand, Mitscherlich also served as “the conscience of the nation,” a “gentle repentance-preacher.”⁶

Mitscherlich managed to finesse this double role not least by amalgamating creatively elements of Heinz Hartmannesque American ego psychology (Hartmann was the dominant figure in the US – the 50s in America are referred to in psychoanalytic circles as “the Hartmann Era”) with frankly left-liberal political commentary on current events with (what in hindsight may seem rather *un-analytic* and conceptually clunky) persistent enjoinders to West Germans to develop what he variously referred to as “ego-strength” (*Ichstärke*), “self-control,” “capacity for critical thinking,” or “the critical thinking-capacity of the ego.”⁷ The contrast with someone like his French counterpart Jacques Lacan, whose baseline assumption was that there could be no such thing as a stable ego, could not have been starker. But for West German conditions, Mitscherlich's approach proved ideal. This was, after all, a culture in which contempt for psychoanalysis in the wider public and among medical professionals had been intensively fostered under the Nazis. This is a crucial part of the backstory. In the Third Reich, Freud was said to have a “dirty fantasy” and an “Asiatic world view,” and psychoanalysis was deemed both to contain “nothing original” – for to claim otherwise would be “to give too much honor to the unproductivity of the Jewish race” – *and* to be “nothing other than the Jewish nation's rape of Western culture.”⁸ These attitudes – psychoanalysis is Jewish, it's dirty, it's stupid and wrong – hardly disappeared overnight in the war's aftermath. But despite this, Mitscherlich eventually succeeded spectacularly in convincing West Germans to think about psychoanalysis differently.

⁵ Philip Shabecoff, “Germans Shunt Psychoanalysis To a Minor Role, Scholar Says: Professor Deplores Neglect of Practice in Region Where It Took Root,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1965): 23.

⁶ Tobias Freimüller, *Alexander Mitscherlich: Gesellschaftsdiagnosen und Psychoanalyse nach Hitler* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 8; Michael Rutschky, “Von Prof. Freud zu Dr. Caligari,” *Cicero* (January 2006): 132.

⁷ Alexander Mitscherlich, “Toleranz – Überprüfung eines Begriffs,” in *Toleranz – Überprüfung eines Begriffs* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp), 10-17; cf. A. and M. Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit*, 171, 318.

⁸ “Die Rolle des Juden in der Medizin,” *Deutsche Volksgesundheit aus Blut und Boden* (August-September 1933): 15; Heinz Hunger, “Jüdische Psychoanalyse und deutsche Seelsorge,” in *Germanentum, Judentum und Christentum* vol. 2, ed. Walter Grundmann (Leipzig: G. Wigand), 314, 317.

Mitscherlich's work was profoundly shaped by an irritated, albeit sporadic, engagement with the astonishing public success of the animal expert Konrad Lorenz. In correspondence with mentors and friends, Mitscherlich declared his disdain for Lorenz and his sense of intellectual superiority to him. And in 1964 Mitscherlich organized a workshop – to which he invited Lorenz – whose express aim was to repudiate Lorenz's conclusions about aggression. The book resulting from this workshop eventually appeared in 1969 as *Bis hierher und nicht weiter: Ist die menschliche Aggression unbefriedbar?* (Up to Here and no Further: Can Human Aggression not be Pacified?). But actually his relationship to Lorenz's oeuvre was more complicated. It is not just that already in his earliest published writing on aggression (a two-part meditation, "Aggression und Anpassung," in *Psyche* in 1956 and 1958) Mitscherlich had cited Lorenz favorably. In addition, the magnum opus of 1967, co-written with Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn* – which actually contains eight essays, only the first of which is the title story, and the remainder of which return recurrently to the puzzle of human aggression – needs to be read not only as a repudiation but also as a partial *incorporation of* Lorenz's theses. So too Mitscherlich's marvelous speech in 1969 on the occasion of his winning the Peace Prize of the Frankfurt Book Trade – "Über Feindseligkeit und hergestellte Dummheit" (On Hostility and Man-made Stupidity) – remained in conversation with Lorenz's theses (and was indisputably understood that way by the media). The preeminent liberal newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, for instance, in a reprint of the full text, plucked from the speech and chose as its headline the Mitscherlich remark that "Aggression is a fundamental force of life," clearly positioning the speech within the ongoing national fracas over how to feel about the existence and value of an aggressive drive.⁹

