

Psychoanalysis as an Erotic Political Strategy of Translation. Turning Egoistic Affects into Socializing Representations

Rosaura Martínez Ruiz¹

Abstract

The phenomenon of affectivization of the public sphere, described by Salvatore, De Luca Picione, Bochicchio, Mannino, Langher, Pergola, Velotti, and Venuleo (2021), sheds light on the contemporary Western sociopolitical crisis, strengthened by the weakening of social bonds, where the other is turned into an enemy. Thus, following Freud and Butler, I explore the underlying conditions of this phenomenon to consider new erotic political strategies that aim to heal the public sphere as the space and time of cohabitation. I propose that the Freudian theory of Repression could help understand why subjects that form a community lose the sense of reality as a shared semantic space. This disavowal of reality facilitates the affectivization of the public sphere, but it could also be read as the effect of the eviction of a particularly painful social representation into the unconscious. That is, according to Butler's theory of subjectivation, the repudiation of dependency at the core of subjectivity.

Keywords: *affectivization; public sphere; subjection; eros; psychoanalysis.*

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¹ Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Email : rosauramartinezuiz@gmail.com

The psychoanalytic clinic is a task of translation. I say task since it is work in the sense of an expenditure of energy and translation because the Freudian psyche is an apparatus constituted by subsystems that communicate with different grammars; this phenomenon causes the semantic interaction between all different instances of the psychic apparatus to be more often than not unhappy. Psychoanalysis as clinic is then a method whose rules of operation allow the translation of the grammar from one psychic instance to another. In terms of the first topic in which Freud divides the psychic apparatus into the subsystems unconscious, preconscious and conscious, the direction of translation goes from the grammar of the primary process to that of the secondary process. In the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895/1966), Freud explains that:

Wishful cathexis carried to the point of hallucination [and] complete generation of unpleasure which involves a complete expenditure of defense are described by us as *psychical primary processes*; by contrast, those processes which are only made possible by a good cathexis of the ego, and which represent a moderation of the foregoing, are described as *psychical secondary processes*. It will be seen that the necessary precondition of the latter is a correct employment of the *indications of reality*, which is only possible when there is inhibition by the ego. (pp. 326-7).

Hence, free association, the fundamental rule of the analytic frame, which indicates to the

patient that s/he must communicate everything that comes to mind first, allows psychic contents constructed under the grammar of the primary process to be translated into that of the secondary process. The gain is a temporalization of the unconscious psychic contents that makes it easier for the consciousness to recognize the unconscious contents as memories and not as current experiences. This work of translation is not a once-and-for-all effort, for the translation is not from an original material to, say, a secondary one, but a transcription in which the psychic content inscribed in one *topos* manages to register into another, however, not without modifications (Freud, 1954). The latter is best understood with the analogy Freud draws between the psychic apparatus and a magic slate.

In the *Note upon the Mystic Writing Pad* (1925/1961), Freud presents the psychic apparatus as a writing machine in which the mnemonic traces are rewritten with each new inscription. It turns out then that the psychic material is alterable and that each mnemonic trace is a precipitate of rewritings. The interesting thing about this model is that the "first" and "last" impressions only have the status of myth, for, in order for the psyche to function as a writing machine, it must resist it while remaining open to new inscriptions. The analogy with the Mystic Pad solved for Freud that age-old problem of design that he had been dragging along since before psychoanalysis was inaugurated as a universal theory of mind and a clinic of interpretation of the unconscious psychic content, that is, before the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. I mean that, since the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895/1966), Freud wondered how to

think of one apparatus able to fulfill the contradictory functions of perception and memory, that is, that archives traces while at the same time remaining always open to the reception of new stimulation. Moreover, the analogy of the psychic apparatus with the Mystic Pad is also withstood because the functioning of both artifacts depends on the anti-stimulus protection:

If, while the Mystic Pad has writing on it, we cautiously raise the celluloid from the waxed paper, we can see the writing just as clearly on the surface of the latter, and the question may arise why there should be any necessity for the celluloid portion of the cover. Experiment will then show that the thin paper would be very easily crumpled or torn if one were to write directly upon it with a stilus. The layer of celluloid thus acts as a protective sheath for the waxed paper, to keep off injurious effects from without. The celluloid is a 'protective shield against stimuli'; the layer which actually receives the stimuli is the paper. (Freud, 1925/1961, pp. 229-230).

