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The Inevitability of Stereotypes

“There is no worse lie than a truth misunderstood”

William James (1986, p. 365)

The correspondence between Darian Leader and the editorial staff of *Essaim* confirms a state of affairs that Leader has the merit of questioning. I would call this state of affairs: Imaginary Reconstruction of Psychoanalysis. As Bernard Shaw said, “Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance”.

I had my training in the 1970s first in Paris and then in Italy. I actively attended Lacanian schools in France and Italy, but also other analytic institutions and currents. What united the various French and Italian schools, whether Lacanian or anti-Lacanian or a-Lacanian, was a common contempt for “American psychoanalysis” and in particular for Ego Psychology. (While the Lacanians themselves showed some respect for the “English” masters, like Winnicott and M. Klein.) It was condemned by the various currents with almost the same words: that American psychoanalysis had put itself at the service of the American Way of Life, which was “adaptive” to social demands, betraying the original inspiration, considered revolutionary, of Freud. For over 50 years the Italian sections of the IPA (SPI) have been pro-British (Klein, Winnicott, Bion, London’s Tavistock Clinic).

Then I also read texts of these “traitors”, the Ego psychologists, and I found that some were not as evil as I had been told. For example, I found Erik Erikson’s *Childhood and Society* beautiful, especially the reconstruction of the childhoods of Hitler and Gorky... I realized that, if analyzed in depth, certain theses of the “Americans” were not so far from what the “Europeans” claimed, even if the language they used was different. I tried to show this in a recent book (in Italian) about a case that Leader and *Essaim* discuss, that of Kris’ “fresh brains eater” (*La ballata del mangiatore di cervella*, Orthotes, 2020). In the book, I examine the reconstruction not only of Kris’ case by Lacan, but also the way in which Lacan (1975) analyzes clinical vignettes of Anna Freud and Annie Reich in his *Seminar I (Freud’s Technical Writings)*, and I draw from it the conclusions that Lacan’s criticisms of these analysts are based, at least in part, on a biased interpretation, which makes one suspect a misunderstanding. This is not to conclude that Kris, Anna Freud and Annie Reich are right and Lacan is wrong, but to offer another kind of less dichotomous, more historically serene look.

I soon realized that this “American psychoanalysis” was in fact an Austro-German psychoanalysis transplanted to the USA not because of an elective affinity between these analysts and “American ideology”, but simply because they fled the war in Europe and sought refuge in the U.S. In fact, the typical figure of the psychoanalyst in America, as seen in many American films, is an austere gentleman who speaks with a German accent... In the 1970s analysts in Italy repeated “we have been colonized by American psychoanalysis!”, but in fact the opposite was true: so-called American psychoanalysis was in fact a psychoanalytic Jewish-Austro-German colonization of America, which at some point (the 1980s) lost its

charisma to the benefit of a *truly American* psychiatry and psychotherapy (think of the DSMs, which are really American!).

Most of the major “American” psychoanalysts were born in *Mitteleuropa* and mostly came to America quite late in their lives. Kris, born in Vienna, arrived there at the age of 40. Heinz Hartmann, born in Vienna, at 47. Rudolph Löwenstein, Lacan’s analyst, born in Lodz, Poland, at 44. David Rapaport, of Hungarian origin, at the age of 27. Heinz Kohut, born in Vienna, at the age of 27. Margareth Mahler, a Hungarian, emigrated at the age of 41. Karen Horney, born near Hamburg, at 47 years old. Erich Fromm, born in Frankfurt-am-Main, at the age of 34. Erik Erikson, born in Frankfurt-am-Main, at the age of 31. Franz Alexander, born in Budapest, at the age of 39. More recently, Otto Kernberg, born in Vienna and first emigrated to Chile, moved to the United States at the age of 33. And we could continue with most of the famous “American” psychoanalysts.

