

GENDER RELATIONS AND MODERNITY

*RELAÇÕES DE GÊNERO E MODERNIDADE**RELACIONES DE GÊNERO Y MODERNIDAD**Olivier Douville ****RESUMO**

A atualidade da psicanálise consiste em explorar as implicações subjetivas ligadas ao desvelamento do desejo e às incertezas identitárias que resultam da desconstrução dos interditos e das normas estabelecidas pela lei patriarcal. A maneira pela qual o sujeito inventa as soluções de identidade sexual, combinada à bissexualidade psíquica e à diferença dos sexos, encontra-se hoje em dia impelida por ideais sociais instáveis que implicam relações de identificação e poder. Hoje, a clínica psicanalítica deve revisar e reformular suas posições normativas vinculadas à idealização dos patriarcados. Não pretendemos reforçar as representações dominantes, mas desconstruí-las. Nenhum sujeito se realiza plenamente como homem ou mulher, ou como “trans” ou “queer”. É por conta de sua natureza conflituosa que a sexualidade se inscreve no âmbito da vida psíquica.

Palavras-chave: capitalismo; gênero; gozo inconsciente; patriarcado.

ABSTRACT

The current craft of psychoanalysis consists in exploring the subjective implications related to the unveiling of desire and the uncertainties of identity arising from the unraveling of bans and norms established by patriarchal law. The way a subject creates solutions for sexual identity, combined with psychic bisexuality and the distinction of the sexes, is currently driven by moving social ideals linked to relations of identity and power. Currently, the psychoanalytic clinic needs to revise and reform its normative stances tied to the idealization of patriarchies. We do not intend to support the prevailing representations, but

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instead to pick them apart. No subject is fully realized as man or woman, or as “trans” or “queer”. It is on account of its conflicting nature that sexuality nests at the heart of psychic life.

Keywords: capitalism; gender; unconscious enjoyment; patriarchy.

RESUMEN

La actualidad del psicoanálisis consiste en explorar las implicaciones subjetivas relacionadas con la revelación del deseo y las incertidumbres de identidad que resultan de la deconstrucción de las prohibiciones y normas establecidas por la ley patriarcal. La manera en que el sujeto inventa las soluciones de la identidad sexual, combinada con la bisexualidad psíquica y la diferencia de los sexos, es hoy día impulsada por ideales sociales inestables que implican relaciones de identificación y poder. Hoy, la clínica psicoanalítica debe revisar y reformular sus posiciones normativas vinculadas a la idealización de los patriarcados. No es nuestra intención reforzar las representaciones dominantes, sino deconstruirlas. Ningún sujeto se realiza plenamente como hombre o mujer o como “trans” o “queer”. Debido a su naturaleza conflictiva, la sexualidad si inscribe en el cerne de la vida psíquica.

Palabras clave: capitalismo; género; disfrute inconsciente; patriarcado.

Introduction

The logic behind relations between genders, a way of compromising to attain an impossible harmony, may vary depending on how much a society tries to forbid it, according to some ideal scenario of role assignment. That invites us to think about the relationships of psychoanalysis to anthropology and politics. Where are we now in our culture regarding the deconstruction of the “father” entity, which used to be central, and changes in current roads to pleasure?

This in no way argues that Freud’s breakthroughs, and Lacan’s rework, deny that gender identification rationales are “pure”, with no influence from the social environment. The fact that intimate matters are influenced by the political explains why psychoanalysts are interested not only in anthropology, but also theses such as Michel Foucault’s. We don’t limit our relationship to what’s sexual to a role: libido is indeed not determined by gender identification. However, we think sexuality over and above what sexual convention directly implies. The latter is dependent on the laws of sex; psychoanalysis has pointed out that the dialectics

between body and language take place around castration, that is to say, in more a structural way, the subtraction to a mythical pleasure (Chaboudez, 2019). Cultural scenarios play their part when they sexualize gender difference within the roles and expectations that modernity keeps redefining. And we could also say that, although new ideologies justly stand against the leftovers of patriarchy, it does not necessarily imply that the formations of the unconscious are now that free from patriarchal logic. The logic of the Speaking Body often underlines how it can be underground and rebellious in face of this social convention. The relationship anyone has with pleasure could not be defined and limited to its place in social discourses.

The other-worldly anthropologist tries, not without nostalgia, to set a “traditional” rationality for which the social discourse on the union and lineage changes is based on a more or less sustainable, or necessary, relationship between a man and a woman, between a woman and a lineage, between a marriage and a reference of ancestry (Douville, 2014).

Thus, the link between the self and the sexual cannot be totally understood through a law that attributes gendered ideal and sexual role. The principle of reality behind sexual pleasure breaks through the symbolic. Sexual pleasure does not aim at creating a harmonious and cohesive balance between men and women. As soon as psychoanalysis delves on love, pleasure or madness, it is in a sense adapted to its logic, we can better understand how psychoanalysis and anthropology may keep a regular dialog. What about the new modalities of sex life today, in a world that we believe is being very quickly changed by the fall of taboos?

