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Book Review Essay: “Psychoanalysis, Clinic and Context – Subjectivity, History and Autobiography” by Ian Parker

Psychoanalysis, Clinic and Context – Subjectivity, History and Autobiography

by Ian Parker

London and New York, 2020, 208pp.

It has been summarily difficult for me to review this book for a personal reason. I will not reveal it until its ending.

Although I never met him in person, I am familiar with Ian Parker’s journey through various publications I was able to read and the seriously documented entry offered by Wikipedia which I advise the reader to consult simultaneously or, even better, before reading this review.

The book delivers what its title advances: from a clearly autobiographical perspective, Ian Parker, without specifying details one could call “personal,” without any reference to his feelings or emotions, which constitute the marrow of most autobiographies, dedicates himself to reconstructing his philosophical, personal, political, and institutional trajectory within British psychoanalysis (specifically in London). Neither is this an autobiography as prosopagnostic as Freud’s in his “objective” *An Autobiographical Study* (1925). As psychoanalysts, we know there is more autobiography in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* than in this apathetically commissioned “*Selbstdarstellung*.”

Parker offers us a detailed description, without obeying an auto-imposed chronological order, of the many meetings with people, books, ideologies, and institutions through which his life was constructed. His story is not one of successive casual encounters but of an incessant search for the construction of a personal system of thought aimed at understanding the complexities of the human being, better said, the subjectivity of speaking beings in their relation to the Other.

The book couldn’t lack the description of the consequences that his readings of Marx, Freud, Trotsky, Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, Melanie Klein, Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and the surviving disciples of Lacan (J.-A. Miller, C. Soler, J. Allouch, etc.) had over his conception of the world. Neither does he spare us the vicissitudes of his participation in various institutions pretending to participate or belong to the “Freudian field.”

He describes in detail his activity as a professor at his university, his own analytic formation, his personal analysis, the supervisory processes he went through, his participation in groups, Lacanian cartels, the pressures to be included as a member of diverse institutions, the beginning of his clinical practice, and his strict vigilance over his own narcissistic propensities which would enter in direct contradiction to the vital and institutional project that guided him.

At the nodal point of this crossroads, we glimpse a project in which Ian Parker, not being the first, was one of the most unrelenting protagonists in the last 30 years: a tradition aiming at the integration of a Marxist and Freudian psychology in which, starting from 1950's, the name and teachings of Lacan could not be ignored. Additionally, and this is essential, the orienting compass to avoid going astray was that of "critical thought" as it was set by the forerunners of this project, Th. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, a compass that, to a large extent, was deprived of its North by the idealistic Hegelian reading, widespread in our time, through the charismatic figure of Slavoj Žižek who assumes speaking in the name of all those authors. It's worth noting here that the description of the encounter between Parker and Žižek in Ljubljana is the funniest anecdote of an oeuvre as personal and objective as *Subjectivity, History and Autobiography*.

It is worth underscoring that Parker's book, let's say the entirety of the personal trajectory of the author, doesn't aim at giving a coherent discourse integrated with a university curriculum for psychologists or psychoanalysts where "things" could be learned by reading one or several books. One gathers clearly upon tracing this oeuvre about psychoanalysis that the goal of the author is to set the basics for a *clinical practice* centered on the analyst's discourse, averse to the discourse of the university which parrots the master's discourse, quite aware of the final transformation of the master's discourse when it becomes the capitalist discourse.

Thus, Parker's words are embittered when he challenges the statements and methods of Science, which was defined by Lacan (1973) as "an ideology of the suppression of the subject." Such is the project of contemporary academic psychology in all its branches which should end in a reduction of subjectivity to the neuroscientific knowledge of cerebral functioning.

This psychology finds, in the clinical field, its culmination and its gospel in the DSM of the American Psychiatric Association which subordinates the infinite ways of human suffering to the discourse of medicine. Parker doesn't restrain himself on this point and extends his diatribe to mount an assault upon the widely preached "psychoanalytic psychopathology" based on a supposed Lacanian tripartition of the human subject according to three "clinical structures" (perversion, neurosis, and psychosis) which are presupposed from the origin to the end of life, unmodifiable, among which the analyst should identify his patient before deciding about the initiation and direction of the cure. Parker contests, coinciding with many other authors, amongst whom I count myself, the attribution to Freud of a clear cut distinction among the supposed three "structures."

Thus culminates, naturally, closing the circle that begins with the great Freudian invention which is that of asking patients to speak until they themselves can find, with the help of interspersed interventions by the psychoanalyst, the key to their symptoms and their suffering in what Freud dubbed as "unconscious," the "unknown" (*Unbewusst*). That circle that shuts with a commandment to which today's analyst owes obedience and which is none other than to keep listening, lending ears to "*Civilization and its Discontents*". This discontent, this Unbehagen, manifests itself through discourse and the experience of each one of those subjects which are our analysands, is split, one by one, between the two poles of desire and jouissance. The subject of the unconscious, not liable to being pigeonholed or classified by the knowledge of psychoanalysts who always find themselves facing a subjective position of each one of their "patients", fluctuating for each analysand all along the time of the session according to their relationship to the Other within the transference space.

The demand on the analyst in our time of "technoscientific revolution," the ideology that aims at the suppression the subject, is that of a return to Freud overthrowing every statue of "the subject supposed to

know;” that \$\$\$ (*subject supposed to Know*) which today should be found materialized in the internet, that is to say, the contraption that encompasses the knowledge of the world due to the interconnection between all computers, or that could be incarnated in the psychoanalyst, consecrated by some version of diploma or nomination (including the Lacanian “passe”).

On top of this demand made to the psychoanalyst, there is another one, by no means of less weight, that of debating without barriers the internal and external reasons as to why psychoanalysis is so embattled from the exterior and encounters so few in defense of its cause, determined to maintain the validity of the discovery of the unconscious and its essential meaning en route to the comprehension of *subjectivity* in the midst of a torrential tidal wave of the owners of *objective* reason, masquerading as “scientific.”

The readers who embarked in reading this review, if they have reached this point, may have forgotten that I wrote about my personal difficulty in developing this laudatory praise of the book. I will manifest it now: despite multiple differences, due to the geographic, linguistic, and chronological mismatch, (Parker was born in England in 1965, myself in Argentina in 1941), and I could enumerate a number of biographic distances, but I must say it now, this volume of charming and pleasant reading, surprised me because of the parallelism of our trajectories (it would require another Plutarch to showcase them). I will abstain from citing the coincidences, often surprising...

We are speaking about his autobiography, not mine, which now only matters in terms of its convergence. I will only highlight the oxymoron produced when I say that our footprints, within reach to anyone who might be interested in them, are, simultaneously, *parallel and converging* in that both of us are based in the same sources and oriented toward what we perceive as an urgent necessity: the construction of a *materialist psychology* based on the radical critique of academic psychology and, I anticipate to think that Ian Parker will agree with me, deprived of every enshrinement of proper names that could be, in an inconvenient manner, those of our ego ideals.

I would be remiss if I did not invite the reader to read the last paragraph of the book:

“Psychoanalysis sets itself against those apparatuses, ideologies and powerful individuals who say that they know how we think. They do not know how people think, and neither should you think you can know how people think, by learning about psychoanalysis, by learning how to “psychoanalyze” other people. Psychoanalysis is not what you think; it challenges, subverts the very idea, challenges and subverts each and every normative notion about subjectivity. That is what makes it radical, and that is why I remain committed to it as one among many different radical frameworks for grasping what is to be a human being.”

Translated from the Spanish by Diana Cuello & Fernando Castrillón

Bio:

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