And immediately afterwards Freud adds, "I may at this point recall that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* I showed that the perceptual apparatus of our mind consists of two layers, of an external protective shield against stimuli whose task it is to diminish the strength of excitations coming in, and of a surface behind it which receives the stimuli, namely the system *Pcpt.-Cs*" (1925/1961, p. 230). Resistance to writing is then the condition of possibility of writing. In other words, there is writing if and only if there is resistance to writing.

This also means that there is memory only if there is resistance to memory, to the inscription of a trace. The force of resistance that what has already been written opposes to what is about to be written, causes, on the one hand, that the new inscriptions are not printed in their exact, so to speak, design, but are altered by the previous text; but, on the other hand, that what has already been written is modified by the new that manages to overcome some of the force of resistance. That is to say that every mnemonic trace is a mixture between the previously written and that which is about to be written.

Thus, translation in psychoanalysis does not consist in the substitution of one grammar for another, but in the introduction of the secondary process to the unconscious psychic content that manages to reach consciousness. In other words, it is within the analytic framework that this translation from the primary process to the secondary process is achieved. However, it is fundamental to understand that the unconscious psychic content does not dissolve; there always remains a rest, a trace of the old mnemonic in the heart of the new imprint that has been formed by the impression of the secondary process. In other words, the old content, however modified, co-exists with the new, although the latter also conditions the former. Understanding this Freudian discovery is of utmost importance to truly grasp what the psychoanalytic clinic is all about and, also, the psychoanalytic efforts aimed at healing the public sphere as the space and time of cohabitation. If the psyche is a tissue of mnemonic traces always open to new registers which, though they modify the previous psychic architecture, do not replace it, or if the unconscious is, as Freud states, the place where "nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten" (Freud,

1900/1953, p. 577); then psychoanalysis as a therapeutic intervention is a never-ending task and must be a continuous effort.

In *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915/1957a), one of his most pessimistic and saddest texts, Freud points out that:

...every earlier stage of development persists alongside the later stage which has arisen from it; here succession also involves co-existence, although it is to the same materials that the whole series of transformations has applied. The earlier mental state may not have manifested itself for years, but none the less it is so far present that it may at any time again become the mode of expression of the forces in the mind, and indeed the only one, as though all later developments had been annulled or undone. This extraordinary plasticity of mental developments is not unrestricted as regards direction; it may be described as a special capacity for involution —for regression— since it may well happen that a later and higher stage of development, once abandoned, cannot be reached again. But the primitive stages can always be re-established; the primitive mind is, in the fullest meaning of the word, imperishable. (p. 577).

Let us now return to the modes of mental functioning.¹ We already know that the psychic apparatus holds protection against stimuli coming from outside the organism; however,

it does not have an equivalent to defend itself from hyper-intense drives. Thus, it has developed defense mechanisms against these forces that attack the organization from within. One of these mechanisms is repression, responsible for the eviction into the unconscious of contents that the psyche interprets as painful. In his metapsychological text on the subject, Freud explains that associated with the representation of the drive there is always an amount of affect; and adds that both take on different destinies once repression has succeeded in defending the psyche from its uncomfortable content. While the destiny of the drive representation cannot be other than its eviction from consciousness (or, in the case of never having been conscious, but being in the process of becoming so, its prohibition to break into perception), the quantitative amount of the agency representing the drive or affect has three possible vicissitudes: "...either the drive is altogether suppressed, so that no trace of it is found, or it appears as an affect which is in some way or other qualitatively coloured, or it is changed into anxiety. The two latter possibilities set us the task of taking into account, as a further drive vicissitude, the *transformation* into *affects*, and especially into *anxiety*, of the psychological energies of *drives*"² (Freud, 1915/1957b, p. 153). From this theory of repression and the destiny of affect, we can understand the affectivization of the public sphere, as Salvatore, De Luca Piccione, Bochicchio, Mannino, Langher, Pergola, Velotti, and Venuleo (2021) name the phenomenon of "enslaving of the public sphere to the individual and group emotional

¹ Beyond the multiple uses Freud gives to the word unconscious, in this commentary I will only refer to the unconscious as the repressed unconscious. Freud discusses this in A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'. (1925/1961).

