

## A Call to Action for Psychoanalysis

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### **Abstract**

Honored by having been invited to write a commentary on the positional paper launching a new interdisciplinary journal “*Subject, Action, & Society: Psychoanalytical Studies and Practices*”, this critical essay enters into the essential points and many aspects and angles of what the authors’ refer to as a global crisis in the “affectivization of the public sphere”. This general deterioration in objective cogitation and rational dialogue are addressed as a break down in semiotic organization and communication precipitated in good part by the surge in rapid code-like digital/screen-mediated interactions and “image” obsession. Also addressed are various underlying core therapeutic principles that psychoanalysis could bring to bear to impact widespread societal change. This author’s revised psychoanalytic general model of mind and communication (Aragno 1997/2016, 2008/2016), based on semiotic developmental processes, is proposed as providing a new updated and modernized metatheoretical backbone in support of their papers’ thesis.

**Keywords:** *revised psychoanalytic metatheory; semiotic organization; societal vs individual therapeutics;*

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.32111/SAS.2021.1.1.6>

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## Commentary on positional paper for journal launch: “*Subject, Action, & Society: Psychoanalytical Studies and Practices*”

“Current Western societies are characterized by a deep anthropological and socio-institutional crisis. The many signs of this turmoil indicate a creeping affectivization of the public sphere. Psychoanalysis can play a pivotal role in understanding the current socio-institutional scenario beyond a reductionist splitting between individual and society.” (Salvatore et al., 2021, p. 2)

With these opening lines authors *Salvatore, S. De Luca Picione, R. Bochicchio, V. Mannino, G. Langher, V. Pergola, F. Velotti, P. & Venuleo, C.* set the stage in an orienting abstract for their positional paper “*The affectivization of the public sphere: the contribution of psychoanalysis in understanding and counteracting the current crisis scenarios*” (Salvatore et al, 2021). They continue by asking that psychoanalysis enter vigorously into the current over-heated socio-political climate, throwing down a gauntlet that it “broaden its horizons” and concern itself with the processes and problems generated by what they refer to as the “affectivization” of public social action by providing counteractive interventions. A very tall order for a field that began in a dyad, only speculatively ventured into “mass” psychology by Freud (1921) and has, over the past one hundred years, moved tentatively into small and large group processes. Clearly the dy-

amic cycles of large societal groups are systematically quite different from those of small or family groups, and when the authors propose to address “western societies” as a whole, the systemic orbit expands even further, encompassing the Judeo-Christian ethos and traditions of the ‘West’. They bemoan “the multiple symptoms of a progressive global loss of momentum in the role of “rational thinking” and, in further defining the arena of observation, depict a deeply symptomatic “anthropological and socio-institutional crisis” expressed through the public sphere, conjuring existential malaise, political turmoil, rampant xenophobic and extremist trends, within generalized institutional inadequacy in serving people’s basic needs. We have here so many systemic levels, so many dynamic currents and probably cyclical patterns of progression and regression, as to boggle the mind! Group processes are complicated enough and every groups’ composition is also characterized by size and its purpose for coming together let alone the dynamic distinctions that differentiate conferences from congregations, parties from protests, masses from mobs, a ‘western’ from an ‘eastern’ block.

I am not a sociologist or anthropologist but a practicing psychoanalytic meta-theoretical revisionist and therefore am not familiar with the rich bibliography from these other multiple disciplines. My competencies lie in understanding human unconscious motives and meanings, my specialty, in updating our general theory of mind in light of contemporary knowledge. I can comment only on what I am skilled in and where my knowledge and

expertise lie. My critical commentary is therefore restricted to what I know about psychoanalytic practice and theory, its prerequisites, potential use, and limitations. As I look at the “public” sphere on a global scale today, with widespread international displacements and ideological polarizations during a worldwide pandemic, I see an urgent need to vastly expand our perspective by erasing most territorial, political, religious, and even national boundaries, to look, as Neil Armstrong did, at our little blue ball of a planet hurling through space, with us, of many-colors on it, as *one whole*. But this is just my opinion, a conceptual reverie. And it takes us away from, not towards, the specific subjects the authors of this paper refer to as an ‘anthropological crisis’ manifest through what I would term the “primitivization” not just of the public but of *all spheres* of social intercourse, from dyads, families, and everyday exchanges, to ‘mass’ phenomena.

