

For a psychoanalytic clinical psycho-sociology

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Abstract

My commentary on the positional paper aims to contribute to the goal of extending psychoanalysis to an analysis and intervention in the social systems. It is not a question of “applying” psychoanalysis outside the dual clinical context but of identifying the elements that allow it to be used correctly in non-classical clinical contexts. In this perspective, my article revisits *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, in which Freud, while demonstrating the potential of psychoanalysis for attaining an understanding of social processes, moves within implicit presuppositions that can result in epistemic and technical obstacles to the very extension of psychoanalysis. In this sense, the article discusses three issues. A first issue is the legitimacy of defining the social in its various components (individual, groups, organizational) as a set of levels made up of unconscious and conscious variables, each endowed with emerging specificities (autonomy) that cannot be reduced to simpler underlying levels. A second issue concerns the fact that analyzing unconscious processes present in social systems, such as identifications, defense mechanisms, desires and fantasies, cannot ignore the complex relationship with organizational aspects (objectives, roles, functions, technologies), i.e., with conscious and socially shared projects. The third issue is the need to historicize, i.e., to interpret the signs of the times, the specificity of the historical moment that determines certain forms of social and cultural life.

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Introduction

The project of the journal *Subject, Action, & Society: Psychoanalytical Studies and Practices* is as ambitious as it is necessary, aiming to further the psychoanalytic research on society that Freud first undertook. It is a very promising field because science, which more than any other technique has investigated the complexity of human behavior, cannot fail to have something significant to say about social life.

In Freud's works, there are many passages which free psychoanalysis from the clinical environment. It is sufficient to think of his great works on culture and society: *Totem und Tabu* (1913), *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921), *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (1927), *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930), *Warum Krieg?* (1933), *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1939). In many other texts too, Freud demands a comparison with different branches of knowledge. For example, in *Die Frage der Laienanalyse* (1926), he indicates the importance, for the apprentice analyst, of studying the humanity sciences, such as sociology, history of civilization, and so on; or, in *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse* (1916-17, Lektion 24), he maintains that psychoanalysis is not characterized by the subject it deals with, but by the technique it uses, and that therefore it can be applied to the history of civilization, the science of religions, or mythology, because its

aim is to discover the unconscious in psychic life.

However, it must be recognized that its promises seem unfulfilled, above all due to the difficulty in overcoming the inadequacy between understanding, even if profound, the unconscious determinants of social phenomena and ideologies, and possible intervention practices. Psychoanalysis seems to promise an important aid in understanding the complexity of social dynamics, but some interpretations appear at the same time illuminating and “impractical”, unable to suggest any practical intervention¹.

The project of the journal is set forth by the Authors of the positional paper (hereinafter PP) who have proposed a Semiotic Dynamic Cultural Psychological Theory (SDCPT) as a socio-cultural psychological model, which integrates aspects of psychoanalysis, the dynamic systems theory and pragmatic semiotics (Salvatore et al, 2021).

This is a rich and complex approach which I will summarize here only on certain issues, such as those regarding a theory of technique which seeks not only to use psychoanalysis, but to be based more radically on the contribution of psychoanalysis itself. Freud's ideas remain the unavoidable starting point, and at the same time, make it possible to highlight the factors that do not always make it easy to “apply” psychoanalysis outside the clinical context of its origins, in which its fundamental concepts were developed (Carli, 2020).

A Freudian reference text for our topic is undoubtedly *Massenpsychologie*² which, for the

¹ Of course, this statement does not apply to psychotherapeutic structures. which, for obvious reasons, I will not discuss here.

² *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* is the translation in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud of *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*. However, translating *Massen* with

topics discussed, is easily comparable to the PP. Although it is sometimes considered a “minor” work within the Freudian corpus, it nevertheless takes its place as founding the psycho-sociology³ of psychoanalytic inspiration (Enriquez, 1983). It is no coincidence that this sentence contained in the first page of *Massenpsychologie* is almost in exergue of the PP: “individual Psychology is at the same time Social Psychology as well - in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the word”. A precise research path is indicated in the identity between individual and social psychology. However, on a more in-depth analysis of the text, the question appears more complicated, and perhaps involves some difficulties, if not for some aporias in its *extension* of psychoanalysis from the individual to the social field.

