

Mad in America

SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Alfred Adler: Psychoanalysis for the People

By **Adam J Sacks** - April 4, 2026

"Professor Black Herman" was a celebrated magician of Jazz Age Harlem. In addition to his voodoo-inspired stage show, he developed a side practice where he saw patients, calling himself a "poor man's psychologist." His patients could scarcely afford expensive psychoanalysts further downtown. He was persecuted for his efforts. In 1927, he was arrested and sent to Sing Sing on charges of fortune telling and "selling medicine," without a license. Almost a century later, the recent, powerful HBO documentary *Look into My Eyes*, directed by Lana Wilson, reaffirms that "psychics" continue to function as affordable psychoanalysis for the working class.

Psychoanalysis has only been tried amongst the rich, the purview of the privileged, and rarely if ever amongst the poor. When I taught high school in Harlem during the mid-to-late 2000s, I saw endless students brimming with talent surrounded by mental illness undiagnosed and untreated in themselves and their families, and sometimes inside other teachers and administrators. I often had fantasies of mobile truck units of psychoanalysis racing into inner-city schools and the housing projects seeing patients at a rapid clip. At the time I had no idea that a psychologist rival to Freud not only had such dreams but put them at least partially into practice a century ago in inner-city Vienna.

The question is what would a progressive, even radical, psychoanalysis look like? Freud was always a reformist at heart; he only sought to repair what was broken, not wholesale replacement with a vision of a new society. There were a couple openly socialist party members in his founding circle, such as Ernst Simmel and Siegfried Bernfeld; unsurprisingly, today they remain entirely forgotten. They were devoted to the idea that psychoanalysis needed to be embedded within the educational system, because learning, class, and psychology were deeply enmeshed.

What today counts as "radical" psychology has arguably been more often theatrical and willfully perverse. Two examples include Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, who both enjoy somewhat more renown today than those other socialist psychoanalysts. It was Reich who actually coined the term "sexual liberation," and his theory of "orgone" energy enjoyed a cult-like following. Kate Bush sang a song, "Cloudbusting," about his machine designed to generate "orgone energy." A martyr for the cause, he was persecuted by both the Gestapo and the FBI, Reich died in a federal US prison. Marcuse has served as the avatar of the New Left, the philosopher of the counterculture of the '60s. He spent his career on college campuses, observing the antics of boomer youth, the first generation to enjoy wide access to higher learning.

Probably based in his observations, he too developed theories about sexual liberation, but on the opposite side of the coin as Reich. The author of *One Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse postulated "repressive desublimation," meaning that sexual instincts could be released in a manner that served only to only further crush the psyche. Their colleague Erich Fromm looked on at their erotic radicalism with dismay, observing

a “succumbing to the morbidity of the avant garde.”

A Tale of Two Directions in Therapy

To find a genuine working-class alternative to Freud we need to turn to a figure even less known amongst Americans today, Alfred Adler. Once one of several designated heirs to Freud, he certainly experienced more renown during his lifetime than after. Right from the start, Adler conceived of psychoanalysis as a social project. Unlike the others, he has yet to enjoy any sort of widespread renaissance. He conceived of psychoanalysis as a form of social activism and he and his circle had strong links to the interwar social democracy of Red Vienna as well as the fledgling Soviet state.

Biography amply illustrates the chasms between Freud and Adler when it comes to class orientation. Freud was the golden child of upwardly striving migrants to Vienna from the Russo-Ukrainian borderlands, whilst Adler was a son of outer-borough, working class Vienna. Freud identified with conquerors like Hannibal and lawgivers like Moses and celebrated the Austrian Emperor as a bulwark against the politics of the masses. Freud’s discussion circles never strayed much beyond upholstered bourgeois domestic interiors, while Adler gave lectures to hundreds in community recreation halls. Adler preferred the company in housing shelters and spoke Vienna’s more working-class dialect with great ease. Freud’s wife, Martha Bernays, came from an upper-crust traditionalist family from Hamburg of refined domesticity whilst Adler married a radical foreigner, Raissa Epstein: a university educated, publicly passionate Russian migrant well-known as a feminist political activist.