The authors turn to general psychoanalytic principles in advocating their applicability to benefit the public at large in the symptomatic areas they identify. But their challenge runs deeper and becomes more specific when they state: “In a dynamic semiotic perspective, affects are forms of embodied, a-semantic, hyper-generalized sensemaking processes. They pragmatically ground cognition, and their roots are cultural, linking forms of intersubjectivity and ways of thinking and acting. From this standpoint, a model of counteractions and interventions can be organized in terms of the development of *semiotic capital*.” Here they introduce a definition of affects and an assumption about what counteractive measures may be taken on a social scale, asking that this be done from a “psychoanalytic” perspective, in terms of developing “semiotic

capital,” introducing a new ‘economic’ metaphor!! Setting aside for now that their definition of affects runs counter to what affects actually are (not ‘sensemaking processes’) and how they become modulated, we are now in an interdisciplinary realm of political-science, social-action, anthropology, affects, group/mass psychology, semiosis and therapeutic process, all calling on psychoanalytic clinical principles and meta-theory!!

Let me start with the good news and then introduce some ideas that may provide a kind of compass, pointing due north, here! First of all, launching a new interdisciplinary journal “*Subject, Action, & Society: Psychoanalytical Studies and Practices*” by an enthusiastic group of academics with interdisciplinary psychoanalytic training, in the vigorous pursuit of engaging their ideas in so probing an enterprise, is to be applauded! One can only commend academics for their intellectual energy and vision a quality too often lacking in the strictly clinical and medical branches of psychoanalysis. And more, for their insistence on investigating what ails the current socio-political theatre of group-minds gone astray calling for psychoanalysis to play a role in this arena. The demand that psychoanalysis come out of its highly personal, privileged, clinical space and insulated communities to contribute to the public welfare, may be exactly the direction it ought to go to become more relevant again to the general public. This extension outward is a real possibility given a number of ideas they propose coming from psychoanalytic principles correlating with the benefits of analytic therapy. But to do so – and here comes the critical side -- it better present with a cogent, up to date and solidly revised, general theory of mind that accords with its therapeutic processes and “cure,” a metatheory that plausibly integrates the functioning and

place of “affects” including the neurobiological impact of working-through as well as how linguistic semiotic activities in their *specialized* use within a *specific semantic sphere* can provide what the authors refer to as “semiotic capital”.

None of these foundational organizing metatheoretical principles are evident in this paper and therefore the new terms and interesting concepts of their thesis swim loosely in a sea of valid but ungrounded ideas. What, for instance, is “affectivization,” since no definition is offered, other than a common-sense assumption that it refers to the take-over of amplified emotions. In individual psychology this might be termed “histrionics”. On a social scale, can this amplification of affects be likened to group/ego emotional-contagion, a “mass” psychology phenomenon? Has this exhibitionistic primitivization become the norm? If so, where does it fit on a scale of non-affective rational-cognition, and what can, or does, psychoanalysis do about it? And what is “enemization” if not the creation of the ‘Other’ as enemy, a primitive or paranoid process with ancient tribal origins and deep phylogenetic roots? (Aragno, 2014). Xenophobia, regrettably, is also a carry-over deeply engrained primitive reaction to “Other” as are territorial invasion and a thirst for power. Since time immemorial humans have waged savage wars, tortured, killed, maimed, and tried to abolish by genocide “Others” of different ideologies, religions, genetic traits, or beliefs. And what of the reciprocal impact of leader and populace, for good or bad? Socrates died for the dangerous ideas he was infecting the Athenians, Christ’s message of brotherly love popularized him enough to threaten the authority of Roman rule, fascism is born and inflamed by militant personalities. No-

where is the influential role of ‘leaders’ introduced into the discussion, crucial, I think, in all social/group phenomena. Charismatic leaders posturing appealing ideologies that cater to human narcissism ignite primal tribalism and have *always* been behind massive ideologically-driven irrationality. No nation has been immune to this “primitivization” of ideas and resulting degradation of human behavior. Or is the new “leadership” technology itself and the rampant impact of its exhibitionistic seduction; bombardment of advertisement, omnipresent intrusive “screen,” the interpolation of digitalized ‘social media’ interactions and constant availability of “contact” with no “content,” surely all of extreme interest in a discussion of impulse degeneration, crisis, the impoverishment of semiosis. But how does psychoanalysis fit in or explain this “affectivization” *now*, as a general existential crisis, if the authors do not support their premise with a coherent psychoanalytic theory that addresses affects in relation to cognition, its therapeutic action, and *especially* integrates semiosis?

