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On Freud's Group Psychology: A Debate

This debate started after the webinar on “Subject and Masses” that took place on April 23, 2021, and which featured talks by Jean-Luc Nancy, Divya Dwivedi and Sergio Benvenuto.

You can find the speeches in:

J.-L. Nancy, in French, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/nostalgie-du-pere-en-francais-j-l-nancy/>

D. Dwivedi, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/a-mystery-of-mysteries-d-dwivedi/>

S. Benvenuto, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/one-hundred-years-of-group-psychology-and-the-analysis-of-the-ego-with-addendum/>

JEAN-LUC NANCY (24 April 2021) :

Dear Sergio and Divya,

I would like to add a few more precise words to yesterday's discussion since time had run out: the obvious proof that Freud is not concerned with politics in *Massenpsychologie* (or elsewhere) is that he takes as exemplary for him the cases of the army and the church which are precisely outside politics, [they are] even anti-politics. These “organised crowds” respond to a principle given in advance, transcendent (for the army it is the prince or the *patria*, for the Church it is God). But politics begins when there is no given principle – and in this it is *an-archic* ‘in principle’.

Freud is “archaephilic” as I recalled (I think) in the text (according to a neologism that Lacoue-Labarthe and I had coined in “The Political Panic”, which was already a commentary on *Massenpsychologie*. That is to say, on the one hand he thinks like everyone else that we need a leader, on the other hand he does not ask himself what “democracy” means... Moreover, this is perhaps linked to his preoccupations as leader of the psychoanalytical group.... beginning with the series of psychoanalytical power struggles that Sergio mentioned yesterday.

Certainly, the question of the desire for a leader remains BUT what intrigues Freud the most is the mutual identification of humans. Identification with a transcendent figure is much simpler than the former – and Freud admits that he has not cracked the riddle.

What can be said, however, is that in his myth of the first narrator of the murder of the Father Freud does see that there must be both types of identification – but he glosses over this point a little by neglecting, surely on purpose, a phrase from Hans Sachs as I explained in my text (but yesterday I skipped over this passage). And

on mutual identification he admits that he has not solved the problem.

So I would say that Freud poses the problem of democracy: how to associate subjects by something other than Eros? By a relationship not of subject to object but of subject to subject? He senses that this passes through art (poetry) but he is careful not to go looking for it in politics... .

Best wishes to you both.

SERGIO BENVENUTO (24 April 2021) :

Dear Jean-Luc, dear Divya,

When I say that the society with which Freud is concerned is “political society”, I simply mean that he is interested in “crowds” to which one belongs by choice, even if the choice is often only assumed. This is why he wrote a *Massenpsychologie*, not a *Gesellschaftspsychologie*, and not a *Mengenpsychologie*.

In this sense, the church and the army are properly political *Massen*, for one is not born a “military”; and even if as a child one is baptised by one’s parents, it is assumed that one will later choose to be a Christian, or a Jew, or a Buddhist, and so on. Whereas one is not supposed to choose to be born French or Indian or Italian; or rich or poor. A *Masse* is something one adheres to, instead a society is something one inhabits. Although one can emigrate, when the time comes.

I think Freud is dealing with “participated collectives”, not “obliged collectives”. A large prison is not a *Masse*.

So I am not saying that Freud is concerned with political groups in the Aristotelian sense, for man would be ??? ?????. political animal, he is concerned with ‘crowds’ that form themselves with a goal in mind. I would say that he is dealing with “hot” politics, not “cold” politics (Lévi-Strauss’s distinction, I believe), which in most cases consists of negotiations and agreements.

You say, Jean-Luc, that the army and the church are “‘organised crowds’ that respond to a given, transcendent principle”. But by politics I mean just that: crowds organised in relation to a predetermined, transcendent principle. For example, the communist parties were like churches, organised in relation to a predetermined transcendent principle (socialism), and I believe that one could not deny that the communist parties were politics. But this can be said of any other party, which is based on a project.

Of the three powers envisaged by Weber – the bureaucratic, the traditional and the charismatic – Freud is in fact only interested in charismatic power. In other words: the hot *Massen*, not the cold ones. Bureaucratic legality is essential in a society, but it does not make a mass: it is a neutral functioning that does not demand our personal adherence, nor a beloved leader. And even for tradition, one does not choose it, one “belongs” to it from birth.

For example, Freud does not talk about the economy at all: because the economy is not something to which we adhere. There is no “party of the economy”. You have to have money if you want to live, that’s all, you don’t have to “believe” in the economy.

