



ARE WE STILL AFRAID OF THE UNCONSCIOUS?

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AN UNIMAGINABLE EARTHQUAKE

If psychoanalysis were to be taken into account seriously, effectively and practically, it would be a nearly unimaginable earthquake. Indescribable. Even for psychoanalysts. We act as if psychoanalysis never existed, even we, who are convinced of the ineluctable necessity of the psychoanalytic revolution. . . . In entire parts of our life, we act as if we believed in sovereign authority, consciousness, the ego, and we hold the language (discourse) of this autonomy.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida indeed showed that the “earthquake” called psychoanalysis is not only inevitable for Western society’s understanding of itself, but is also desirable. Still, resistance to psychoanalysis and the revolutions it brought with it persists. We act as if we are conscious, autonomous, and sovereign all the time. However, since Freud’s discoveries, we know very well that this is not the case. It is time we find the courage to face the reality that we’re not sovereign, conscious beings, but are ruled by forces outside of our understanding and control.

First, we must accept what we are neurotic and speaking subjects and take responsibility for everything that psychoanalysis involves from there. In 1967, Jacques Lacan wondered about the future of psychoanalysis, about how it would survive, and in which how-to books it would find itself. As part of the “Mardis du Vinatier,” a series of conferences in which he developed the main lines of his teaching intended for a wider and more “profane” audience—as Freud would have put it—Lacan declared:

The unconscious has been admitted, and then many more things that we believe to have been admitted, loosely, in a package, whereby everyone thinks they know what psychoanalysis is. The trouble is, it’s only psychoanalysts who don’t know. Not only

do they not know it, but up to a point, it is quite right that they do not know it, because that is precisely what it is about. If they thought they knew it all right away, it would be terrible, there would be no more psychoanalysis at all, as, since everyone agrees, it's a closed case. For psychoanalysts, that cannot be.

The case of the unconscious is not quite “closed,” since it continues to be debated. For decades we have been regularly told of the programmed death of psychoanalysis, sometimes rendered supposedly obsolete or ineffective by “brief therapies” and “coaching” of all kinds. We are told psychoanalysis is not sufficiently in tune with the frenetic pace of our time, which pushes us to be as productive as possible.



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from *Dias De Glória Quando Encontro Seu Olhar (Glory Days When I Meet Your Gaze)*
~ Iris de Oliveira

More than a century after the Freudian invention of psychoanalysis and “unearthing” of the unconscious—the “time of discovery” as Jean-Bertrand Pontalis called it, that of “original dazzling” for Elisabeth Roudinesco, or of the “stroke of a genius and a gangster” as Gilles Deleuze had it—what still resists, at the individual and collective level, to fully assume what the “science” of the unconscious is and involves? Did the general upheaval of the psychoanalysis “to come” (*à-venir*), to use Derrida’s expression, ever happen? Either way, in the meantime, there is only fear and trembling . . .

The subversive virtue of Freud's discoveries upset the common representation we had of the functioning of our psychic apparatus—but also, by extension, the common representations of law, religion, education, patriarchal (and therefore political) authority, as well as many other areas of life. This subversion begins with the unconscious. The exhibition “From Regard to Listening” devoted to Freud and held in 2018 at the Museum of Art and History of Judaism in Paris recalled, in large letters on a wall, that according to Freud himself, he inflicted on humanity the third “narcissistic humiliation.” The first humiliation was heralded by Copernicus who proved that man is not at the center of the universe, followed by Darwin with his theory of evolution. Haven't we learned the lessons of these humiliations yet? Or is the narcissistic wound too deep to allow for recovery?

A REVOLUTION OF THE SUBJECT

What could be more dizzying than to recognize that we are not alone in deciding, that we are not “master in our own house”? Psychoanalysis has invited itself into our world, into our lives, into our privacy, to upend our sense of authority and identity. The accompanying ideas of the unconscious and its power alone arouse fear. To accept the notion that the unconscious impacts our choices, actions, and our lives would be to break with the modern (capitalist, productivist) idea that *homo faber* can control everything—since we could no longer have authority, even over ourselves. Fear of the unconscious, fear of losing control—of what, exactly?

The subject is not a conscious and sovereign intentionality: it is a divided entity. This is both its condition and its cause. According to psychoanalyst Philippe Cabestan, “the unconscious is not a hidden, virtual, potential presence to itself. On the contrary, the unconscious for Derrida differs.” The unconscious is that disturbing thing we'd rather put off—forever, ideally. In her dialogue with Derrida, Élisabeth Roudinesco nails it: “The unconscious, in the Freudian sense, can always be avoided, refuted, deemed ‘dangerous’ and therefore banished from consciousness and from reason.”

