

Convergencia Paris Sept 28-29 2019

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Après-Coup Psychoanalytic Association

Consumerist Civilization and the Subject of Psychoanalysis

As *Après-Coup* is the only member of *Convergencia* that is situated in the U.S., our response to the question concerning the way 'global and neoliberal civilization....submits each individual's culture to its own order' (from the announcement), will take as its point of departure Freud's remarks on American civilization, which he makes at the end of chapter five of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*:

"In addition to the tasks involved in restricting the drives [*Triebeinschränkung*]-for which we are prepared--we are faced with the danger of a condition that we may call "the psychological misery of the mass." This danger is most threatening where social bonding is produced mainly by the participants' identification with one another, while individuals of leadership caliber [*Führenindividualitäten*] do not acquire the importance that should be accorded to them in the formation of a mass [*Massenbildung*]. The present state of American civilization would provide a good opportunity to study the cultural damage that is to be feared". (Freud 1930/2002 52).

Beyond the cultural crisis of Europe, Freud had a premonition. In the U.S. he glimpsed a presentiment of the future, a mass misery germinating under conditions of a burgeoning consumerism. What is truly remarkable is that, at such a critical juncture, and in a book where Freud goes so far toward situating psychoanalysis on the world stage, he would dwell not only on the dangers posed by the demagoguery and violence of fascism or Nazism, but would single out for special treatment the formation of a new misery and a new malaise in civilization. Freud recognized that where commercial gain is extracted by engendering herd-like behavior the cost is a psychological impoverishment [*Elend*] that threatens to further exacerbate the social source of suffering. Accordingly, we propose to approach the question as to 'how does psychoanalysis situate itself in regard to these new issues', where the 'individual' is promoted 'to the detriment of the subjective dimension' (from the announcement), first by briefly alluding to

how psychoanalysis was implicated in the construction of the model of the consumer; then considering some of the present consequences, especially for *Massenpsychologie* in the Freudian sense, of the malaise of a consumerist civilization; and finally conclude with some considerations concerning the subject of psychoanalysis. What follows has been inspired by work presented by members of Après-Coup on consumerism, neo-liberalism, identity politics, bio-politics, citizenship, the subject and the social link, the ethics of psychoanalysis, and Freud's *Massenpsychologie*.

How was psychoanalysis directly implicated in the model of the consumer?

While Freud was still a student, Stanley Jevons (England), Leon Walras (France), and Carl Menger (Austria) inaugurated a revolution in economic thinking, the utilitarian foundations of which would also underlie some of Freud's own economic formulations. The new subjective theory of value that emerged was an expression of the burgeoning consumerism that had become palpable in such phenomena as department stores and advertising, and represented a major rupture in the conceptualization of the source of value, away from the classical preoccupation with the labor necessary to produce a good, to the neo-classical interest in consumption and in the disposition of the one who consumes. Between the wars, émigré analysts who made the exodus from Europe to America were accompanied by influential economists of the Austrian school such as Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, and Joseph Schumpeter. The American response to fears about overproduction, which had haunted the industrial economies of production, was the implementation, on the basis of commercial marketing and advertising, of the consumerist model, whereby individuals are incited to want things they don't need by linking mass produced industrial objects to supposed unconscious desires. The new techniques were conceived in connection with the commercialization of certain ideas derived from Freud, as well as from misrepresentations of his work on mass psychology. But an even more direct line of kinship was operative. While Freud's Vienna witnessed the emergence of the subjective theory of value in the Austrian School of Economics, as well as the origins of psychoanalysis, the *practical* intertwining of *Homo Sexualis* and *Homo Oeconomicus* that has become synonymous with the invention of the model of the consumer

was consummated in America in the person of Freud's double nephew [the marriage of Freud's sister to Freud's wife's brother] Edward Bernays, who took it upon himself to be the spokesperson for Freudian ideas in America. It was Bernays who energetically set out to exploit the immense possibilities of libidinal economics for purposes of social control and economic regulation; whose techniques included what we call today marketing and the program industries; and whose name remains tied to the consumerism that is still identified as "the American way of life." A pioneer of modern propaganda, he is considered one of the most influential figures in 20th century America. As a public relations consultant, he advised political leaders, the CIA and, above all, major American corporations, including Procter & Gamble and General Electric. He called his technique for molding public opinion through advertising the "engineering of consent".