Whereas a good minestrone’s many ingredients flavor a nourishing broth, it is possible to throw in too many disparate condiments, confusing the palate! And, to continue with a culinary metaphor, too many cooks spoil the broth, just as too many ideas from different perspectives confound the thesis! The many authors of this paper contribute terms and concepts coming from their respective fields whereas the central claim, that psychoanalytic processes are useful in the public sphere, must be coherently and forcefully supported by why and in what specific ways this is so. In their attempt to do this the authors list three fundamental tenets. As a revisionist, who has laid out in two volumes (Aragno 1997/2016,

2008/2016) a modernized bio-semiotic epigenetic model of mind, applying it to a detailed study of human communication (Aragno 2018/2016) that begins in the communicative function of affects, I cannot agree with the first of these basic tenets. So, what if one applauds the ambitious premise of this paper but is in fundamental disaccord with the most foundational of its basic tenets?

Let me specify: The authors present their “*semiotic view of affects*” by stating, “The SDCPT moves from the recognition that *affects are a particular kind of meanings* because they are able to trigger further mental states. More specifically, affects are embodied, a-semantic, hyper-generalized classes of significance (Salvatore et al, 2018).” First of all, our eight universal primary affects are phylogenetically-programmed facial/vocal emotional expressions with widespread physiological implications that immediately and forcefully communicate what is going on in the organism, what is felt. Of course, they are embodied, they are organismic primal *signals* that communicate feelings physically/globally to others and provide proprioceptive feedback regarding a particular state along a like/dislike or pleasure/unpleasure continuum. They remain, often unconsciously, prime motivators throughout life and their overt expression is shaped by stylistic cultural convention as they are mediated and modulated by language in socialization. As *natural signals*, they “mean” only themselves, at the *beginning* of developmental processes mediating semiotic progressions that will move through *organizations of experience* and *cognition* through the use of signs (linguistic and others) that only grow slowly into full symbolic organization through cognitive maturation. The authors rightfully point out that language is losing its function (among many others, in my view) as

a cognitive medium and communicative mediator in social bonds. This degradation of form in valuing careful verbal articulation in interpersonal interactions leads to an increase in unmediated primitive emotions since raw acted-out affects eliminate the requisite space where semiotic-process generates thought, and hence reasoning dialogue.

The authors put forth the Primary and Secondary processes (Freud’s two modes of mental functioning) to illustrate the difference between unmediated “affectivization” versus cogitated reasoning, in a version still imbued with “energetic and economic” metatheoretical connotations, Freudian metaphors borrowed from neurology and physics that have *long* been criticized out of metapsychology, which itself died a slow death in American psychoanalysis. A newer understanding of these same primary and secondary processes of thought (Aragno 2016 a&b) considers them two ‘semantic types’ the first compositional, connotative, sensory/emotively evocative, abstract, immediate and timeless; the second, denotive, linear, syntactical/consecutive, causal and time-bound. The fact that it takes longer to spin a sentence whereas “an image is worth a thousand words’ is valid but not enough to ground a comprehensive theory of *meaning*, especially if this implies ‘higher and lower’ value. A ‘pictured’ metaphor, even a musical phrase, may contain as eloquent an abstract felt/idea as any philosophical sentence! But to be *fully conscious*, an idea has to be spun out in words. And to speak of “reality-testing” in socio-political contexts is hazardous indeed since deep irrational passions typically hook on to fervent ideologies harnessing savage actions, an arena, like religion or fictional entertainment, where “reality” claims, even more than in others, are a chimera! In fact, humans are unique in investing their ideas with so

much raw emotion as to override their own survival! And to look backwards at psychoanalytic principles as they were initially couched and apply them now without an updated *explanatory* version inclusive of semiosis undercuts the authors' thesis, since, as they state; "We... need models that allow us to understand the synergy between the rational and affective components of cognitive processes." Such a model exists! But apparently is insufficiently widespread to have been used to bolster the claims of this paper. First published in 1997, it is this author's revision of Freud's first topographical model, expanded and transcribed into a seamless bio-semiotic epigenetic model of mind and human communication formed by a six-tiered developmental hierarchy depicting the gradual mediation of natural affect-signals by sign and then symbolic functioning along unconscious/preconscious/conscious dimensions. It differentiates the phenomenological as well as cognitive implications of these advances as they are mirrored in both micro-stages and macro-phases during the course of psychoanalytic treatment. This model's application to a study of multiple forms of communication (2008/2016) through the prism of supervision along an Ucs to Cs continuum, includes analyses of the referential scope, semantic fields, listening/speech processes, and specific semiotic features of psychoanalytic dialogues, integrating therein their "ameliorating" impact on cognition. The principles underlying this revised model of mind and communication and the findings from these prototype studies may be generalized to understand how socio-cultural linguistic and dialogical forms influence communal semantic fields conditioning perceptions and ideologies, reinforcing group-boundaries, promoting trends and traditions, as well as specific conscious-awareness.