Aggression thus became one of the central themes of Mitscherlich's public life. In addition to *The Inability to Mourn* and *Up to Here and No Further*, he published or co-published three further books on the topic: *Aggression und Anpassung in der Industriegesellschaft* (Aggression and Adaptation in Industrial Society, 1968, with Herbert Marcuse and others); *Die Idee des Friedens und die menschliche Aggressivität* (The Idea of Peace and Human Aggressivity, 1969); and *Toleranz – Überprüfung eines Begriffs* (Tolerance – Verification of a Concept, 1974), which contained multiple essays on aggression, cruelty, and war, including a reprint of the Peace Prize speech. The timing was crucial. Mitscherlich was just – barely – succeeding in getting psychoanalysis to be taken seriously in West Germany when Lorenz's *On Aggression* burst on the scene.

A new spate of violence and wars around the globe in the 1960s and after added a cacophonous diversity of possible resonances to what the Mitscherlichs had, in *The Inability to Mourn*, summarized succinctly as "the aggression problems of our time."¹⁰ The U.S.'s escalation of the war in Vietnam from 1965 on, the renewed outbreak of war in the Middle East in 1967, and eventually also the rise of violent leftist movements within the West whose actions were, in turn, met by state violence, provided countless occasions both to evade *and* to engage the actual intricacies of what had happened during the Third Reich. But in the West German context, Nazism and the Holocaust lurked behind nearly all the ensuing arguments. Current events complexly refracted the attempts to make sense of the national past. Nonetheless, it bears pointing out that the debates also went international – among other things, the International Psychoanalytic Meeting in Vienna in 1971 focused the entirety of its discussions around the question of an aggressive drive, with media from the *New York Times* to the *Kansas City Times* to the Paris *Herald Tribune* covering the story.

III.

Although the New Left student movement that reshaped the political landscape of West Germany after the mid-1960s liked to describe itself as antifascist, it is better understood as an "antipostfascist" movement – in other words, a movement developed in opposition to the more conservative earlier postfascist settlement in West Germany.¹¹ Certainly there was something distinctively

⁹ Alexander Mitscherlich, "Aggression ist eine Grundmacht des Lebens," *Spiegel* 42 (October 13, 1969): 206.

¹⁰ A. and M. Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit*, 172.

¹¹ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7, 139.

“antipostfascist” about the fury with which members of the West German New Left would attack Lorenz from the later 1960s on. In the process, Lorenz and Mitscherlich were intermittently lumped together. Even though they disliked each other, they were treated by the young leftists as similar. In the pages of the venerable weekly, *Die Zeit*, one anti-Lorenz reviewer opined in 1969: “One really has to call it tragic: Mitscherlich is the sole German psychoanalyst who is determined to pursue the sociopolitical responsibility of his discipline with full earnestness and whose voice carries weight with the public.... But he hardly ever gets concrete.... Mitscherlich’s thinking is paralyzed by the unresolved contradictions of Freud’s drive-dualism [i.e. of libido and aggression]. In the final analysis, then, [according to Mitscherlich,] the decisive evils are after all only secondarily caused by society, because ‘evil’, hate, and pleasure in destruction are ineradicably biologically anchored in human nature.”¹² (In short, this was what New Leftists hated: They hated the idea of aggression as biological, inborn, and inevitable. They were determined to emphasize that it was *society* that encouraged violence – and that human beings could be changed if society were changed.) Other New Left-affiliated writers were yet harsher. The editor of an anthology entitled *Zur Aggression Verdammt?* (Condemned to Aggression?, 1971) blasted both Lorenz and Mitscherlich, but pointedly urged “above all the psychoanalysts to spend the next decades on research and otherwise – remain silent.”¹³ The escalation of the conflicts over the value and causes of aggression, however, had another effect as well, for they inadvertently triggered a sarcastic backlash in the mainstream media against what rapidly came to seem like the New Left’s severe naïveté about the dark sides of human nature.

This second round of nation-wide debate about the source and function of aggression drew in many further passionately eloquent commentators. In and around the generation of Lorenz (born 1903) and Mitscherlich (born 1908), there was also: the Freudian Marxist Frankfurt School philosopher and beloved mentor to the New Left Herbert Marcuse, the German-British psychoanalyst Paula Heimann, the neo-Freudian social psychologist Erich Fromm, the émigré philosopher Hannah Arendt, and the Viennese-Los Angeles analyst and specialist on terrorism and hostages Friedrich Hacker. In the intermediate generation (born 1928-1933), there were: the philosophers Arno Plack and Rolf Denker, the historian Hermann Glaser, and the poet and journalist Hans Krieger. And in the younger generation there was Mitscherlich’s assistant at the Sigmund Freud Institute, the social psychologist Klaus Horn, as well as the psychologist Herbert Selg, the education specialist Hanns-Dietrich Dann, the sociologists Wolf Lepenies and Helmut Nolte, and the political artist Hans-Georg Rauch, among many others.