The topics that Freud deals with and the conclusions he arrives at establish the vision of social issues from a psychoanalytic point of view. When one wishes to position *Massenpsychologie* as one of the indispensable foundations of psycho-sociology, some elements of dissatisfaction cannot be ignored. By writing *Massenpsychologie*, Freud followed his lines of research, and obviously he did not have in mind psycho-sociology, which would take shape much later. Despite this, if we read his essay from a psychosociological perspective, we cannot fail to note certain reductions or to the lack of development of some analyses. I will focus on this. It goes without saying that the critical remarks I make here do not indicate any defects in the essay (it would be

a completely incorrect, incongruous and misleading conclusion), but they constitute some suggestions for a strictly psychosociological research based on psychoanalysis.

Social context in Massenpsychologie

It seems to me that *Massenpsychologie* offers two different representations of the social context.

The statement that “individual psychology is at the same time social psychology as well” is preceded by the observation that, for the subject, “someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent”. The relationships which the individual has with his or her parents, siblings, teachers, and so on can legitimately be considered social phenomena. Here, one has a first representation of the social context which appears to be targeted through the individual. That is, the point of view of the individual is assumed when he encounters different types of relationships with others: the social context is given by these individual relationships.

This representation of the social context is accompanied by a second representation which coincides with the mass as described, in particular, by Gustave Le Bon and other authors such as Gabriel Tarde and Scipio Sighele. In chapter 10, there is a complement and a clarification of this representation where Freud reclaims the comparison between the mass and the primitive horde: the mass seems to be a revival of the primordial horde, and so, like in the horde the organization usually dominates

Group does not seem to me the happiest solution, above all because *Group* in psychoanalytic literature has a precise meaning today. Therefore, here, I will use the words *mass* and *masses*.

³ To simplify the discussion, I will use the term psycho-sociology from here on to indicate a complex of

theories and techniques which I allow myself to approach here to the SDCPT. So, I execute two questionable operations at the same time: I speak of psycho-sociology as if it were a known and shared knowledge - which it is not (Guerra 2012) - and I propose a sort of analogy between this and the SDCPT - which is a question to be explored.

people, and it can be concluded that mass psychology is the oldest human psychology. What can be isolated as individual psychology is something which developed later. However, Freud immediately corrects this statement because, in fact, there must also have been an equally ancient individual psychology: the psychology of the supreme leader of the horde. In chapter 12, Freud specifies how “the advance [*sic*] from group psychology to individual psychology” would take place. He reclaims the “scientific myth” of the father of the primordial horde so as to arrive at the poet who created the hero myth, that is, the one who claims to have killed his father. I will not comment further on this last step in order to make some observations.

Therefore, the Freudian social context is seen either as the network of relationships which the individual has with others or as the mass endowed with a regressive mental functioning, such as is found in the child and in primitive peoples. This evaluation takes the adult individual as a “yardstick”: it is in relation to the individual that one measures how regressive the mass is. By commenting on McDougall’s position in chapter 3, Freud suggests that the organization McDougall speaks of is equivalent to endowing the mass with those attributes of the individual which he has lost just by entering the mass.

If the evolution of humanity goes from the mass to the individual - who appears as the superman that Nietzsche, says Freud, has predicted for the future, however, the mass can only “evolve” insofar as he assumes the characteristics of an individual.

Another point to consider is that the development of the essay, starting from the discussion on the mass, progressively turns its attention to the Ego, its functioning and its internal sub-

divisions. Mass remains a useful term of comparison, but what Freud is interested in is to achieve a deeper understanding of the Ego. In a certain sense, the title of the essay could be reformulated as follows: *from the psychology of the masses to the analysis of the Ego*. In fact, *Massenpsychologie* can be read, quite correctly, as a text on identification (de Mijolla, 2017). By exploring the formation of a neurotic symptom, Freud specifies three forms of identification: as the most primitive and original form of emotional (affective) bond; as an assumption upon oneself of the characteristics of the object, namely, as an introjection of the object into the Ego; finally, as a form which arises in relation to some aspect possessed in common with a person who is not the object of sexual impulses. This third form of identification constitutes the core of the explanation of the libidinal ties which unite individuals to a mass, together with the replacement of the ideal Ego with the external object, i.e., the leader.