The discoveries of psychoanalysis undermine the elusive comfort in which we indulge ourselves as speaking subjects: that of imagining we always find reality in the same place. However, the idea of the unconscious modifies our entire conception of reality. Thus, long before Derrida, Freud questioned the primacy of full presence at the same time as that of presence to (and therefore consciousness of) oneself. By telling us that we cannot be fully aware of what we are going through all the time, that there is always a part of reality that escapes us, psychoanalysis shakes us. This is a disturbing idea because we have to accept that we are not in control of everything. Derrida has endeavored to integrate this logic of the unconscious into his philosophical body of work, writing: “Psychoanalysis calls into question all constituted knowledge, whether it is academic or not, since the existence of the unconscious comes to reject it.”

Nevertheless, if Derrida willingly follows in Freud's footsteps, if he is seduced by Freud's courage, his nerve, if he uses the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, including those of repression and resistance, he still does not seem to really believe in the future of the psychoanalytic revolution. On the contrary, he remains skeptical about its fragility. The unconscious is for him, above all, a theoretical machine built in opposition to the cult of consciousness and agency that dominates in the metaphysical tradition, especially since the Enlightenment set itself the task of combating all obscurantisms. However, was the unconscious not first described as a gray area, in front of which we should adopt the posture of humility, of not knowing? According to Derrida, we just pretend to trust the teachings of this still-stumbling "science." In actuality, we are unable to fully assume them. In short, the philosopher of deconstruction does not want to give psychoanalysis its "scientific" value, but instead accepts and fully adopts the logic of the unconscious.

Freudian discoveries trace a clear thread through the 20th century. In *Philosophy of the Will* (1950), Paul Ricoeur attempts to discern what divides and reconciles the voluntary and the involuntary. Philippe Cabestan emphasizes that in seeking the nature of the will, Ricoeur recognizes the notion of the psychic unconscious as one of the figures of the absolute involuntary. Sartre, for his part, challenged the absolute power of the unconscious over our will and our freedom in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), reaffirming that consciousness is crossed through and through by knowledge. Sartre was nevertheless interested in psychoanalysis all his life and was a keen reader of Freud, even writing the screenplay for John Huston's film, *Freud: The Secret Passion* (1962), at the latter's request—without, however, signing his name, which does not even appear in the credits. Sartre also asked his friend Pontalis to analyze him, which the latter refused, precisely because of their friendship. Vexed, the philosopher of existentialism did not ask any other analyst and therefore never opened himself up on a couch—further proof, if needed, of his deep resistance. Ten years later in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Deleuze and Guattari criticize the reduction of the unconscious to the family field (which they even call "familialism"). According to them, the child's unconscious relates not just to the family, but to the world at large, to social groups and the identities that constitute it.

These examples, among many others, suggest that the psychoanalytic revolution was assimilated by many philosophers of the 20th century all the same—even without ever being completely adopted, as if a small remainder (an object a?) persisted. Besides the human sciences, how can we lead psychoanalysis into fields where it is not heard in the 21st century?

A REVOLUTION OF POWER

Beyond the first thrill caused by the logic of the unconscious and the division of the subject, Derrida's affirmation underlines our resistance to thinking about the "drive for power" (*pulsion de pouvoir*)—this power that we lose first in relation to ourselves, then in relation to other people, a power beyond our control, one that perseveres. However, Freud did not

hesitate to think about politics, as many works testify, from *Totem and Taboo* to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, via *The Question of Lay Analysis*. Psychoanalysis will be political, or it won't. This was the message that Freud wanted to leave us with, confirming psychoanalysis' eminently subversive character in its resistance to clear categorization. The fear aroused by the unconscious must affect all subjects, whatever they are, individuals as well as institutions, including political or psychoanalytic ones. As a result, psychoanalysis has a duty: to dissect political, institutional, or bureaucratic discourse, including its own. Cabestan warns us: "From this angle, and paradoxically, it is above all itself that psychoanalysis must strive not to 'resist' if it wants to survive."