The debate – which exploded all over the West German media – also drew in new advocates for Lorenz, including Lorenz’s student, the ethologist-anthropologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, the author of *Liebe und Hass* (Love and Hate, 1970), which asserted early on in passing that *both* ethology and psychoanalysis “have established that man has an innate aggressive drive,” took side swipes at Lorenz’s left-wing critics, and especially mocked the New Left’s sex-radical communal experiments.¹⁴ In subsequent writings, Eibl-Eibesfeldt took aim at what he saw as the gullibility of the New Left’s “educational optimism” and expressed doubt “that one can prevent the development of undesirable tendencies simply through appropriate childrearing and somehow thereby create a society without pecking order and without aggression.”¹⁵

Strikingly, some of Lorenz’s critics fussed a great deal over whether or not Freud himself had *really* been committed to the notion of a death drive, or an aggressive drive. (Some pointed out that Freud had conceded that his concept of the aggressive drive was speculative, while others said that Freud had, after all, resisted it for twenty years, and yet others noted the incoherencies that had ensued for Freud as he explored the idea and how he had subsequently contradicted or modified the notion

¹² Hans Krieger, “Der Mensch – von Natur aus destruktiv?” *Zeit* 46 (November 14, 1969): 32-33.

¹³ Herbert Selg, ed., *Zur Aggression verdammt?* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), 147.

¹⁴ Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Liebe und Hass: Zur Naturgeschichte elementarer Verhaltensweisen* (Munich: Piper, 1970), 13, 265-67.

¹⁵ Eibl-Eibesfeldt quoted in Klaus Horn, “Die humanwissenschaftliche Relevanz der Ethologie im Lichte einer sozialwissenschaftlich verstandenen Psychoanalyse,” *Kritik der Verhaltensforschung: Konrad Lorenz und seine Schule*, ed. G. Roth (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1974), 192.

once more.) Suddenly there was an outpouring of exegeses. People started reading Freud closely. But many who were unsettled or disgusted by Lorenz also actively sought substitute models to explain human behavior and were adamant that there could be no such thing as a non-libidinal drive; they emphasized instead that aggression was above all a *learned* behavior, not innate, and that there was much that could practically be done to discourage its spread.

Among the most passionate critics of Lorenz were those who strove to combine a recovery of the work of the Freudian Marxist Wilhelm Reich (who had famously contended in the 1930s, in numerous variations, that aggression was the result of a lack of sexual satisfaction) with an updated version of the “frustration-aggression” theories of inter- and intra-group violence and scapegoating developed by psychologist John Dollard and his team at Yale, which had grown out of Dollard’s fieldwork on race relations in the U.S. South. The philosopher Arno Plack, for example, was outraged by what he diagnosed as Lorenz’s feat in making not sex but aggression “the *Ur*-drive, the drive of all drives, that moves everything that is living.” Plack’s book, *Die Gesellschaft und das Böse: Eine Kritik der herrschenden Moral* (Society and Evil: A Critique of the Dominant Morality, 1967) was meant – as was made clear by both the title and the cover format – as a definitive rebuttal to Lorenz. For Plack, the enthusiasm for Lorenz and the public skepticism about the New Left’s efforts at sexual liberation were all part of one big package of misconceived morality. It was the dominant morality, in Plack’s view, that repressed and thereby perverted the sexual drive and made pleasure in brutality and killing pervasive. As Plack reductively but fervently declared: “It would be wrong to hold the view that all of what happened in Auschwitz was typically German. It was typical for a society that suppresses sexuality.”¹⁶