And so Freud is talking about the church (which is “God’s crowd” one might say, God’s people) but not about religious rites and beliefs, which can be an important part of social life: for religion is a form of life of a people, it is not a necessarily organised mass. Religion as such ‘blankets’ social life. But there are religious parties, and then religion becomes political, mass.

In my opinion, this is why Freud does not talk about democracy, because it is a functioning to choose who should govern: it is a protocol, it is not a mass. Of course, there have been and are “democratic parties”, but insofar as democracy becomes a political programme, something that requires our partisan adherence. And as soon as a country functions democratically, a “democratic party” is meaningless. It is true that in the USA there is a democratic party, but this name comes as a legacy from the past, when democracy in America was not yet complete and therefore could be made into a programme.

There is a part of modern political thought that tends to see society itself as a political product, rather than vice versa (that there must first be a society, and that politics is defined within it). This is the case with the thought of Ernesto Laclau, for example (*The Populist Reason*).

It can be said that Freud also questions the supposed political genesis of any society.

In this sense, the myth of the parricide of the father of the horde can be read: through this myth, Freud hypothesises a political origin of all society. Indeed, a plot to kill the tyrant-father, and an agreement between the murderers, are eminently political acts. What is more political than a conspiracy? Freud believed that society was the effect of political choices, albeit bloody ones, at its source. One can doubt this, but it was his idea.

I can understand the criticism of Freud for the essential position he gives to the Führer. Indeed, Lacan, in his theory of social bonds (the *Four Discourses*), no longer speaks of a leader but of S1, of the *significant-maître*, master-signifier. For there to be a social bond, there must be a master-signifier, a master position, somewhere. In our three-way discourse, which Lacan would call “university’s discourse”, the master-signifier is repressed beneath knowledge. We don’t see it.

That is all I wanted to say in the webinar.

In friendship

Sergio

JEAN-LUC NANCY (25 April 2021) :

For my part, I see in Freud only one essential thing: the mythical birth of the community, of the being-together; mythical meaning passing through the word.

In other words, it is the word that makes the common and vice versa; but the word not as information, [rather] as creation, invention or imagination and first of all creation of the similarity that is neither the same nor exteriority: this is the question of identification that Freud stumbles upon – and I don’t pretend to solve this question but rather to understand how it is insoluble or is not a “question”.

And as such [it] entirely precedes anything that would be “choice” or “participation” and that can only be called “politics” by an abuse of language: I would rather say that politics (the very idea of the city) appeared when there was no longer any founding transcendence: this is what Greek history shows.

I therefore understand that we speak in heterogeneous registers, which is normal.

SERGIO BENVENUTO (25 avril 2021):

Yes, we are talking in heterogeneous registers. But I believe that they are not exclusive for that.

I agree with you that for Freud the birth of the community is mythical in the sense that a myth constitutes it. And that Freud's theory is therefore a myth about a myth.

Even the *Urvater* is a myth. I would not translate *Sehnsucht* "nostalgia of the father"—nostalgia would be rather *Heimweh*. *Sehnsucht*, an untranslatable word—but perhaps as *poignant longing*. Freud seems to say that subjectivity starts from a poignant longing for a myth, for the *Urhorde*, the original horde (in fact, a mythical *Gemeinschaft*).

It is true that what we call politics is part of a community. But in *Massenpsychologie* Freud privileges the political dimension of the mass, hence the importance he gives to the charismatic leader. One can disagree with him, but it seems to me that his choice is clear.

JEAN-LUC NANCY (25 April 2021) :

Dear Divya

I was finally able to read [your text] because the translation is not too bad (except for a few obscurities) and I find your analysis very accurate and very penetrating! You understand very well what Freud's research is and it is very interesting to orient it towards the death drive (especially as one could say that what dies is the "I" and not the "id")—that is to say that here as elsewhere Freud does not cease to push back further the obscurity of the origin (instead of "explaining" it as is often thought)—and from this point of view Lacan is also very ambiguous: he acknowledges the mystery (by saying that it is "poem") but he still has to fabricate explanations (like "master-signifier" or "**split subject**" which are basically ways of naming what is not nameable but makes naming possible).

My only deviation from you is in what I just added in my answer to Sergio: for me, "myth" is the nascent word in which the "common" opens up—and that is why, as you point out, it is Freud who invents the "common", it is Freud who invents the myth of the first mythologist—and he invents it by naming him "poet", which is in line with what he has always said about art—this is why your use of Poe's poem is excellent and the idea of the "mystery of mysteries" expresses exactly what makes Freud say that "the impulses are our myths".