There appears to be an inverse relationship between unconscious proto-semiotic and signal-forms and the availability of general categories of experience to express them through linguistic vehicles of denotive reference. In this sense words initially invoke an entire scenario and only gradually detach from the global experience of the things they stand for. Language only assists thought in becoming conscious; it facilitates the necessary abstractive step in specificity. This entire progression is marked by stages of symbolization which characteristically move from somatic/affective-enacted channels, through iconic presentation, to discursive-abstract symbolic-form. Language is a semiotic instrument that implicates underlying drives, affects, motives, and goals, constant undercurrents that filter or burst through linguistic meanings, often usurping languages *re-presentational* function altogether. An epigenetic hierarchical model illustrates how regressive currents reactivate earlier less evolved modes of expression in a primitivization of behaviors. The "enslavement of the public sphere" to all manner of affective-displays, of which the authors speak, is one example, merely the tip of an iceberg, of a *general* invasion of personal/private emotions spilled-out for public viewing.

The revised multistratal epigenetic model of mind-in-inter-action illustrates how language and dialogues retain deep roots at organic, less-differentiated interpersonal levels, regardless of how abstractly a semiotic system is used, generating inter-penetrative semantic fields. [An analysis of empathy and its specialized application in psychoanalysis (Aragno, 2008) is of particular relevance here.] Specifically, the model provides epistemological bridges between what is unrepresented (Ucs) acted-out; what can become known through linguistic/semiotic mediation



(Pcs-Cs), and what may become consciously aware (Cs) through language, as these correlate with current neuroscience. Psychoanalysis is a developmental psychology, its lengthy therapeutic action founded on verbalization and working-through: its investigation into everything unconscious uncovered phylogenetic modes of thought through dreams and, today, in order to achieve a broader reach, it demands anchoring in cutting edge correlations of its processes with neurobiology, placing affect-signals at the *start* of an hierarchical epigenesis of semiotic mediations that *does* provide explanatory principles for what these authors are claiming.

Without such a cohesive, organizing, psychoanalytic model, the authors' thesis lacks explanatory grounding in therapeutic action that strives to mediate and *elevate raw drives/affects to higher levels of semiotic organization*, supporting their claim that psychoanalysis can diminish "affectivization" and "enemization" by promoting rational thought — all of which it does! Psychoanalytic dialogues, where its processes take place, however, are now highly confidential and personalized. Designed to make the personal unconscious conscious they reveal how discourse-situations are both fed by and feed into new conscious awareness and would indeed benefit social discourse. But – and this is really the crux of my critique - it does this in settings that are *voluntary*, that honor protocols of lengthy and painstaking verbal analysis in a collaborative interpretive space designed to investigate deep unconscious patterns of behavior and motives through personal memories and unique experiences that are gradually worked-through, from affect-entangled-ambivalent schemas to modulated, post-conflictual, neutralized thought. How many in the general public, the masses, are willing or even able, to engage in

such a process? Especially when aggressive ideologically driven gatherings and social-media platforms provide a haven for feelings of 'belonging,' outlets for frustration, narcissistic exhibitionism, or for pompous leaders posturing power to offer themselves as seductive identificatory idols?

The early analysts surrounding Freud originally conceived of a more socially engaged, widespread, psychoanalysis. Ideally, as Anna Freud advocated with her Community Clinics, its educative function would become part of a governing formative philosophy embodied in education and academic curricula. Behavior, conduct, and good manners, used to be based on "form," requiring impulse-control, adherence to general societal standards subject to punishment and reward, but not anymore! Inherently, the idea of rational thought, restraint, social consciousness, consideration for the "common good" etc., would be transmitted top down as core values of citizenry. But the overuse of technology; misconstruence of democratic principles of "freedom" and juvenile exploitation of social media platforms; modern consumerism; the seduction and subliminal corruption of advertisement; and the blurring of reality and fantasy in the entertainment industry, have taken us in the opposite direction. No wonder there is rampant degradation of form and regression of semiotic organization. The interpolation of any sign-vehicle into human exchange generates one more filter through which to re-present experience, distancing us from nature and from each other. And the current screen-driven, internet-ridden, smart-phone addicted modes of exchange only encourage the I-this and I-that, whatever I-feel, me-first, blurted-out entitlement of today's unmodulated exhibitionistic trends. We are living in an "impulsera" a time of much imaging, showing, and discharging,

and little reading, reflection, or thought. Not that there is anything wrong with images but that they are now replacing crafted thought and deliberate cogitation in regressive disregulative ways.