Adler became the first president of the psychoanalytic society that evolved out of the early Wednesday Night meetings. He also would dutifully serve Freud as first co-editor of the first psychoanalytic periodical *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse*. Already in 1909, on one of those Wednesdays, Adler laid down the gauntlet for the fundamental complementarity of inner psychological struggle and outward economic struggle. In his “Psychology of Marxism,” he urged a consideration in tandem of the theory of psychic drives and instincts with that of the struggle between economic classes. Way ahead of his time, Adler observed that the working classes are subject to a relentless series of slights, of what we today would call “microaggressions.” Subtle, but potent, the accumulation is relentless, unavoidable, and inevitably produces class consciousness and psychological effects. His colleagues reacted negatively. Those most hostile to Adler even suggested that socialism itself should be considered a neurosis. Within a year, from the fallout of making class so clearly an issue, he was driven out, forced to resign, and branded an enemy. Members of the Wednesday circle called him “wrong” and “dangerous,” and even a “fanatical socialist.” As Freud wrote to a pupil: “I am... carrying out on him the revenge of the offended goddess Libido.” As a testament to Adler having been more convincing than fanatical, when he left, eight members of the original circle defected with him.

Adler’s new breakaway school of psychology became known in English as “individual psychology.” This is confusing, especially for a movement dedicated to the social. The original term in German was not “individual,” but “indivisible,” and what he meant was that the human and the social are indivisible. Together they form an inborn, regulating norm for all. The core idea Adler used to express this was *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. This too has been poorly translated in English as “social interest”; it should instead be read as “communal feeling.” *Gemeinschaft*, as classically formulated by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887, is actually the opposite of the “social,” the word for which in German is *Gesellschaft*. In short, the social is an impersonal space where no essential connections exist between people, whereas the communal is where connections are deep and based on mutual sympathy.

In Freud’s model, before the social or the communal comes the sexual, specifically the sexual *inside* the family. Work life and wider society are only addressed after this first world of libido. For Adler, human experience is always primarily social. For any neurosis and healing, community context must always come first:

the development of man . . . is subject to the redeeming influence of social interest, so that all his drives can be guided in the direction of the generally useful. . . . We find neurotics, psychotics, suicides, etc., only when social interest is throttled

Adler’s first biographer was the Marxian essayist Manes Sperber. He criticized Freud for his class bias, limiting his system to his very upper-middle class milieu. As many would observe later, Freud’s system was as much a symptom as an antidote to the decaying, declining European bourgeoisie of the crisis period of the *fin-de-siècle* around 1900. In Central Europe, that middle class would be ripped apart by civil war conditions, largely with fascists making war on all progressives.

Though acutely conscious of himself as a Jew and supportive of the nascent Zionist project, Freud provided little means to account for social pain brought on by persecution. Adler thought in terms of generational effects and the collective impact of such traumatic phenomenon. His notion of “communal feeling” was transhistorical, akin to karma: where the choices of one generation greatly impact the next. Any experience of persecution, racism, or war weakens the overall strength of communal feeling thereafter for everyone, what Adler calls a “vulgarization” of life. Even within one lifetime, protracted exposure to the mistreatment of the poor, disabled, witnessing of racial and sexual discrimination, has its noxious effect:

The years of capitalism with their unfettered greed for dominance have aroused rapaciousness in the human soul...Only in socialism did the feeling of community remain as the ultimate goal and end as demanded by unhampered human fellowship.

Therapy for Work and the Social Sources of Suffering

Adler pioneered a psychology about work and the choices people are compelled to make for career and livelihood. His very first published study was fittingly quite working class, about the garment industry. He wrote about the health of tailors ("Health Book for the Tailoring Trade") and laid a foundation for this whole new field of inquiry. His inspired main idea is one that only recently has enjoyed widespread acceptance: that illness is social, and that social factors are key to evaluating living standards and health.

His most famous concepts, the inferiority and superiority complex, evolved out of his psychology of the life of work. Career choices are a direct response to self-perceived organic shortcomings which are universal and unavoidable. Critically, Adler does not place abilities in any kind of hierarchy. Rather he was a pioneer in the reframing of disability as something primarily a function of psychology. We all in some way share in the sentiment of disability: everyone responds to the organic shortcomings they perceive in themselves. Work life unfolds along the lines of what he deemed "protest," protest against powerlessness and the perception of inner limitation. Although he often employed a gendered term for his adjective ("masculine protest") the instinct against servitude and persecution was the domain of all, especially women. Though one may take issue with Adler's use of a gendered adjective here, bear in mind that at the same moment Freud seriously advanced the notion of "penis envy," on the part of women.