As Derrida suggests, psychoanalytic associations, the whole of psychoanalysis itself, should detach from political, institutional, and bureaucratic discourse. Lacan considered the creation of a "school" of psychoanalysis that would be neither bureaucratic nor sectarian. As he said, not without humor: "Up to you to decide whether you want to be Lacanian. As for me, I am Freudian." Let's go back to the history of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. First planned for Budapest, its establishment was stopped by the mayor in 1919. According to Sándor Ferenczi, who was there, this failure must be blamed on the incomprehension of the responsible authorities. With the fate of the institute's location determined by politicians, the problem of psychoanalysis' development was already political, since a conservative political decision with little justification was enough to prevent it from existing as an institutional level.

In Germany, the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute was established the following year, in 1920, headed by Max Eitingon, Karl Abraham, and Ernst Simmel, overseen by Freud, from Vienna. Their wish? To make psychoanalysis accessible to a wider public, and to open a training space for analysts with a system of grants for those who need it. The first consultation with the patients was given by Eitingon, who decided on the next step: analytical treatment or psychotherapy, nursing homes depending on the pathology detected. The BPI thus welcomed adults and children, from all backgrounds and all professions. Everyone paid what they could, and consultations could even be free. The gesture was fundamentally, and intentionally, political:

Make our therapy accessible to this crowd of human beings who suffer from their neuroses no less than the rich, but who are not in a capacity to finance their treatment. To create a place where analysis can be taught theoretically and where the experiences of older analysts can be passed on to students eager to learn. Finally, to improve our knowledge of neurotic conditions and our therapeutic technique by applying them and testing them in new conditions.

For Freud, who was very proud of the project, the foundation of this clinic could also help to fight against resistance to psychoanalysis from administrative bodies, and from medical doctors. He published *The Question of Lay Analysis* six years later, a text in which he refused the incorporation of psychoanalysis into medicine and wondered whether psychoanalysis should submit to public powers. The founders of the BPI also envisioned a future affirming the necessity of psychoanalysis:

A day will come when . . . society will recognize that public health is no less threatened by neuroses than by tuberculosis. . . . Institutions and clinics will be built, headed by qualified psychoanalysts, and we will endeavor, with the help of analysis, to maintain their resistance to men who would otherwise indulge in drinking, to women who succumb under the weight of frustrations, to children who have only the choice between depravity and neurosis. These treatments will be free of charge.

This remarkable institution disappeared in 1935 under the Nuremberg Laws, prohibiting the exercise of liberal professions to Jews. It was re-founded in 1950 and still exists under the name of Berliner Psychoanalytisches Institut Karl-Abraham—an association which retained the name of only one of its four founders.

Is it not in the wake of this great Freudian dream, transdisciplinary and open to the world while preserving its autonomy, that psychoanalysis can remain a historical revolution? In his course given in 1974 at the Collège de France called “Le Pouvoir psychiatrique,” Foucault analyzes the phenomenon of involving “shrinks” in institutions (schools, army, prisons, and, more recently, companies), which would confirm the interdependence of state power and psychoanalysis. For him, the latter seems to be part of a long history of obedience, even submission to the Other—work he will continue with his analysis of sexuality two years later in “The Will to Know.” The injunction to “know thyself,” induced in a way by psychoanalysis (but which predates it), would be a matter of obedience—to a certain law, but also to the diagnosis, to the evaluation, which psychoanalysis nevertheless refuses to set up. In *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1982), Foucault replaces self-knowledge with the care for the self, an art of interpreting our relationship to ourselves. For the *homo psychologicus*, the care for the self draws the contours of a new aesthetic of existence, as spiritual work and bodily exercise.

THINKING THE WORLD THAT COMES WITH PSYCHOANALYSIS

How to think the world that comes with psychoanalysis? The question has never seemed so burning. Relevant to an answer is Derrida’s assertion in a dialogue with Roudinesco: to understand and face the crises that our civilization is going through, it is urgent to really take into account what the drive for power, and therefore the death drive discovered by Freud, implies. Only thus, by deciphering all the hidden, repressed, or obscure sides of the human being, will we allow society to be more “human,” more empathetic, more open to difference and to others.

We must therefore be careful to preserve the subversive force of psychoanalysis, maintaining both vigilance and openness, especially for non-practitioners. The “future” of psychoanalysis must remain, according to Derrida, a discourse and a practice of non-violence, while welcoming unconscious knowledge with open arms—with all the intellectual requirements it claims, and without limiting itself.

Freud was well aware that he was going to throw a stone in a still pond. Could fear of the unconscious and the denial of the drive for power be a fear of the Real, into which we would never want to bump? In dialogue with Derrida, Roudinesco maintains that “the truth always ends up emerging.” As for Lacan, he taught us that even after an analysis, “we will never be in line with our unconscious.”

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