The analysis of the concept of “social context” in *Massenpsychologie* leads, therefore, to two conclusions. The first is that, unlike the individual, the social context does not have a specificity, an autonomous readability, that is to say, it takes on a meaning from the fact of using the individual (adult) as a parameter. The second is that between the individual and society, more than a connection, there is an opposition - a concept that runs through Freud’s entire oeuvre.

On the second point, we must recognize that at the basis of this vision there is undoubtedly an implicit and obvious epistemic presupposition, namely, that there are two entities: the individual and society which must relate. Given this thesis, what inevitably arises is a search

for the relationships between the two entities⁴ and the intermediate structures between them. Obviously, I cannot discuss this topic here, but I indicate it as a necessary line of research⁵.

Instead, I add a note on the possibility, indeed on the need to see social spaces as having a specificity which cannot be reduced to the individual's psychodynamics.

To clarify this point, it may be useful to consider Bion's (1961) view of groups. First, I do not think that the group is a miniaturized society, and therefore what we find in the group could be extrapolated and extended to a larger social system. I would just like to define the specificity of the group in such a way as to question the specificity of more complex social systems.

As a matter of fact, Bion notes that a group offers a field of study that includes phenomena which could not be studied outside the group itself, since they do not manifest themselves in any field of study outside the group. The group, as such, makes it possible to visualize something that would otherwise remain invisible. Therefore, in the group there is something different and more complex than a regression of mental functioning.

This seems to me to be a precious indication of research for identifying the specificity of the different levels of observation of human reality. The distinction between the levels of an individual, a group and an organization is quite common in psychosociological analysis. I suggest the hypothesis that, in the social context, the term "level" is neither metaphorical nor conventional, but indicates a specific emerging reality, characterized by the singularity of the combination of the elements

which make it up, and which cannot be reduced to an underlying, "deeper" level. In other words, I am speaking of the *autonomy* of different levels of research. Which presupposes an exact definition of the categories that identify the different levels (Mingers, 1999; Van de Vijver, 2000; Guerra, 2003).

The organization

It is interesting that Freud chooses to analyze two masses, the Church and the army, which are very distant from one another, indeed quite the opposite of the *foule* evoked by Le Bon. In fact, at the beginning of chapter 5, Freud notes that different types of masses can be distinguished: transitory and stable, homogeneous and non-homogeneous, natural and artificial. He also introduces a further distinction between masses with a leader and masses without a leader. Hence his choice to deal with the Church and the army, two "highly organized, stable, artificial masses", subject to a leader. One cannot fail to note how the two masses in question are characterized by a strong organization, or in the case of the army, a very strong one indeed. Freud says that they are two masses that, precisely because they are artificial, need a certain external coercion in order to guarantee them from disintegration and modifications. Freud does not intend to deal with the reason for this need and prefers instead to analyze the relationships whose characteristics are particularly recognizable in those systems.

Therefore, the organizational dimension is seen by Freud only as an expression of a certain degree of constraint, but the functioning of the organization as such is not taken into

⁴ Of course, it can also be denied that there is such a thing as society: "no such thing as society" as Margaret Thatcher said.

⁵ See Guerra 2014.

consideration. Here, by organization, I mean the complex which includes the definition of objectives, roles, functions, rules, the distribution of responsibilities, the areas of decision-making, etc. In other words, Freud does not examine all those aspects of rationality which oversee the design and functioning of an organization. The reason for this apparent neglect lies in the fact that what Freud is interested in is the unconscious relational dynamic which sustains the social system and makes it cohesive just beyond organizational constraints.

In chapter 3, Freud discusses the hypotheses of McDougall who, sharing the representation of a mass which behaves like a child or an impassioned savage, indicates five principal conditions for raising collective mental life to a higher level: the continuity of existence of the mass; the individual's awareness of the nature, function, activity of the mass; the comparison with similar collective formations; the presence of traditions and customs; and the differentiation of roles and tasks. In conclusion, McDougall speaks precisely of what one defines as an organization.