For Adler, the roots of psychological suffering, the mild form of disorder known as neurosis, was found in the social. For Freud, suffering was related to sex and abuse. In Adler, emotional instability and high reactivity had its roots in the constant conscious efforts to avoid social devaluation. Humans are ultimately mostly driven to avoid debasement by others. As anyone who has ever gone through middle school knows, humiliation is the thing dreaded most of all. For those who do develop full blown neuroses, they live life "as if in an enemy country." Adler understood the symptoms of sufferings as expressed in neurosis as an "advance to the rear." Neurotics build a wall against communal and cooperative life, contrary to the state of being known as "*mitmensch*" or "living with the human." In German, this term also implies living with other humans as well a general humanistic disposition. Neurotics strive for a sense of security, but end up fashioning a fictional secondary rail track of life, a devil's circle that often only exacerbates insecurity and isolation.

Psychoanalytic Tools Against Fascism

Though Freud wrote about "group psychology" and "discontent with civilization" he shied away from direct analysis of fascism. Only the Marxian-inspired Frankfurt School during the war years would apply his theories to the analysis of toxic political actors. What Adorno and Horkheimer would call the "authoritarian personality" had already been identified as "reactionary" and "ultraradical" personality complexes by Adler decades earlier. Certain neuroses such as these could pose clear threats to society and be clearly politically identifiable. Adler further postulated the idea of the "social returns" of neurosis. Some neurotics can exploit their own symptoms to dominate others. This process has the two-fold benefit of manipulating others while screening out further their own discomfiting reality. In other words, it makes them even more blind to their own suffering and its sources.

Adler's home base of 1920s Red Vienna embodied his commitments and offers many lessons for today. Between Imperial monarchism and fascism, Vienna enjoyed a brief interlude of courageous and experimental social democracy. Then as now child care was seen as the linchpin to social health and class equity. As Vienna City Councillor Julius Tandler once said, "the resources we devote to care for the pregnant and toddlers we can save building more institutions for the mentally ill." At the height of Red Vienna in 1927, Adler signed onto a declaration of principles on behalf of the Social Democratic city government, along with many other leading intellectuals and artists. In contemporary America, scientists and academics signing on to public policy and social welfare projects is all too rare.

Adler's key innovation and contribution to Red Vienna was his development of outpatient psychoanalytic clinics, 27 in total. They were often located in schools, and free of charge. In a move controversial at the time, Adler held public therapy sessions especially for teachers themselves. Especially distinctive was that Adler would treat schoolchildren as his equals. Therapy sessions were often fully public and would integrate family and other members of the social milieu into the therapeutic process. This bold and innovative turn to community psychiatry came closest thing ever to therapy as a civic, social utility in the history of psychology. Adler shifted the limited Freudian goal of attaining an "ordinary level of unhappiness," to a psychology with the "guiding star of universal welfare."

Though those clinics were suddenly shut down by the Austrian fascist regime in 1934, the reports of the relief they brought to children and family lived on for generations in memory. Some districts in Vienna never returned to the low delinquency rates they enjoyed during the years of Adler's clinics. It is these clinics that come nearest to my fantasies of mobile rapid response trucks for inner-city schools and housing projects. We could do worse for a starting point to finally end the apartheid that still exists within psychoanalysis which often means psychology for the rich and psychics for the poor.

Mad in America hosts blogs by a diverse group of writers. These posts are designed to serve as a public forum for a discussion—broadly speaking—of psychiatry and its treatments. The opinions expressed are the writers' own.

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Adam J Sacks currently serves as a Lecturer for the School of Humanities at the University of Hong Kong. He has published two short books of cultural criticism, one on *Parsifal* (2021) and the other on the *Passion Play of Oberammergau* (2023). His forthcoming book is a survey of *Music and Global Politics: From Beethoven to Beyoncé* and he is currently editing Dr. Lawrence Mass' "shadow memoir" of the American composer Ned Rorem, *Wayfaring with Ned Rorem*. He also publishes a podcast, performance reviews and poetry.