Your recourse to the myth of the origin of life is very enlightening and you have tied up a very important link between the texts of Freud that we are talking about—and you are right to say that everything that amounts to talking about the master's desire counts for little in relation to the question that you designate through Eichmann as that of the "agents" of mass membership, which, as you say, can be (and I would say always are) apparatuses because it is—I think—a question proper to modernity, where the founding myth is somehow diluted (and lost as a religious or poetic myth) in a general rational necessity (a technocracy).

This is less the question of myth and mystery than that of the absence of myth and the domination of a supposed "logos"—and that is why it becomes a set of pratico-ideological apparatuses and is no longer even a "political" matter.

(but there's one thing I don't understand: when you spoke you started by talking about "anarchy" and in your text there's nothing about it... ???)

In any case I think that what I want to indicate as primordial anarchy communicates with what you say about the death drive).

DIVYA DWIVEDI (25 April 2021) :

Dear Jean-Luc, dear Sergio,

Thank you very much! I too was moved by the brief discussion after the seminar, and thanks a lot to you Jean-Luc for opening this conversation and for your precious comments on my text.

As Jean-Luc said, politics is *an-archic*, that is, it begins from where there is no given principle. I would like to add that politics begins in this way because we are the “community of the forsaken”, the forsaken of transcendent ends. Transcendent origins and ends do not constitute our changing regularities, rather it is our inventions and our imagination which do so. Some of us create them, some of us examine them and some of us find the means to exchange them for when new ends.

If I may venture to explain in my own way what Jean-Luc and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe called Freud’s “archaephilia”: Freud looks for the arch? (origin and principle) that rules over identification such that mass as well as individual can be grounded in the psychic apparatus, and he finds it in the death drive (*the goal of all life is death*), a notion that I cannot agree with. The arch? (as principle) in Freud that corresponds to his arch? (as origin), which is the death drive, is what I proposed to call the *regression principle*— of which the pleasure principle would be a modification, given that Eros is a modification (a *partialtrieb*) of the death drive (and the reality principle is a further modification of the pleasure principle). In that case, nostalgia (drive to return) is only another name of the regression principle (the death drive is the compulsion to repeat).

In his *Zollikon Seminars*, Heidegger’s concern about Freud also comes to us as a necessary caution: namely, that that theory of drives was pure hypothesis and was not scientific even according to contemporary scientific standards; and that in striving to be scientific (retaining the cartesian subject-object relation), Freud substituted causality for origin, which, since explanations cannot be found in consciousness, it is posited in the unconscious (where, as we saw, the death drive as origin pulsates). (I must add that his *Nirvana principle* has been among the elements that has perpetuated the calamitous caste system in India, with its myth of origin, social organization, absolute, and mute submission forgoing the appearance of politics in the subcontinent.)

Consequently, what is the genuine mystery to us – how individuals mutually identify, or how subjects relate to other subjects without the mediation of object, as Jean-Luc says – is foreclosed by Freud, even though he experienced the origin as something receding further into the past, into pre-history. According to Freud, secondary identification is very much mediated by displacements and redirections of object-cathexis and primary identification, which itself has its origin in the death drive, which too is very much mediated (delayed, detoured, directed) by Eros. And primary identification in the oral stage is inseparable from first object-choice (which is “imitative” and therefore itself identifying); so that what he calls “ambivalence” is the interchangeability of “having x” (object) and “being like x” (example, identification, *sich anlehnen*). Thus, *being in common* and *having (something) in common* are interchangeable, *being*-retains the character of *having*-; love retains this ambivalence, and Freud loses sight of “*existence in common*” because he determines it as *being-having*.

Is there not then an enormous difference between an-archy and identification as *existence en commun* on the one hand, and the archaephilic types of identification on the other? (We can add very quickly that this an-archy must also be distinguished from the misguided anarchic political projects and theoretical paradigms that are circulating today. It was what you heard me say during the discussion, Jean-Luc).

Again, Freud’s hypothesis of the myth installs the nostalgia of the father, since we know that Freud’s myth has its own principle and origin/end in nostalgic deprivation of which it is the vehicle and executor. Whereas, the impersonal call of the poem or myth or language, as Jean-Luc said, discloses our existence in common, simply by being said and not by what is said, provided that we remain capable of hearing it as the

call of no-one.