Freud notes that these principal conditions are exactly those of the individual before being absorbed by the mass: the evolution of the mass should, as previously stated, aim at these characteristics. But the objective of Freudian analysis is the nature of the unconscious bonds which hold social systems together, not the conscious components of the organization. My stressing the lack of consideration of the organizational component in Freudian analysis is in response to an inevitable question from those who want not only to analyze, but also to intervene in social systems: can we ignore the organization by focusing attention only on identifying processes?

Further, the analysis of unconscious processes present in social systems will have further original developments starting from the 1950s with the works of Elliott Jaques (1955) and the Tavistock Institute, inspired by M. Klein. The idea of social systems as a defense against persecutory and depressive anxieties offers extremely interesting insights that broaden the comprehension of the unconscious mechanisms at work in social systems.

But a certain dissatisfaction, due to the fact of ignoring the organizational aspects, has also given rise, since the end of the 1950s, to lines of research and intervention attentive to organization. I refer, for example, to the theory of *socio-technical systems*, created in the context of labor studies by the Tavistock Institute in London toward the end of the 1950s (Emery & Trist, 1960), which draw attention to the role played by the technological and, more generally, organizational component. Even French and Italian psycho-sociology, from the late 1960s onwards, have insisted on the difference between organization (conscious and rational dimension) and institution (unconscious dimension). Again, although belonging to a different context, we should remember the French institutional psychotherapy, which always plays on the difference and relationship between an unconscious dimension and organizational elements.

Freud, again in *Massenpsychologie*, does not forget the fact that the mass can also express a higher morality than the individual, and "that only collectivities are capable of a high degree of unselfishness and devotion". Creativity does not belong exclusively to the individual, but also the masses too can be creative, as shown in language, songs and folklore. And it remains to be established, Freud adds, to what extent the individual thinker or poet is not the one who performs an intellectual task to which

others have contributed too. Perhaps this mass capable of producing culture has evolved sufficiently to acquire the characteristics of the individual.

In any case, in this discussion, one can identify the more general topic of the relationship between conscious and unconscious in both individual and social life, a topic in large part ignored, as if it were not - as it is - at the center of individual and psychosocial clinical practices. Unconscious determinants cannot even be explored without conscious thinking. The form and culture of organizations and work groups are the result of the combination of different elements: objectives, work organization, emotions, conscious and unconscious fantasies about the work object, knowledge, techniques, etc. The object of both psychosocial knowledge and intervention is the specific combination of these different variables (Guerra & Zeloni, 2001).

The story

The *foules* appear as an object of study at the end of the nineteenth century in a very particular historical situation: the birth of the urban industrial working class as well as the spread of socialist ideas which give rise to riots, strikes, and violent actions in various parts of Europe.

Le Bon in *Psychologie des foules* (1895) describes the crisis experienced at the time, by attributing it to two factors: the destruction of religious, political and social beliefs, and the entirely new conditions of existence and thought created by the modern demands of science and industry.

After World War I Freud found himself living a situation quite similar to the one described by Le Bon. However, *Massenpsychologie*

moves towards a reconstruction of the prehistory of humanity and does not take current events into consideration.

It is useless to reaffirm here the coherence of Freudian research and the wealth of thoughts which derive from it. But one may again wonder whether it is not indispensable for psychosociology to include in the field of analysis what characterizes a certain historical moment. The PP is precisely an example of the attempt to anchor the analysis to current events characterized by the crisis of confidence in the relationship with institutions and by the affectivization of the public sphere.

Also, *Psychologie des foules* arises precisely from the observation of the crisis of confidence in traditional institutions and describes the mass precisely in terms of affectivization - with some differences which I will mention. I could certainly argue that no era is free of crises and that, regardless of the historical moment, the mass always shows the same characteristics. However, this observation has the disadvantage of not understanding the specificity of the historical moment and the certain essential peculiarities for an analysis which is intended to be specific and not general.

At least two elements should be reported in this sense: the question of the public sphere and the question of public opinion, to which one must refer if one wants to understand at least some aspects of the culture of an era.

