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The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Sep 28, 2022

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/culture-subject-psyche-dialogues-in-psychoanalysis-and-anthropology/>

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Book Review Essay: “Culture, Subject Psyche: Dialogues in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology” by Anthony Molino, editor

This volume by Anthony Molino could not be more timely. A study woven in the form of a dialogue between anthropology and psychoanalysis, it shuttles between disciplines whose past contacts occasioned frequent comparisons of their respective practices and theories. Those who are familiar with both fields – practically coeval in their historical genesis – know well the difficulty of dwelling on the border between the two. And yet, at the same time, they also recognize just how fruitful the effort can be. Indeed, Molino’s renewal of this cross-disciplinary encounter is quite an auspicious one, particularly because of anthropology’s outdated approach to dealing with the unconscious, and the implications of cultural diversity for psychoanalysis.

The structure of the book, clearly outlined in the introductions by Wesley Shumar and Molino, and in the afterword by Waud Krake and Lucia Villela, unfolds through interview-conversations conducted by Molino with scholars and researchers who have made important contributions to the dialogue between anthropology and psychoanalysis. Both the choice of the title and the style of the dialogic exchange are significant. The conversation-dialogue, in fact, creates a position of tolerance: one that opens up an array of visions and viewpoints in what proves to be a collective, multi-vocal search for new forms of understanding. Molino’s book, in short, allows for a working group, a think tank of sorts, to coalesce around a common object, which is then explored in all its complexity. Obeyesekere, Crapanzano, Ewing, Williams, Rustin, Stewart, and Augé are, in fact, all names known for their engagement with anthropology, psychoanalysis and the intersection of the two.

The interview-dialogues center on the themes put forth in the title. If *culture* is used in its broad, peculiarly anthropological meaning, the term *psyche* belongs more to the sphere of psychoanalysis and unconscious processes, while *subject* appears instead as an intermediate term, always hanging in the balance in the dialectic of modern and postmodern, always constructed (even excessively), deconstructed, if not reconstructed or redefined.

The book reveals connections between theories which are not always explicit, given the fact that interdisciplinary research between the two fields has tended to be undermined by important limits and misunderstandings. In particular, anthropologists have often limited their attention to Freud, while psychoanalysts have reductively used the anthropological paradigms of only a few fundamental authors. In the prologue to the book, anthropologist Wesley Shumar indicates how Molino draws attention to key points of contact between the two disciplines in his conversations with scholars who have instead attempted to go beyond such a reductive approach:

Indeed, there is a tremendous range of unrecognized material in contemporary psychoanalysis, and it is one of the merits of Culture, Subject, Psyche to bring some of it out of the shadows and to the attention of anthropologists and cultural theorists working today. In doing so, the dialogues in this book provide us, as social scientists, with an invaluable resource to make better sense of the complex relationships between individuals and the social contexts in which we all live, work and love (p. 15).

The book's first three interviews – with Gananath Obeyesekere, Vincent Crapanzano and Katherine Ewing – together with the subsequent one of Kathleen Stewart, are linked by an especially common thread. These chapters, in fact, differentially highlight the importance of the researcher's subjective experience in his or her analysis of a chosen socio-anthropological setting. All these authors, as practicing anthropologists, enjoy an intense relationship with psychoanalysis; Ewing, moreover, even underwent analytic training. Taken together, they refer to a complex network of relations between different and contiguous cultural traditions. In particular, spurred by Molino, these authors compare and contrast their work with that of Clifford Geertz and interpretive anthropology: while accepting Geertz's paradigm in part (with respect to the hermeneutic dimension), they also reject the excessive cultural relativism that characterizes it. In fact, in the analysis of individual-group-society relations, these scholars all assert the importance of unconscious elements of symbolism, as well as the multiple levels of emotional and affective contagion inherent in fieldwork (that is, by definition, *intersubjective*).