While what Freud glimpsed would not remain confined to America, the depth of the threat is definitively rooted in its history. As a migrant country, it was committed, as Georges Perec put it, to the transformation of emigrants who had departed into immigrants who had arrived. In the terms of Freud's *Massenpsychologie*, in America, a tendency toward the sacrifice of the sublimation otherwise reserved for the love of the leader along a vertical axis, was superseded in favor of lateral investments among the members of the social body -- that is to say, by an inclination toward sameness and conformity at the expense of heterogeneity (1921/55). The model of the consumer that took root in the U.S. was preceded by and grounded in this apparatus of 'conversion'. By the 1940s, the entire panoply of expertise and knowledge that had been aimed at domesticating otherness and inculcating a consumerist way of life was harnessed and deployed in the interest of colonizing the imaginations of people abroad. The American dream, packaged and beamed through powerful psycho-technologies such as film and television, instigated a revolution in civilization. As Pasolini put it after the war: "I consider consumerism to be a Fascism worse than the classical one, because clerical Fascism didn't really transform Italians, didn't enter into them. It was a totalitarian state but not a totalizing one" (1975).

The Religion of Neo-Liberalism and the Subject of Psychoanalysis

Neo-liberalism posits itself as a form of religion that thrives on converting individuals into consumers, and everything else into objects for their consumption, including matters of education, healthcare, relationships, and decisions pertaining to the end of life. It is bolstered everywhere by the newest technologies, which relentlessly convey the demand to get with the program. But above all, the god of neo-liberalism is, to paraphrase Lacan in *Television*, the Other who wishes your good (1973/80). Just as Freud could not recall ever having any inclination to help suffering humanity, and noted dryly that thanks to the weakness of any sadistic disposition such an urge had little ground to take root, Lacan reminded analysts of the link between sadism and the wish to cure.

Under the conditions of a consumerist civilization, the super-egoic demand to enjoy drives the individual to pursue happiness in the blind impulse toward satisfaction through objects, which further compounds the intensive production of want. Thanks to this relentless pressure of a compulsion to enjoy (*un pousse-au-jouir* - Lacan), consumers become the producers, in Lacan's formulation, of "an extensive, hence insatiable [...] lack-in-enjoying (*manqué-à-jouir*)", which further intensifies the demand to enjoy, precisely "because of its ineptitude at producing the *jouissance* that would slow the process down" (*Radiophonie* 1970). The mounting dissatisfaction exacerbates the immanence of a *jouissance* that routinely arises in proximity to one's neighbor, often rising to heights that, Freud says, individuals can just barely endure, and which prompted Lacan to exclaim, "God only knows where this *jouissance* is taking us" (Seminar XVII 1969-70/2007). As homogenization fuels imaginary passions, the suspicion is fed that some other must be enjoying in my place, that he must have stolen *my* enjoyment. More than anything else, it is this fascination with some mythical other's lawless enjoyment that feeds the murderous rage against whoever is suspected of depriving me of my own. Today, this rage appears to increasingly unleash a collective taste for cruelty, which Freud in horror discerned at the heart of being human.

In 1974, Lacan told Italian journalists that although psychoanalysis has granted us one brief shining moment of truth, nothing says it has to last. What is certain is that religion is invincible; it will continue to find ways to outlive its demise by secreting enough meaning to cover over the Real. As for psychoanalysis, it will never triumph, but will only either survive or not. But the analyst, exposed to the Real, and working with what cannot be said, reintroduces the possibility for a *jouissance* other than the phallic one.

Disillusioned with politics in his youth, Freud discovered that alongside the political rights of the individual must be reckoned the subject that is called upon in analysis. He realized that the duty taken up by psychoanalysis under the name of symbolic prohibition amounts to an internalization of a limit that humanizes the subject. However, Freud recognized that this capacity to say 'no' to the promise of total *jouissance* is not a given in the universe of natural rights that we inhabit, and that the political legacy of the declaration of the rights of man, a written law, does not transmit of its own accord the unwritten ethical injunction that is addressed to a subject who is called upon to be sustained, not by the rights of citizenship, the pursuit of happiness, or by the consumption of substitute, fetish objects, but by a desire whose cause remains radically unknown.

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For Après-Coup Psychoanalytic Association

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Convergencia Paris Sept 28-29 2019

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