On the other hand, the most popular critic of American ego psychology, Herbert Marcuse, lived in America himself: he had emigrated to the United States at the age of 36, in 1934, also to escape Nazism (he was born in Berlin). We can therefore see the great appeals for or against Ego Psychology, which became dominant after the Second World War, as a debate largely *within* the Austro-German intelligentsia that emigrated to the United States. This conclusion was confirmed for me when I learned that Ego Psychology was always hegemonic in Germany after the war, when psychoanalysis resurrected there. Even my analyst friends in German-speaking Switzerland were all trained in the line of Anna Freud and Ego Psychology. Because this appeared to them as the prolonged logic of the original Austro-German psychoanalysis. (We should consider why German speaking culture has not been impacted by Lacanianism at all, as compared to other important cultures.) So, we should speak, in fact, of a German-American current that dominated IPA psychoanalysis at least until the 1970s. The only truly dissident psychoanalysis was certain British schools (also created by an émigré, Melanie Klein) and then some French ones, formed, yes, all by psychoanalysts who were French by birth.

This hasty identification of an “American psychoanalysis” explains some of Lacan’s oversights when, on several occasions, he comments on Kris’ case of the brainer (Leader mentioned some of these). For example, the first time Lacan spoke about it, in his Seminar (February 10, 1954), he described this patient as an American from New York. But if he had read the text more carefully, he would have understood that this patient was a Londoner[1] (Kris practiced as an analyst in London from 1938 to 1940, before going to the United States). Given his desire to Americanize Kris, Lacan ends up Americanizing his patient as well. (After all, Lacan had an old grudge with Kris who he himself reveals to us.[2])

I don’t want to say that Lacan acted in bad faith! Even Lacan had an unconscious, this means that he could distort what he read. Just like anybody else, he saw the world through the grid of certain cultural assumptions of the time and of his own country, and through his own unconscious. And who does not have, moreover, these assumptions? Contemporary philosophy has problematized the concept of *prejudice* (cf. Georg Gadamer): is a thinking that does without prejudice thinkable? Each recognition of the other takes place against the background of prejudices that must certainly be overcome, but that must be there to be overcome.

For example, at the zenith of his demolishing critique of Kris, Lacan mocks the fact that the Austrian analyst speaks of patients’ “behavior patterns.” He basically taunts Kris for adopting a behaviorist language alien to psychoanalysis. But precisely, *what did* Kris mean by using an English term not familiar to himself (one must guess what German term he had in mind)? Now, because of the context of the article, it is understood that Kris refers to something that every analyst knows, namely the fact that a subject always *repeats many of the same acts*. We could also say, he always repeats the same mistakes. It is a way of manifesting repetition, which Kris here calls *pattern* thinking perhaps of a *Gestalt*. But said in this way, even a Lacanian could accept the idea.

Another example: each “good Lacanian” rejects the “American ideology of the autonomous ego”; the concept itself of “autonomy” is banned from psychoanalysis. But when Lacan, in his Seminar *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* talks about the analytic ideals, he says that one of these is the ideal of non-dependence[3]. And he seems to accept this ideal as essential in analytic ethics-practice. But “non-dependence” is just the other (negative) side of autonomy. Why is it that “autonomous” is a bad concept when it is written in English and becomes good when it is written in French as “*non-dépendance*”?

Using Frege’s famous distinction between *Sinne* and *Bedeutung*, sense and reference (Frege 1892/1980), we could say that *Sinnen* differences – evidenced by the linguistic differences between French and English – are taken as *Bedeutungen* differences, which is not always true. That is, in a different terminology, we squabble over certain “idioms” rather than over what is said. This is the trap of all inclusion in a cultural *mannerism*: the jargon you use in order to say something (in *that* circle, in *that* tongue) becomes the essential thing, and is taken for the thing itself[4]. In all fields (philosophy, social sciences, art, literature... psychoanalysis) all leading creators of a doctrine have thought deeply about their creation, but with time their doctrines, passing to disciples, become more and more mannerisms.

Like many European intellectuals of the time, including Freud, Lacan was both an Anglophile (also because of the role the UK had played against Nazism) and an anti-American. It must be said, however, that over time Lacan saw America with different eyes, also because he had been well received there. I remember well the seminar of Lacan on December 9, 1975, which I myself attended. While he was talking about his (catastrophic) encounter with Noam Chomsky, an American student intervened from the audience to defend Chomsky. It was then that Lacan said, clearly, that in America the audience had made acute remarks to him for which he felt understood there, while the French audience, alas, seemed sleepy to him...[5]

On the other hand, Lacan’s Franco-centrism is another – this time anti-Lacanian – cliché which should be seriously revised. Let’s not forget that Lacan starts his *Ecrits* with a comment on an American writer, Poe. And we can say that, Lacan virtually closes his *Séminaire* with an English-speaking writer, Joyce. It seems that English literature occupies the alpha and omega of his work. And he invited other persons to talk in his Seminar (this was a dream for a lot of his pupils!) about Peirce’s (the analytic philosopher François Recanati)[6] and Bateson’s thought (the psychoanalyst Gisela Pankow)[7].