Considering the lines of inertia of the representations of what one sex should be for the other, we could therefore think that until last century, gender roles were organized entirely around a simple score. Man “is what has”, he defines himself in the register of having or lacking, whether it is goods, power, or object of desire. This is an understanding of the impact of sexual law on the metaphors of being and having.

The novelty that modernity brings about on this sexual relationship, or relationship between the sexes, leads to a current deconstruction of the Father, of this father established according to the canons of Christianity, roughly since the series of councils from Nicaea to Aachen (whereas for other monotheisms the link between Father and God is far from being so substantial). That could, though it is a different incident, direct us towards a clinical anthropology of superegoic formations in their relationships and their reconciliations with the formations of the ideal and the fictions about what a Father is. At least, it is a path I explored in 2014, in my book *Les Figures de l'Autre* (Douville, 2014).

Psychoanalysis and Politics

Psychoanalysis would then have the possibility of speaking out on the effects of the unveiling of the impossible and the gap. This unveiling is the result of the dissemination of the figure of a Father taking upon himself the defects of his creations and of the forms of engendering and transformation of his creatures. The fact that psychoanalysis proposes another understanding of these pleasures, that it has the possibility of advancing to this point, does not imply in any way, as we see almost every day, that everyone advances. Because there is still a lot of confusion between the examination of the dissemination of the functions of a father and the usual moanings about a decline of the father. On the other hand, the heart of reasoning is to assume that psychoanalysis can have a say in the subjective implications of this revelation of the gap produced by the deconstruction of the prohibitions of sexual law, where we see that it is now an overcoming of a very phallic distributive logic. What Freudian theories and their resumption by Lacan make possible to establish is that, if the prohibitions on sex and pleasure are fortunately blunted, this does not in any way herald an era of unlimited jouissance without law and love. It is that, in the interstices of cracked patriarchal diktats, an impossible is revealed, that of the absolute complementarity between the male and female poles. This is good news, because it is this possible exposure that allows inventions of love, that helps the flowering of styles in the art of love.

One more word about our modernity. Globalization has the effect of making aggregates of people united according to their “sameness”, but it does not create connection, as long as mimicry prevails over the meaning of a discourse. What about the manifestations of Eros? Promises of love? Not to close oneself to questioning and hear the current of love, its failures and its knotting, is it not then what allows the analyst to leave the “discourse of capitalism”, a formula Lacan used to locate the possible ends of a psychoanalytical cure?

A Normal Sexuality?

There is a danger for psychoanalysis if we use it to think that there would be a normal sexuality eventually produced by the identification with the current sexual codes, without further questioning the possibility of deconstructing such codes. But it is important to say that psychoanalysis, that is to say also psychoanalytic treatment, does not aim at creating stereotypes of masculinity or femininity that we could call standards. Of course, our psychoanalytical world, so diverse,

is divided on this point. The strictly psychoanalytical question is about eroticism, about what makes something erotic for a subject, where the virulence of desire and the uncertainties of love collide; the way in which this Eros is or is not symptomatic in its relationship to the object and otherness. I would like to point out the following: it is not to define a superposition of what would be feminine with the category women, except to reintroduce the idea of a harmonious sexual relationship, whereas a major psychoanalytical question for a cure is to establish with which desires and fantasies we miss and reach for the other in the sexual encounter.

How can we preserve the chance for the subject not to become one with ideals taken *a priori* as conventional or subversive? This raises the question of sharing and identity exchange. It is therefore a question of highlighting features of identity grouping that function as heterogeneous entities compared to the enactment of conventional identity assignments. The stakes are high. It concerns the way in which we obey our identity imperatives, and in this respect no one can *a priori* determine whether or not this or that ideal leads to emancipation. Here we are dealing with a metapsychology of the links between the authority that commands the Superego, an often cruel authority that requires us to make it one with an identifying feature, and the ideal of the ego that can flourish in schemes where singular narcissism is based on common issues. This last point concerns the process of civilization (the possibility of loving and creating).

Psychoanalytical opinion takes part in the public debate and does so with its divergences and inconsistencies, and also with its prejudices. The question of the father, of the couple and of homosexuality are the most revealing evidence of the way in which some people renew a certain genuineness of the symbolic. All this is accompanied by a pessimistic folklore, mourning the fall of patriarchies and seeing in our modernity a kind of decay of humanity's symbolic buttresses. A minimal and outdated conceptual apparatus, derived from an ethnology based on the idealization of male and female poles and of the gendered distribution of roles and social tasks in societies considered untouched by capitalism, will serve as a basis for an essentialization of gender difference as a crucible of any symbolic law. Psychoanalysts are therefore divided by debates, often passionate and poorly justified. The blind spot comes from an inability to understand the sociological and anthropological questioning of the procreative level. As a result, the hierarchies and sexual dominations that rule our social order are not challenged.