Yet another variation, meanwhile, involved the reflections of Herbert Marcuse. He remained an unapologetic advocate, as he had been since the 1950s, for a radical and utopian understanding of the Freudian inheritance. However, simultaneously he continued to mull over a puzzle that had long preoccupied many members of the Frankfurt School: how the increasing powerlessness experienced by individuals in a competitive-technological society exacerbated aggression and diminished individuals’ capacity for political resistance.¹⁷ Mitscherlich’s younger associate Klaus Horn also repeatedly built on Marcuse, Mitscherlich *and* Freud in order to push beyond the stalemated terms of debate. Horn persistently challenged the Lorenzians’ instrumental concept of “the biological,” referring to their “ontologized” or “reified” approach (the way they acted as though “the biological” could somehow be separable from “the social”). He regarded it as no coincidence that in the U.S. as well, under the impact of the “Nixon restoration,” there was an increasing backlash against Cold War liberal social engineering projects – a backlash based upon the pretext that there was, as an article in *Fortune* magazine had put it, a “basic intractability of human nature.”¹⁸ Horn had given a lot of thought to just how extraordinarily tractable – i.e. changeable – human nature had proven to be under Nazism, and found this argumentative appeal to an unchangeable “human nature” repellent. The whole point of sophisticated psychoanalysis, Horn contended, was to understand not just the continual interaction of the biological and the cultural, but also, quite literally, their mutual constitutiveness.

IV.

Nonetheless, despite these radical readings, already by the early 1970s, a new version of Freud gained ascendancy in the West German media and among a wider public, finally securing his status as august authority. It did so, however, by portraying Freud as a conservative and a pessimist. As late as 1968, the inventor of psychoanalysis had been celebrated in *Der Spiegel* as one of the great liberators of humankind from centuries of hypocrisy around and hostility to sexuality. Here Freud was placed, rather startlingly, in a lineage with the actively anti-psychoanalytic but certainly pro-sexual Alfred

¹⁶ Arno Plack, *Die Gesellschaft und das Böse: Eine Kritik der herrschenden Moral* (Munich: List, 1967), 309.

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse et al., *Aggression und Anpassung in der Industriegesellschaft* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 7-29.

¹⁸ Horn, “Die humanwissenschaftliche Relevanz,” 190-191, 193; Klaus Horn, “Gesellschaftliche Produktion von Gewalt: Vorschläge zu ihrer politpsychologischen Untersuchung,” *Gewaltverhältnisse und die Ohnmacht der Kritik*, ed. O. Rammstedt (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 62; Tom Alexander, “The Social Engineers retreat under fire,” *Fortune* (October 1972): 132.

Kinsey and William Masters.¹⁹ By 1971, however, the very same periodical was explaining that Freud was increasingly being understood to lend gravitas to the downbeat idea that human nature irretrievably tended toward mutual unkindness: “Freud’s teaching about aggression and the behavior research of Lorenz are ever more frequently being enlisted for the development of a conservative theory of society.”²⁰ Again in 1972, *Der Spiegel* published an interview with the psychoanalyst Friedrich Hacker focused upon his tome *Aggression: Die Brutalisierung der modernen Welt* (Aggression: The Brutalization of the Modern World, 1971) that addressed him as “a Freudian [*als Freudianer*]” and in the same breath invoked “Freud’s view, delivered in the wake of the First World War, that a potential for aggression resides in the human being, that has to find expression, one way or another.”²¹ While Hacker considered himself as rather more balanced, *Der Spiegel* placed his volume, along with a new one by Robert Ardrey, among “the recently constantly swelling ranks of books in which the conservative conception of a hierarchically organized society is being defended against the New Left.”²² Perhaps this was not surprising, since Hacker’s volume was graced with a foreword by none other than Konrad Lorenz. Here and elsewhere, Lorenz was blatant in his disdain for the young rebels.²³

To twenty-first-century eyes, the idea of accepting the existence of a drive for aggression might seem uncontroversial and banally, if sadly, obvious. Or it could seem wrong, as a theoretical position, to see the human capacity for aggression specifically as a “drive” – but inconsequentially so. The pivotal point is that under the very specific circumstances of a culture only twenty-five years away from (what had been at the time a wildly popular) mass-murderous dictatorship, the claim seemed, to many people, not just wrong, but emphatically and menacingly so – even if not all commentators critical of Lorenz invoked the Holocaust, but rather pointed to current events unfolding in their present. Some commentators, for example, contended that Lorenz was offering excuses that just legitimated the Vietnam War or other wars – as though it was hopeless to protest – as though fighting each other was just what human beings do.

