

## Collapsing boundaries and the turmoil of the public sphere

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### **Abstract**

While psychoanalysis is usually associated with the individual level of analysis and the psychotherapeutic process, we should recall Freud's deep interest in the public sphere to understand the sources of the deep feeling of discontent which characterizes the western society and constructively seeking for solutions. Indeed, a process of affectivation of the public sphere (Salvatore et al., 2021) can be recognised at the ground of the crisis, which brings us back to the difference between primary and secondary processes. Questioning how the adoption of psychoanalytic lens on a collective scale of analysis may be translate into constructive actions to face the socio-institutional turmoil represents a challenge for research and intervention that cannot be postponed.

**Keywords:** *psychoanalysis, public sphere, affectivization, sensemaking, primary processes.*

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The paper “The affectivization of the public sphere: the contribution of psychoanalysis in understanding and counteracting the current crisis scenarios” by Salvatore et al.,(2021) inaugurates the new Journal “*Subject, Action, & Society: Psychoanalytical Studies and Practices*”. It is a paper touching important aspects of our life. The paper has three main points: The Western society is in crisis, the crisis is the one of affectivization and psychoanalysis can help us to understand the crisis. The idea that the Western society is in crisis seems to be expressed by many intellectuals but whether the “Western” society is in “crisis” (relative to what?) is less important than realizing that a feeling of deep discontent is evident and that it is highly important to seek an explanation to this deep feeling of discontent (Salvatore et al., 2019). The authors explain this deep discontent in terms of affectivization but what is the meaning of affectivization? They define it as “the enslaving of the public sphere to the individual and group emotional enactment”. This is an interesting process which is expressed for instance by the “publicization of the private” as we can see it TV shows, the return of populism (in its bad sense) and so on. In one of his novels, Murakami suggest that there are three clear marks of the civilized person: trust, respect and etiquette (Murakami, 1993). Anyone who has watched a reality TV show may easily understand the affectivization of the public sphere where the basic tenants of trust, respect and etiquette are abandoned for the sake of emotional incitement. The interesting proposal by the authors though is that this affectivization brings us back to psychoanalysis and the dif-

ference between primary and secondary processes (Freud, 1911), but this time on the collective scale of analysis. “A system of sophisticated psychic processes designed to mediate, regulate and negotiate forms of relations between inner states and outer states” is necessary for us to survive and live meaningful life as civilized people. Giving the lead to primary processes on the public sphere, specifically through the use of mass media and new social platforms such as Facebook, might threat the delicate balance between primary and secondary processes. The thesis of Salvatore and his colleagues is that “the way the relation between socio-institutional turmoil and modes of thinking, feeling and acting ... can be addressed is through the theoretical framework based on a long-lasting tradition in psychoanalytic analysis of social phenomena” (Salvatore et al., 2021). While psychoanalysis is usually associated with the individual level of analysis and the psychotherapeutic process, we should recall Freud’s deep interest in the big and integrative story of human beings that includes the public sphere (Freud, 2021). In this sense, the current paper is clearly in line with a long and respected tradition of research in psychoanalysis and culture. This venture almost inevitably invites the modelling psychological processes as “sensemaking processes”, processes through which human beings form their experience, both as individuals and as collective, through the mediation of sign-systems (Neuman, 2003, 2010; Neuman, et al. 2012; De Luca Picione, 2020; Valsiner, 2005, 2007). This approach has important implications for both research and intervention. Whether understanding the deep source of our

discontent may be translatable into constructive actions is an open question. Freud himself was sceptic even with regard to his own insights. However, no other option exists rather than constructively seeking for solutions and

in this context the direction to which this paper points in important and required.

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