It is perhaps a testament to the paradoxes of evolution and unpredictable consequences of human pursuits that we live at a time when more is known about the technology for transmitting information than about the complex architecture of meanings and human communication itself. At no other time has contact been more instantaneous, direct, or continuous, or have communicative means so radically altered the multi-palleted tissue of human interchange, transforming codes of discourse and relationship, transcending time and space, altering the quality of life, even the nature of reality. As the authors point out regarding the “loss of temporality” we lose time absorbed in ‘screen time,’ no time-zone matters anymore, any time is *all* time anywhere anytime! The globe wrapped in an “internet” defies temporal and geographical boundaries providing a mind-boggling supply of information while severely constricting the plane of interaction to a flat screen. The E-mail contact and obsessively thumbed text, similarly, reduce communication to highly abbreviated linguistic coding, bypassing syntax. We need no longer have any contact to make contact; even intimate conversations occur between people who will never meet.

Paradoxically, the faster we can press a button or flick a switch the less effectively do we seem to be able to reach each other, to forge relationships that hold, moderate impulse, mediate difference by tolerant discussion rather than dismissal. The interpolation of fake voices and so much machinery between us has bred new strains of disease, as the authors alert. It is increasingly difficult to

bridge the distance created by the dry impersonal conditioning of the modern world and its symptomatic sequelae spread through our daily lives. These un-affirming mechanized forms cannot but lead to an alienated loss of identity. And with the Covid-imposed loss of public-space human interchange, “affectivization” may have grown even louder to compensate for isolation. Again, paradoxically, the more accessible has communicating become the less are we doing it meaningfully. Attempting to reach a person in a business is frustrating; an institution, futile; but try having an in-depth conversation! The art of conversing *about* anything has been overridden by a preponderance of the time-pressured three millisecond utterance favored by the impatient interlocutor who, were one to attempt a slightly more developed sentence, might cut you off or put you on hold! We have grown accustomed to listening through clipped messages recited by monotone fake-voices listing “menus” from which we obediently pinch our select morsels of information, raging silently at an inanimate machine for having wasted all the time it was supposed to save. Lost within these sterile techno-labyrinths, we fail to find a vital human response at the other end that could lead us out. We have become a species of information mongers, knowing more and more about less and less, oblivious to the difference between information and knowledge, digitalized data and human intelligence.

The new humans are quickly briefed into becoming the breathless button-pushing, screen-scanning, channel-switching, icon-gazing techno-puppets most fitted adaptively to our great, giant dazzling technocracy. But the loss of slow process, careful formulation, reflection, and frequent, diversely phrased and paced, face to face interchanges, only rein-



forces a rampant collective narcissism nourished by the omnipotent control of the almighty switch that can, at will, flick you on or off. We ought to be vigilant to the potentially disjunctive effects of technology on human relating; seemingly simple habits may have deep seated and widespread impact on the human mind. Signals or coded signs, rather than symbols, are now the median currency of exchange — heaven knows what complex consequences for the human brain this primitivization of interchange will have. For the authors of this paper, it has already created an “existential” crisis of identity and meaning. Within the woof and warp of all exchanges are embedded a blend of moral and ethical codes of conduct, national and individual personality traits, the entire lattice work of values, beliefs, and principles for living, that tie us to a family, a culture, and the traditions of a particular society of which, as animals of kinship, we must feel a part. If it is to be truly human then communication, in its social function, should continue to encompass all those codified, affiliative signs and gestures, subliminal cues and expressive symbols, that are essential to the making of meaning and the use of verbal interactions as a means of thought and bonding, affirmation and identity.

For myself, I have grown appreciative of the privilege inherent in the daily professional practice of an intimate, purposeful dialogue, where unconscious meanings are of the essence. This engagement convinces that, more than ever, we must hold dear those venerable forms of discourse — poesis, narrative, ritual, drama, story, debate, conversation, exegesis — that continue to preserve our needs to participate and represent thoughts, to transmit, articulate, listen and respond, via personal communication. This expression of Eros, that binds together, versus Thanatos, that rips apart, validates Freud’s two great supraordinate ‘Life and Death’ drives.

The subjects these authors address in this positional paper challenge psychoanalysis to come out of its ivory tower and promulgate its theories and therapeutic principles for the common good in public spheres. These ideas are *very* important. I foresee that launching this new interdisciplinary journal will invite more such ideas, as I have here tried to contribute to, that ought to be forcefully discussed at large. And it is my sincere hope that having brought them forth, their impact will spread.

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