The truth is that intellectuals, of any culture, are permeable to prejudices and cultural stereotypes no less than ordinary people. Sometimes I am literally amazed to hear, on the part of intellectuals whom I respect and whom I find an affinity with in their work, unleash completely false clichés about countries, authors, movements... Paraphrasing Descartes, I would say that prejudices are among the best shared things among people. Of course, I can recognize a false bias when the other tells me about things I know quite well. But if an economist, a theoretical physicist, an astronomer or an expert on Eastern thought speaks to me – fields in which I am not a specialist – I am not able to judge whether what he tells me is truth or nonsense. So, I suppose that speaking falsehoods and nonsense, even by experts, is much more frequent than I imagine. In fact, if illustrious philosophers make distortions about a part of philosophy that I know well (and I happen to hear them, even on TV), this means that no one, not even a Nobel Laureate, is immune from the danger of believing in falsehoods even in their *own field* due to their political or philosophical or other prejudices.

When I first went to the United States, in 1989, and lived there for three years, I too was full of prejudices about America, without realizing it. Prejudice is subtle because it is never reported as such, but manifests itself as acquired truth, “well known things”, obviousness... For example, I thought that American culture was essentially neopositivist and analytical, but I soon realized that in New York the cultural stars were... Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, then Agamben. The New York of the 1990’s, it seemed to me, was a return to the Paris of the 1970’s, where I had spent the better part of the decade.

Another nonsense I believed because it was repeated in Italy: that American university studies are highly specialized and avoid overall visions. I realized that the opposite was true: while in Italy the university curricula are quite rigid, in the great American universities (in those of secondary ranking it is different) the

student has a boundless freedom to study what s/he wants ... In fact, American culture believes in this principle: what matters is not what you know, but your ability to learn. And this ability is acquired through an exquisitely individual path.

Back in Europe, therefore, I realized that a lot of intellectuals had a completely false image of American society and culture and ignored its complexity. Certainly, like any culture, America has horrible aspects (political [and sexual] correctness is one of these), but also creative and exhilarating aspects. Every great culture is complex, multifaceted, contradictory (as Leader reminds us about psychoanalysis). Even French culture has ridiculous and detestable aspects (a certain chauvinism) as well as exquisite aspects peculiar to it. And there are terrible and delightful aspects in Italian culture. Global judgments about a culture are almost always forms of racism and ethnocentrism. It is individuals who are worthy or not worthy, not nations or cultures.

Years ago, in a public conference a very popular Italian philosopher chanted the most trivial anti-American slogans. For him, America was the triumph of dehumanizing technology, and he ended up saying, snatching the applause of a low-brow audience, "But do you think Americans have a soul?" A rhetorical question for him. The Jews after all, according to the Nazis, did not have a soul.

There are certainly many American prejudices against other nations as well. I was struck by an anti-French sentiment among Americans that surpasses, in my opinion, the anti-American sentiment of many French people. I could not understand the deep reasons for this. After all, France and the United States have historically been countries that have always been friends and allies. For a century American intellectuality had chosen Paris – not London, nor Berlin, nor Vienna, nor Rome – as its *European home*. But among ordinary people the French are detested. *Hypothesis non fingo*.

To the national clichés are then added the "school clichés". In all fields adverse schools produce clichés against rival schools, biases that turn out to be mostly fake news or misunderstandings. I listen every day to false clichés against the Lacanians, just as I listen every day to false clichés of the Lacanians against other analytical schools, of which they have read little or nothing.

For example, it was widely believed in Italy that Lacanian psychoanalysis was something literary, based essentially on texts and not on the clinic, which is why it could be a good cure for writers and journalists ... Strange idea, since Lacan has always insisted on *parole*, speech.