In fact, however, there was even more to it. Many of Lorenz’s critics on the left were convinced his entire purpose was to provide exoneration for the elder generation of Germans. A group around the young psychologist Herbert Selg explained – as *Der Spiegel* summarized it – the “great public resonance” of Lorenz’s book in West Germany by the way it “seems to exculpate all those ‘whose slate did not stay completely clean,’ in accordance with the motto: ‘If we have an aggression drive and this drive must be expressed, then we actually can’t really help ourselves, that...’”²⁴ This was an obvious gesture back to the past of the Third Reich. Already in 1966, the philosopher Rolf Denker had bluntly proposed as a reason for Lorenz’s “bestseller” status “no doubt, for one thing, the ongoing discussion of the gruesome deeds of the Third Reich.... One looks for an answer to the question, how something like that was possible.” However, “the way the book has been discussed until now will not galvanize people to actions against aggression or for its more sensible channeling, but rather is more likely to lead to disposing of the topic in a trivializing and affirmative way. For many, the expositions will have a reassuring effect.... Who knows how many aging, publicly unknown fascists who received this book as a Christmas present have acquired a relieved conscience from reading it.”²⁵

¹⁹ “Was für Zeiten,” *Spiegel* 47 (November 18, 1968): 46-47.

²⁰ “Der Wille zur Macht lebt,” *Spiegel* 33 (August 9, 1971): 90.

²¹ “Was brutalisiert den Menschen?” *Spiegel* 24 (June 5, 1972): 124-128.

²² “Der Wille zur Macht lebt,” 90.

²³ Lorenz in Friedrich Hacker, *Aggression: Die Brutalisierung der modernen Welt* (Vienna: Molden, 1971), 11; Konrad Lorenz, “Von Wölfen und Menschen: Die Feindschaft zwischen den Generationen und ihre Ursachen,” *Christ und Welt* (January 2, 1970), 12.

²⁴ “Gefährliches Gerede,” *Spiegel* 27 (June 26, 1971): 109.

²⁵ Rolf Denker, *Aufklärung über Aggression: Kant, Darwin, Freud, Lorenz* (Stuttgart and Berlin: W. Kohlhammer, 1966), 94-95.

Along related lines – summing the tone of the debates retrospectively in 1978 – the New Left literary and cultural critic Klaus Theweleit, in his magnum opus on proto-fascist and fascist patterns in German history, *Male Fantasies* meditated on “the immense popularity of theories of human beings as intrinsically aggressive” and deliberately associated these theories with Nazism, and especially with the self-exculpatory maneuvers of the high-ranking Nazi Hermann Göring, who from his Nuremberg prison cell in 1946 had fatuously and self-servingly informed the American psychologist G. M. Gilbert that “there is a curse on humanity. It is dominated by the hunger for power and the pleasure of aggression.”²⁶ The analyst Paula Heimann had been more careful, and made no presumptions about Lorenz’s motivations. But she was at pains to emphasize the profound non-comparability of Lorenz’s findings about animals, in which intra-species aggression could serve “the preservation of the species, for which the preconditions are the possession of territory, food, mating, brood-behavior, and which is limited in its ferocity by innate inhibitory mechanisms,” and the kind of brutalities that were unique to humans. What distinguished the human from the animal was twofold: on the one hand, “the feeling of pleasure that is derived from the tormenting and destruction per se” and, on the other, the human being’s tendency to *rationalize* that pleasure in cruelty and “to invent noble goals with whose help he disguises and implements his delight in destruction.” As she pointedly added – and this was a clear gesture to the Third Reich: “Our memory of the human concept of ‘*Lebensraum*’ is still fresh; and with it the sluices to unlimited and calculated cruelty were opened wide.”²⁷

V.

One of Mitscherlich’s most characteristic moves was to declare the insolubility of the theoretical questions. Already in *The Inability to Mourn*, the Mitscherlichs announced that “we do not know for certain whether there is such a thing as primary destructivity (a genuine ‘death drive’) or whether the natural pleasure of aggression is transformed into the pleasure of inflicting pain only by experiences of impotence, humiliation, and loss of self-esteem.”²⁸ Similarly, in 1969, in *The Idea of Peace*, Mitscherlich included a footnote repeating a point he had already made in his earliest *Psyche* essays, which summarily remarked that “the difficult drive-theoretical question about a primary drive-pair (Eros-Destrudo) or a reactive origin of aggressivity can hardly be answered on the basis of our current knowledge.”²⁹ Nonetheless, Mitscherlich undermined this agnostic stance at other points, frankly expressing his commitment to Freud’s concept of a “death drive,” acting dismissively towards what he (interchangeably) referred to as the “behaviorist counter-theory” or “frustration theory,” voicing objection to “the doctrine that man’s hostility is simply a reaction to the disappointments and the suffering which society has meted out to him,” and distancing himself specifically from the idea he ascribed to Wilhelm Reich – that aggression and destruction derived from “inhibited [sexual] urges.”³⁰