² I have changed Strachey's translation of the German word *Triebe* from instinct to drive since I believe it is more accurate.

enactment", (Salvatore, et al, 2021, "The affectivization of the public sphere: a symptom of the contemporary age," para. 1) that grows after the lack of social security and the weakening of social ties. According to these authors, for many decades the West has been suffering from a socio-political crisis that manifests itself in "xenophobia, values polarization and religious radicalization, racial and gender violence, weakening of civic infrastructures, spreading of fake news, declining trust in people and in national and transnational institutions, diffusion of far-right, sovereign and populist political cultures,³ devaluation of representative democracy and its institutions, sharpening of ethnic and international conflicts, re-emergence of the spectre of nuclear weapons, immobilism towards the climate crisis." (Salvatore et al., 2021, "The challenges of the current crisis scenario," para. 1)

From the point of view of the authors of "The affectivization of the public sphere: the contribution of psychoanalysis in understanding and counteracting the current crisis scenarios," the failure of social security and the breakdown of social bonds result in renunciation to think. In other words, subjects that form a community seem to lose the sense of reality as a shared semantic space and, thus, communication among them becomes impossible and non-existent. Renouncing to critically think (or, in

Freudian vocabulary, to the secondary process) as the activity that positively mediates between desire and action upon the world causes desire to act out with no considerations for the others in the world. As I explained above, the psyche is subject to the functioning of the primary process. In psychosocial terms, this implies that the desires of others are overlooked as equally valuable and, instead, are experienced as illegitimate obstacles to the fulfillment of one's own. The other is turned into the enemy (Salvatore et al., 2021, "The affectivization of the public sphere: a symptom of the contemporary age," para. 3).

The disavowal of reality that facilitates the affectivization of the public sphere could also be read as the effect of the eviction of a painful representation into the unconscious, as Freud explains in *Repression* (1915/1957b); however, let us not forget, the affection associated with it can express itself as long as is dissociated from the repressed idea. But which representation will seem as unbearable in the psychosocial sphere? I agree with Judith Butler that negation of our radical dependence on the other is ontologically determinant for the formation of the subject, as explained in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) where they also propose the subject as a paradoxical place between subjection and agency: "Subjection" signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of be-

³ Here I would like to call attention to the double history and double meaning of the signifier "populism". While its history in Europe has been that of fascist totalitarian state projects, in Latin America is that of emancipatory states of the oppressed class and of a project of radical democracy. There is a dispute in political theory over this signifier. From my perspective, it is necessary not to fall into common places in which populism is immediately associated with authoritarianism; we must recognize that there is another side that understands it as an expression of politics itself that affirms the antagonism in the shared space between the dispossessed and

the elites. For populisms in Latin America, the bet has been from the left, which has meant the development of socio-political projects of radical equity. In the context of this new journal, in which the contributions will deal with the intersection between political theory and psychoanalysis, it is essential to account for this debate insofar as, for notable thinkers working at this juncture, the school that understands populism as a political project of the left has been central. I am referring to colleagues such as Yannis Stavrakakis, Jorge Alemán, Paula Biglieri, Gloria Perelló, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau himself.

coming a subject" (p. 2). In other words, following Butler, the subject is a paradoxical tropological movement, for the reflexive turn at the same time that subordinates it to the law of the other (insofar as the law is prior to its existence and, therefore, emergence), is an act of self-subordination and, in that sense, an act carried out by an agency.