The attempt to move beyond the antinomies of Geertzian relativism gains momentum in Crapanzano's use of the Lacanian perspective, in part shared by Ewing. Through the centrality of language, the use of Lacan helps situate the theme of hermeneutics and the search for meaning in the context of a subjective encounter with the "Other". In the interview with Ewing, however, theories of the self, as propounded by the likes of Winnicott and Kohut, are also highlighted. Indeed, while emphasizing the relational quality of these theories, for the purposes of an analysis of cultural processes Ewing notes the limits of an idea of self which tends to insist on the latter's cohesiveness, rather than on the plurality of its representations. Along these lines, Kathleen Stewart – in referring to Lacan and Bakhtin – explores the theme of the decentering/dislocation of the subject, or rather of multiple selves. In Stewart's words:

There are multiple sources of impact – many things happen – and so there are multiple 'selves': where 'self' is no longer a fixed, organized category at all (p. 142).

The themes treated by Obeyesekere differ to some extent from those of the other three authors cited up to this point. His rich and complex contribution analyzes the East-West relationship and is distinguished by the search for points of connection through an attempt to correlate Freudian discourse with Weberian sociology. Obeyesekere justifies his distance from ego psychology, although he recognizes his debt to Kardiner and Erikson, who, original as they were, still referred to it. In particular, he senses the inadequacy of the structural model (Freud's second topography), and from his own experience of fieldwork explains how he came to privilege Freud's first topography and the conscious-unconscious dialectic. In a lengthy discussion of "cultural" context and its symbolic processes, Obeyesekere further explains how he sees no clear-cut distinction between a life's private and public spheres, and how field data and subjective experience led him to infer the existence of unconscious dynamics. In this manner, and quite significantly, he attempts a rather convincing way out of the localism-universalism dichotomy. Paradoxically, in fact, while starting from something of a postmodernist position, Obeyesekere identifies throughout his ethnographic experience in Sri Lanka the existence of obvious Oedipal themes, the central subject of classical Freudian anthropological analysis. This ought not be too surprising, however: even Fischer, an anthropologist of the American dialogical school, gave more credit to the Freudian hypothesis of the Oedipus complex than to Malinowski's refutations of it.

For Crapanzano, who examines the intersubjective aspects of the fieldwork relationship, it is methodologically important for ethnoanthropological research to make room for the psychoanalytic dimension. Discussing his book *Tuhami* and its significant influence on contemporary anthropological thought, Crapanzano argues on behalf of finding ways to foster connections between the theories of the two

disciplines, and especially between their methods. Indeed, his peculiar assimilation of the psychoanalytic method to ethnography seems to derive from the sense of incompleteness that the fieldworker perceives when he refers solely to anthropological paradigms (be they neo-evolutionist, structural-functionalist, culturalist, dialogical or historicist). It is an argument in part echoed by Stewart and Ewing: the emergence of the centrality of context allows one to better fathom the field's intersubjective exchanges and relationships, and to do this the anthropologist is rather ill-equipped without psychoanalysis. In his dialogue with Crapanzano, Molino skillfully fosters a discussion of the crucial themes of transference and counter-transference, and of the typically psychoanalytic desire to cure – something which Crapanzano openly admits to having indulged in his work with Tuhami. Here, it's as if Crapanzano is inviting us to transpose a mental state, or an attitude typical of a psychoanalysis, to the anthropological experience. In his own words:

I'm talking about all those quasi-conscious knowledges, those semi-awarenesses, which you psychoanalysts are concerned with (p. 71).

In these terms, the context of the ethnographic relation is the privileged site of reflexive anthropology.

Self-understanding – and interpretation- occurs over time and changes with context (p. 71).

This noteworthy attempt, which in many ways characterizes the four authors discussed, has been roundly criticized by both anthropologists and psychoanalysts. However, I myself commend their intention of finding ever-new ways for ethnographic analysis to safeguard the complexity of cultural differences while fostering communication across multiple levels of experience. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Crapanzano's idiosyncratic use of psychoanalytic terms and concepts, while aiming to describe this new reflexive condition, is itself not sufficiently developed, and perhaps awaits further elaboration.