The first question is certainly problematic, starting from the very definition of the public sphere: what is its space and what are its boundaries? What are its determining factors? What are the sources for “interpreting” what happens in the public sphere? What is private space and how does it relate to the public one? Jürgen Habermas, in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962), underlines the role of the news media in the genesis of the middle-

class public sphere: from confidential diplomatic and commercial news to the creation of the press which publicly disseminates news, and which already becomes daily in the mid-seventeenth century. It is in this context that at the end of the twentieth century, public opinion is shaped by the preponderant revolutionary technologies of the Internet, social networks and smart phones. Now, not only has access to news and sources spread immeasurably, but also the possibility of forming one's own opinions and expressing them has spread in a completely new way, to the point that each individual can imagine himself as an opinion maker, animated by the irresistible desire to communicate his own feelings, ideas and fantasies to the world.

Many things take place on the web, and many are the groups that meet virtually on different points of interest. In this variety of encounters and communications, one cannot fail to be struck by phenomena such as the ease with which fake news, hate speech and violent affirmations can spread, presenting those traits that the PP indicates as affectivization of the public sphere.

Here, however, there is no longer the mass that takes to the streets, which so dismayed Le Bon, nor is there even a leader to take the place of one's ideal Ego. There is instead a completely new technology. Bloggers or celebrities from the artistic or political world can hardly be likened to Freud's leader type. While there is a community that manifests some identification with a reference figure, that figure is even more evanescent than impromptu in nature, and it is difficult to imagine a libidinal bond between his followers. Perhaps we are witnessing what Byung-Chul Han (2013) called the swarm: an online, virtual mass, which is not a physical mass of bodies, a "we" without a shared soullessness that

moves, I suppose, less like a swarm of bees (as in Mandeville's metaphor) than like a swarm of locusts.

It must be recognized that *Massenpsychologie* does not offer many tools for examining the public sphere, precisely because this is not a mass with a leader - as was the one analyzed by Freud. Moreover, whatever social level we take into consideration, including the "swarm", the idea of the prevalence of unconscious functioning is maintained, characterized, in particular, by the exaltation of affectivity.

Affectivization is central to the theses presented in the PP and in the research project which is outlined there. Thus, by putting the issue of affectivity into the foreground, a fundamental question, which has remained implicit so far, arises: what unconscious do we speak of when we analyze a social context?

Affections, emotions, thoughts

The determining factor of unconscious processes constitutes the identification processes discussed by Freud. Analogously, the defense mechanisms against psychotic anxiety (Jaques) are unconscious psychic processes that establish a relationship of reciprocity between the individual and the masses (organizations).

Freud accepts the idea that affectivity is a social system in the mass, as described by Le Bon and other authors. But Freud's *affekte* refers to a sort of energy that can be linked to different representations. Freud's mode of identification is one of the possible ways of expressing affectivity, indispensable for understanding certain mass phenomena, but there may also be others.

In this sense, the PP attempts, in my opinion successfully, a description of the forms that

affectivity takes in the contemporary public sphere. In attributing a name to affections, the PP makes a transition from affection (understood as a quantity) to emotion, which is an affection connected to a representation (proposition): *publicization of the private, enemization of the other*, etc.

The operation of affection naming recalls explicitly Matte Blanco's theory of emotions (1975). I refer, in particular, to the propositional activity which leads to the formation of what Matte Blanco calls sensation-feeling.

The reference to Matte Blanco is useful for two reasons. First, because it communicates another way in which the unconscious can be present both in individuals and in masses that share the same emotion. In fact, the logical behavior of emotions is indistinguishable from that of the unconscious, so that both are effectively equivalent. Second, propositional activity already communicates the presence of the beginning of thought. Emotions - as widely discussed in the PP - far from being irrational, have their own reason. They give significance to reality and can initiate thought processes. This seems to me very close to what in the PP is called a "semiotic hub". Which is also a way

of saying that "emotion is the mother of thought", but on one condition: that emotions are not immediately discharged into action.

This once again proposes the topic of the technique of intervention, i.e., the planning of appropriate settings, dedicated to social systems, capable of allowing the expression of emotions so that they can become the material for creating new thoughts.

Conclusion

The topics raised by the PP are much more numerous than this comment can discuss. For example, I have just mentioned the fundamental topic of setting, i.e., the practice of intervening, which also involves discussing the position of the intervener and related topics: repetition, transference, countertransference and interpretation. Instead, I have focused on the elements that, by founding the psychoanalytic interpretation of society and promoting its extension beyond the classic dual setting, also raise epistemic and technical difficulties.

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