And so it is in philosophy, in the social sciences... Everywhere.

Hence the tremendous, abysmal question: *Aren't our world views*, whatever they may be, all *falsifications of reality*? Read Heidegger's pages on the *Weltanschauungen*, the world views (Heidegger 1951). That is, has not the world in which we live become a fairy tale, as Nietzsche said? All world views are false, but we cannot live and think without these falsifications... Reality, even cultural reality, is always very complex, so each of us, even the most scrupulous and dispassionate, needs *simplifications* to orient ourselves in reality. Biases, stereotypes, urban legends, distorted history, etc. are perhaps inevitable ways of giving shape to the world, so as not to be overwhelmed by the chaos of reality. This also applies to clinical practice.

It would be an interesting job to collect all the falsehoods that are part of the historiographical baggage of every analyst. Opponents of psychoanalysis such as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen have written much to deconsecrate the hagiographic historical image that most analysts have of the life and work of Freud and other pioneers. Although Borch-Jacobsen's (2012) intentions are bad, it seems to me that he says many precise things. As in every field (even scientific) a sort of Canon is built, of an official historical version that is mostly mythical, in spite of all the historiographical denials.

The fact that lies are even introduced into the history of science must make us think. For example, it was believed for centuries that Galileo had demonstrated in public his theory of the fall of the objects by throwing objects of different weights from the leaning tower in Pisa![8] Imagine then with psychoanalysis!

I end with a grotesque anecdote. An Italian IPA psychoanalyst once wrote an essay on Anna Freud for our *Journal of European Psychoanalysis* that was full of inaccuracies and clichés. For example, at one point she wrote that while Breuer had failed to heal Anna O., fleeing with his wife to Venice, Freud had instead been able to heal her. This fable is widespread both among analysts and non-experts. I reminded the author that Freud had never treated Anna O., although he had known her for other reasons, so he could not have healed her. The analyst agreed that it was true (she had checked the historiography) but she opposed correcting that point in the text. She said, “It doesn’t matter that it’s not true! This is what is believed in the analytical community. It is now part of the history of psychoanalysis...” Here is a plastic example of the obscurantism to which many analysts, of all schools, indulge.

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Notes:

[1] As, my book, A. Leibovich de Duarte (1997) rightly noted.

[2] In 1936, at the congress in Marienbad. Cf. *Ecrits II*, Seuil, Paris, p. 77.

[3] Lacan 1986, pp. 17-20.

[4] For example, many Italian Lacanians use the word *fantasma*, a translation of the French *phantasme* (phantasy), and they are sure that *fantasma* (which literally means in Italian phantom, ghost) is something different from *fantasia* (phantasy). They take a wrong translation from the French as a concept other than phantasy... If one uses *fantasia* rather than *fantasma*, one is mocked by these Lacanians. Not differences of concepts but differences of words become essential.

[5] J. Lacan 1975, pp. 39-40. According to my taped record, in the published edition Lacan's call to the French audience to intervene is missing.

[6] Seminar June 14, 1972.

[7] Seminar June 26, 1973.

[8] Cf. Alexandre Koyré (1973, p. 213 et suiv.) Yet a knowledge of classical mechanics would be enough to realize that, if he had done so, Galileo would have brought unto himself a great deal of ridicule. This legend is precocious, it is already found in one of the first seventeenth-century biographers of Galileo, Vincenzo Viviani (V. Viviani, *Racconto storico della vita di Galilei, Opere*, ed. Naz. Vol. XIX, p. 606). Part of Paul Feyerabend's work on sciences show how even scientists are permeable to false rumors and theoretical prejudices.

Bio:

Sergio Benvenuto is a researcher in psychology and philosophy at the National Research Council (CNR) in Rome, Italy, and a psychoanalyst. He was editor of the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* and member of the Editorial Board of *American Imago*, *Psychoanalytic Discourse* (PSYAD) and *Philosophy World Democracy*. He teaches psychoanalysis at the International Institute of the Psychology of Depth in Kiev and at Specialization in Psychotherapy in Naples. He was or is a contributor to cultural and scientific journals such as *Lettre Internationale*, *L'évolution psychiatrique*, *DIVISION/Review*, *Journal of American Psychoanalytic Association*, etc..

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