The two interview-dialogues with Paul Williams and Michael Rustin are significant for different reasons, as the perspectives of these two scholars are linked to British psychoanalysis. Both Williams and Rustin look at the relationship between psychoanalysis and anthropology, or more generally, between psychoanalysis and the social sciences, in the theoretical context of object relations, and in particular of Klein and Bion's thinking. Williams, who trained as both an anthropologist and a clinical psychoanalyst, focuses his research on the social contexts of psychosis, where disruptive elements in the relationship between individuals and institutions reveal the mutually impactful exchange between internal states and social organizations. In this interview, Molino facilitates connections between the clinical anthropological model in William's research and broader interdisciplinary reflection. In this regard, Williams states:

Anthropology can help analysts situate their models in ways which I think can be helpful therapeutically and which can widen our horizons [...] Alternatively, psychoanalysis may be able to help anthropology take more seriously the tremendous structuring influence of the internal world and its relations to social action, which most anthropologists have trouble thinking about (p. 103).

Rustin's theoretical reflections are particularly precious in that they delineate an epistemology and a method relative to anthropology and psychoanalysis as social *sciences*. He considers the clinical context, both in the analytical situation and in infant observation, as the specific laboratory of psychoanalysis for its investigation of the internal world. This is something akin to what Bion calls "learning from experience," a form of learning based on observation and on theoretical models which are not preconceived. Rather than integrate anthropology and psychoanalysis, therefore, Rustin prefers to consider their relationship a specular one which does not compromise their diversity; in this, I believe, he differs from Crapanzano. And, where method is concerned, Rustin takes a cue from Molino, who quotes Christopher Bollas' view of psychoanalysis as a form of microethnography. In Rustin's words:

If you think about the presentation of ethnographies, psychoanalysis also involves a continuing presentation of ethnographies in the form of case reports (p. 135).

In the book's last interview, with Marc Augé – complex and difficult to reduce to specific features – we clearly perceive the relationship between the researcher, ethnologist of African cultures, and the thinker who navigates in the “solitudes” of *supermodernity*. Psychoanalysis, basically in its Freudian version, seems to accompany Augé in his intellectual itinerary, functioning as a “companion” to whom he turns each time new understandings unfold concerning the registers of the symbolic and the imaginary – both of particular importance to Augé. Rather than integrating psychoanalysis and anthropology, Augé conceives of an *alliance* between the two fields aimed at producing new strategies of memory to counter the excessive stimuli of *supermodernity*, thus yielding a political form of psychoanalytic anthropology.

Augé thus differs with the American school and from the meaning it gives to the terms *self* and *culture*. Indeed, he seems in agreement with Molino, who instead cites Bollas:

who [...] talks about psychoanalysis as an anthropology of the subject, whose history is always being expressed through the history of that person's relationships to singular objects (p. 169).

Along these lines, and looking to reprise the theme of the inner world, Augé then expresses his own opinion as an anthropologist:

I am, however, convinced that any anthropological approach which avoids to consider internal psychic processes risks ignoring phenomena of symbolic significance as well as the dynamism typical of instances of cultural contacts (p. 170).

Fundamentally, Molino's volume traces an open field of interaction between anthropological research and psychoanalytic perspectives. Referring to Bollas's conception of the object as it relates to subjectivity, and to Herdt and Stoller's work in *Intimate Communications*, Molino argues convincingly on behalf of a reflexive attitude that can join together with a sense of the depths of human experience: with what we may well call *unconscious communication*.

Foucault appreciated both psychoanalysis and ethnology, which he saw as similar in their “perpetual principle of restlessness”, insofar as both privilege not “human nature” but an analysis of the complexity of man's relations to society. Unlike Foucault, however, who in *The Order of Things* writes of psychoanalytic anthropology as a “pious wish,” today we see it to be fully legitimized. Indeed, as anthropologist Waud Kracke so aptly states in the book's conclusion:

The intersection of the two characterizations of man – the passion of unconscious desire on the one hand, the construction of every human's thought by his/her language and culture on the other – constitutes the field of psychoanalytic anthropology (p. 177).

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