According to this theory of the subject, even if the subordinating turn is voluntary, this does not mean conscious. Self-subordination is not a joyful act, for it is the product of a cruel translation of dependence into servitude or of an abusive transaction between care and oppression/exploitation. This makes the subject and the oppressor unwilling to acknowledge their dependence on each other. There is a repudiation of the condition of dependency at the core of subjectivity. The subject is then attachment in dependence and, at the same time, repudiation of that subordination. That is to say, it is an agency that attempts de-subordination and revolts against subjection. It is thus the negation of its subordination and dependence, for it has no notice of its perverse attachment to authority (passionate, says Butler). As negation of this subordination, it emerges along with it. From psychoanalysis, we can think of all the failures of repression as attempts and small successes of rebellion against subjectivation: lapsus, dreams, symptoms, repudiated psychic material that bursts into consciousness and, we must also think of course, of all erotic, artistic, scientific and cultural production, and in the formation of complex and diverse organizations. Thus, following Butler, the unconscious also emerges through the tropological turn that inaugurates the subject as agency and subordination; that is, when self-subordination, dependence on the other and the passionate attachment to au-

thority are repudiated: "If the effect of autonomy is conditioned by subordination and that founding subordination or dependency is rigorously repressed, the subject emerges in tandem with the unconscious" (Butler, 1997, p. 7). Here, "it is important to distinguish between the notion of psyche, which includes the notion of the unconscious, and that of the subject, whose formation is conditioned by the exclusion of the unconscious" (Butler, 1997, p. 206).

What to do then to heal the social bond? I would argue, from a psychopolitical perspective, that the task is to strengthen State social projects that protect citizens in a just and equitable manner. Prioritizing the allocation of federal and state resources for public, free and high-quality health (physical and psychological) and education ensures the primary basis of social well-being (I would also think here of fair access to enjoy nature). Without these, inequity reigns intolerably. If these rights are covered, for access to both is a human right, we can, as a society, build other socio-political projects that make the spirit of each member of the community flourish to its fullest capacity. Assuming the insurmountable reality that we are biologically and ontologically dependent beings, since, first, life needs other forms of life for its own survival (eating or the care of an adult when one is helpless, for example) and, second, language and law precede us as subjects, we must then affirm that we depend on the well-being of what is other. If our dependence is not exploited and insidious, there is no reason to repudiate or exploit the other or the world (also as an ecosystem).

In psychoanalytic terms, this is akin to Freud's idea that "whatever fosters the growth of civilization works at the same time against war" (Freud, 1933/1964, p. 215). For here, in his

letter to Einstein, by culture he means an attitude that promotes the progressive deferral of drive goals and a limitation of drive motions (Freud, 1933/1964). In other words, cultural efforts can achieve the deferral of drive satisfaction via logical or creative thought, that is, via the secondary process. In this sense, let us not lose sight of the fact that the secondary process is a modification of the primary process, that its origin is the recognition of reality as the space of socialization, and that this requires the renunciation of the immediate discharge of drives. The secondary process is essentially the incorporation of the world and the other into the psychic economy. Thinking and the translation of the primary process into the secondary may then imply the deferral of the fulfillment of my desires for the sake of the common good. On the contrary, a public sphere that does not care for the wellbeing of each of its members and therefore neither satisfies desires nor entails the hope that it will do so in the future, generates the need to repress desires not without, as we explained earlier, promoting affectivization. In this same direction, if the social bond is constructed via an erotic dependence⁴ in lieu of an exploiting and abusive attachment, we can imagine that instead of prioritizing the egoistic satisfaction of my desires, my efforts can be added to collaborations oriented towards safeguarding the

happiness of the community; for it is community work that would ensure my fortune and not my monadic individuality (Martínez, 2018). In short, the sociopolitical project must be one that promotes actions that facilitate the translation of egoistic affections into socializing representations.

In my opinion, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic should have made clear to us our radical dependence on the other. Our life has not been in our hands, but in the hands of the other person wearing a mask. Today more than ever it became clear that if I do not ensure that the other person has access to a mask or the vaccine, my use of such protection or my immunization will be completely insufficient to safeguard my own health. Today, more than ever, it is clear that caring for the other is the care of the self.

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⁴ In my book *Eros: más allá de la pulsión de muerte* (2018) (*Eros: Beyond the Death Drive*. Soon to be published in English by Fordham University Press), I carefully analyzed the ways in which the life drive can interrupt the death drive and, from a Derridean perspective, I affirmed the possibility of deferring it via erotic

efforts, that is, sociopolitical tasks that imply the construction of complex and difference-loving social organizations. In this sense, I argue that the death drive is not a dismal and irresistible destiny.

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