Whence would come this capacity, how can we train ourselves to listen to the obscure call of that which is no-origin? As Shaj wrote in "On the Relation between the Obscure, The Cryptic and the Public", it is by learning to be the obscure animal that we are: "Reason's objective reality is such obscure exigency which does not come with a plan. Freedom constitutes man as an animal that does not respond causally to the world. [...] Reason is the power to be free; politics is the training [...] to be the obscure animal. The sense we might get in Kant's clarification of man into the obscure animal is of a being subject to no plan, but, in fact, it is characterized by a preparedness for any plan." This preparedness needs politics as the fight for freedom, freedom from transcendent ends. If there ever could be a name for this project it is "democracy", for democracy is not a protocol because this project can have no pre-determined protocol since protocols are characterized by their repetition according to rules. Politics today has come to mean managerial protocols and processes, of which voting is only one. But politics is not the formation of collectivities by designating our friends and our enemies, and by staging fictions of civilizational conflict. Rather, politics as the fight for freedom is ever inventive since the conditions of politics themselves change; rather, we create and fight for the as yet unknown conditions. What we fight for every time is freedom, that is, letting the open remain open. And in this, the reciprocal relations between art, philosophy and politics, while keeping their differences, is needed or else none of them will be individually possible. Is not *Demosophia* also the name for just this task, this promise?

So, it is true that Freud could not look for mutual identification or being-with in politics although he should have, and he could not think democracy; nor could he look for the birth of the common in art and poetry (the force of inventions that call us impersonally, non-subjectively) since he could not conceive a community (or crowd or mass, whatever we may prefer to call it) that was not organized either by a leader-position (in which some object would be set-up as leader) or by a transcendent idea (*patrie*, prince, priest, god, that is, an idea or element that would occupy the same status as the leader).

Here I recall that our seminar took place under the pressing call voiced by Jean-Luc of the disastrous pandemic situation, especially in India, Brazil and other places. In India, we are constantly told the myth of a powerful, decolonial-indigenous leader who had defeated Covid by February 2021. This hoax has allowed the real disaster to unfold without any opposition, criticism or scrutiny of this leader and his government. And the ash rises from the road-side funeral pyres. This hoax was projected and maintained not by the mythic structure of belief (as though the populace desired to believe this hoax of a leader) but by the concerted force of the media, the judiciary, the corporations who have the power to disregard what people think and want. (Even today, his government has asked Twitter to delete the tweets critical of its handling of the pandemic, and since twitter is complying due to its commercial interest, the actual disbelief of Indian people in his myth cannot be heard.)

Indeed, that is why Freud's mass is *anti-political*. We must learn to recognize anti-politics. Shaj and I had sought to expose another anti-politics at work in the life and writings of another influential thinker, namely, the *theological anti-politics* of Gandhi.

But the most important task at hand is: the redefinition of Eros itself, of the unconscious (which Freud taught us not to ignore), of identification (or being-with; Jean-Luc's oeuvre is already the commencement of this rethinking), and of "origin".

My warm wishes to you

SERGIO BENVENUTO (30 April 2021) :

You have opened a lot of problems, and I realise that comments from me would be too long.

I still think that the mass that Freud is dealing with is political, for the reasons I have explained. But it may well be that you give “*politics*” and therefore “*anti-politics*” a very special meaning, which is legitimate. But it does not correspond to what Aristotle meant by politics, for example, when he wrote that man is ???
?????????.

Here I would like to say one thing about the identification between the members of a mass. As I understand it, Divya has problems with this.

In fact Freud calls “identification” quite different processes. The distinction, proposed by Lacan, between an imaginary and a symbolic identification is already a start to clarify this concept.

I would even have problems calling the bond between “comrades” “identification”. As a young man I was a political activist, so I know how it goes. I think it’s a bond of brotherhood or sisterhood. If one is a sibling in relation to a common parent, then one is ‘on the same side’ (political, philosophical, artistic, military, etc.) if one follows the same leader – or, according to Lacan’s rewriting, if one puts oneself under the same Master-Signifier. We feel as “brothers” or “sisters” by a symbolic sharing, for the fact that we are inside or outside this symbolic line. And it is enough for this symbolic line to move, for *fraternité*, brotherhood (called identification by Freud) to become ‘*fratuerrenité*’... Camaraderie is unthinkable without a symbolic cleavage between ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ as Carl Schmitt put it.

The difference with Freud is that he still sees the Führer as a concrete person, but the Führer can be the Cause. The Cause is the cause (in the sense of ?????) of all *Massen*. In this sense I say that the crowd that Freud deals with is essentially political, which does not prevent us from also analysing the anti-political drive, I would say, *the anti-political illusion*.

In fact, the so-called “conservative parties” often appeal to anti-politics, telling voters, “You only have to think about their own affairs, I’ll take care of governing so that you don’t have to deal with politics.” In modern societies, a lot of politics stem from an anguish over politics, since thinking politically implies considering the “common good”, when the actual concern is one’s own “good”. Anti-politics offers an illusion, a self-deception. And yet, a typical rightist statement— “We don’t talk about politics here!”— is already a political statement. Kant spoke about *ungesellige Geselligkeit*....maybe we should also talk about *unpolitische Politik*.