At other moments, however, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich also freely incorporated ideas that sounded a great deal as though they came from Wilhelm Reich. For example in *The Inability to Mourn*, they noted that “The conclusion can hardly be avoided that aggression has to make up for missing and unattainable libidinal satisfaction.” And later in the book, meditating on how the phenomena of “brutal excesses – such as torture to promote morality – contain an element of perverted libidinal gratification,” they remarked that “the fact that throughout long periods of Christian history sexual lust was damned, forced the individual to repress sexuality and to find partial substitute satisfaction in acts of destruction.”³¹ Similarly in the title essay from his anthology on *Tolerance*, Mitscherlich entered into the Wilhelm Reichian spirit when he wrote about the possible causal

²⁶ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Vol. 2, trans. Erica Carter (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 268.

²⁷ Paula Heimann, “Entwicklungssprünge und das Auftreten der Grausamkeit,” in *Bis hierher und nicht weiter: Ist die menschliche Aggression unbefriedbar?*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich (Munich: Piper, 1969), 105-07.

²⁸ A. and M. Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit*, 197.

²⁹ Alexander Mitscherlich, *Die Idee des Friedens und die menschliche Aggressivität* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), 80.

³⁰ Alexander Mitscherlich, “Aggression und Anpassung,” *Psyche* 10 (1956): 183; Mitscherlich, *Bis hierher*, 8; Mitscherlich, “Aggression ist eine Grundmacht,” 209; Mitscherlich, *Die Idee des Friedens*, 80.

³¹ A. and M. Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit*, 106, 198.

relationships between sexual frustration and misdirected violence. He noted at one point that “The role of pleasure in cruel acts – or more precisely: the libidinization of cruelty – is often chosen as an escape in the attempt to satisfy inner tensions wherever pleasure as such is treated by the superego and from the heights of the civilized value-world as sinful, culture-less, animalistic and thereby is soured and ruined for the individual.” Or at another moment, but with the causation reversed, he argued: “Tolerance contributes to the strengthening – the development and differentiation – of the libidinous side of world events. It relaxes and thereby subdues aggressive inclinations.”³² And in yet another essay from 1970, this one on “sexual enlightenment for grown-ups,” Mitscherlich, in his inimitably awkward but moving phrasing, channeled a combination of Marcuse and Hartmann when he reminded readers that “Eros” could only do its needed work in “generating compassion... in countless interpersonal as well as global-political matters” if it was permitted “access to the ego, to its shaping in conscious insight.”³³

Ultimately, Mitscherlich found the language he was looking for. In 1974, in an essay entitled “Two Kinds of Cruelty,” Mitscherlich – perhaps taking his cue from Paula Heimann, who had been his own training analyst – expressed what had been missing, and tellingly so, from the animal researchers in their obsession with proving the evolutionary origins of human aggression. The human animal differed from the others because it was not just aggressive but *cruel*. Holding fast to his conviction that “the only psychological theory that, neither moralistic nor anxious, keeps in focus the time-transcending phenomenon of cruelty, is Freud’s death-drive thesis,” Mitscherlich offered his most thoughtful comments yet on “cruelty as pleasure” versus “cruelty as work.” Both were uniquely human. But “cruelty as work” was the far more prevalent problem – and, in his view, the strongest evidence that the death drive was real. Cruelty as work was cruelty that was approved by a collectivity, rather than arising from a private predilection; cruelty as work was characterized by an absence of subsequent remorse; cruelty as work almost always depended on the absolute helplessness of the victims; and cruelty as work was “asexually destructive.” As Mitscherlich put it: “Cruelty as *work* knows no orgasm; instead it is about piece-rate labor, about managing one’s daily allotment of tormenting and murdering.... The destruction-worker goes home in the evening like others do with the feeling of having had a busy day.” Yes, this “destruction-worker” might well experience pleasure, but it was in very few cases a sexual pleasure. Instead – and here Mitscherlich borrowed both from the survivor of Gestapo torture Jean Améry and from the narcissism theories of the Austrian-American analyst Heinz Kohut – it was an “unhindered omnipotence-experience” – “the realization of fantasies of a ‘grandiose self.’” These were the dynamics, Mitscherlich believed, that had been most in evidence at Treblinka and Auschwitz, but also in the forest at Katyn, among the Brazilian death squads, at Con-Son (the penal colony at which U.S. soldiers tortured Communists), and at My Lai. The Marquis de Sade’s elaborate fantasies had attracted at best a handful of followers through the centuries. “Eichmann, by contrast, was of a different sort. He provided the killings the way one provides a supermarket with wares.”³⁴

It could be argued, looking back, that Lorenz’s provocation pushed some rather productive theorizing into view that was unlikely to have happened otherwise. Mitscherlich, at least, had found himself in a continual double argument – on the one side with the market competitor Lorenz, but on the other with the often overly simplistic but indisputably morally passionate anti-Lorenz New Left. All through the postwar decades, Mitscherlich had worked on multiple fronts at once: striving to shore up psychoanalysis’ cultural authority; continually finding common ground between warring factions; and endlessly circling around knotty, insoluble puzzles of human behavior while coaxing his fellow citizens to think along with him. In all these ways, Mitscherlich was a crucial contributor to a much larger, world-wide, post-1945 reorientation of the psychoanalytic venture. Psychoanalysis became accessible and emotionally involving for a wider lay public and for multiple neighboring disciplines, as the field turned its attention to many more themes beyond familial dynamics and sex.

³² Mitscherlich, “Toleranz,” 14, 30-31.

³³ Alexander Mitscherlich, “Freuds Sexualtheorie und die notwendige Aufklärung der Erwachsenen,” in *Versuch, die Welt besser zu bestehen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 146-47.

³⁴ Alexander Mitscherlich, “Zwei Arten der Grausamkeit,” in *Toleranz*, 175, 181-88.

But there was to be a coda to this story. Although rumours had circulated in professional circles in the 1960s that Lorenz had been a Nazi, the height of the debates about Lorenz's ideas about aggression (1963-1973) occurred without any public mention of the possibility. Not until 1973 when it was announced that Lorenz would be winning the Nobel Prize jointly with his fellow Austrian Karl von Frisch and the Dutch-British Nikolaas Tinbergen for "their discoveries concerning 'organization and elicitation of individual and social behavior patterns'" in animals – were journalists spurred to investigate, and find, Lorenz's (initially vehemently denied) Nazi party affiliation, as well as nasty eugenicist remarks he had put in print in 1940 about the degeneration purportedly caused by domestication (of humans as well as of animals), and in which he had unabashedly called for "a sharper eradication of the less ethically valuable [*eine noch schärfere Ausmerzung ethisch Minderwertiger*]." ³⁵ Lorenz subsequently declared his own phrasing unfortunate and claimed that his use of the word "eradication" had never meant murder, and he made semi-apologetic remarks in the autobiography produced for his Nobel acceptance. ³⁶

Scholars in the 1970s and into the present disagree about the significance of his Nazi sympathies, some seeing him as at worst a badly naïve opportunist, while others are convinced not only of his malice but of the corrupting influence of racist and eugenicist perspectives on the quality of his science; further eugenicist writings produced between 1938 and 1943 were found later. Lorenz, however, remained rather uninhibited in his views. At the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday in 1988, for instance, he remarked in an interview about his annoyance that "Humanity has done nothing sensible about overpopulation. One could for this reason develop a certain sympathy for AIDS [*Man könnte daher eine gewisse Sympathie für Aids bekommen*]." And once again he invoked the peculiar language he had used in 1940, explaining that "ethical" people had fewer children, but "criminals" were breeding uncontrollably. ³⁷

This is, then, without question a weird story. It is filled with unexpected, unplanned effects. But to conclude: The short version of my argument is that, despite the best efforts of Adorno and Horkheimer and above all Alexander Mitscherlich, through a complex set of circumstances it was – irony of ironies – ultimately an ex-Nazi who succeeded in bringing psychoanalysis back to post-Nazi Germany.

³⁵ Karolinska Institutet (1973) Press Release. Available at: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/1973/press.html; "Ausmerzung ethisch minderwertiger," Spiegel 43 (October 22, 1973): 22.

³⁶ "Konrad Lorenz – Biographical." Available at: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/1973/lorenz-bio.html.

³⁷ Konrad Lorenz, "Gespräch anlässlich seines 85. Geburtstags," Natur 11 (1988): 28-33.