Therefore, psychoanalysis paid attention really early on to the unconscious solutions a particular state of society finds to contain the expression of impulsive life. And this, even before Freud reconstructed, with *Totem and Taboo*, a geneal-

ogy of culture in everyone and in every state of culture (Freud, 1912-1913). No one will find any plea for revolutionary utopia in Freud's work. He notes that political systems are more or less toxic and repressive, he spares neither the nascent European totalitarianism, nor the Bolshevik revolution, nor the "American way of life", but this does not lead him to sketch the outlines of a lost and recovered paradise where everyone would find themselves in sweet or conquering agreement with their pleasure. Thus, Freud could be blamed for his pessimism by those who support hedonism within the psychoanalytical movement, and who were also sympathetic tenors of the Freudian left. Yes, Freud has never been in favor of utopia and he had the strength and talent to exempt us from embracing utopias based on the belief of a world where the sex would never again be an issue to the Speaking Body. From my point of view, the greatest merit of such utopias is to have been made reality as little as possible.

The sexual anomie

This is where the "politics" is questioned from a strictly psychoanalytical perspective, which is, in a way, how psychoanalysis tackles the question of social cohesion.

Since Freud, it has become very clear that what we ask, passively and indolently, to politics, which is to grant us carefree pleasure, clearly contributes to our alienation, and is, in this respect, a symptom. We are so much dominated by the tyranny of the principle of pleasure that we demand as little displeasure as possible, even if it means committing ourselves to a pursuit of material goods and putting ourselves at disposal of goods whose function is to prevent displeasure. This hedonistic lure, as we all know and hold on to, is something all of us think we are entitled to. This identitary ideal of consumerist convenience is sure to stray from the ideals of justice and freedom.

Freud's stroke of genius has been revealed as it was built during the 12 years that separate the observations on modern nervousness related to "civilized sexual morality" (Freud, 1908) from the Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Freud, 1920). The teaching of the latter text does not leave us in peace. The forces of Eros, which were destined to array in an antagonistic way with Thanatos, no longer overlap with a domination by the principle of pleasure. Eros is a victory, a transcendence, related to the perception of the distress and trauma that are inherent to the human condition. It is precisely here that Eros detaches himself from the pleasure principle that Freud used to postulate before 1920. The

faded consolations offered by the market of identities, which are held as the foundations of intimacy, are used to reduce to almost nothing the perception of distress and trauma, in other words historical condition, of any subject-being (Douville, 2018).

A simple reading of Freud therefore leads us to examine this overly recited maxim that places the profession of governing as something impossible. It would be a terrible fallacy to deduce from this that governing is a pointless task or that is always doomed to failure. For Freud, it is obviously not a question of arguing that the action of governing, educating or psychoanalyzing is materially, actually impossible. These three professions, as he wrote, are being practiced every day. It is a question of orienting these actions and specifying their ethical axis. Each of these practices must take into account an impossibility which is, for Freud and since Freud, the anomy of the sexual in every single social tie. We could then have thought that Freud had not read Marx. The latter, it is true, argued, and his more or less inspired or dogmatic followers even more, that the structure determined our modes of relationship to ourselves and to others, that this structure set our values and that the appreciation of capital goes along with losses of pleasure. It may well be that psychoanalysts, including Lacan, have “missed” a theoretical understanding of pleasure that would make from the notion of exploitation a priority. The same would be true in sociology and political anthropology when the notion of exploitation fades to the simplistic term “domination”¹.

The “Discourse of Capitalism” and the Principles of Love

One of Lacan’s thesis showed that a perversion of speech, called “Discourse of the Capitalist”, was reshaping social groups, by merging the gimmicks of language with objects supposed to be chambers of pleasure, with a limited use of language. If the convergence between Lacan and Marx came from a comparison of the Marxist concept of surplus value (a different concept from that of profit) and that of object, then we would be entitled to think that the subjective economy and the political economy have the same structure. A first homology would then be written between Marxist surplus value, which is the fruit of unpaid surplus labor, and the Lacanian surplus of pleasure, which comes from what is beyond the scope of symbolic work.

The subjective economy deals with the loss of pleasure in two ways: the desire to know, in order to account for this loss; and the call to pleasure, which causes the endless stimulation of the impulse. However, as far as the mechanisms

of pleasure are concerned, the less they rely on language, the more they become zealous servants of the passion of ignorance. This double process is unstable, fragile and the use of small pleasures, small goods, can annihilate the potentially subversive aspects of the desire to know. And one of the current problems we often hear in our cures is the subjective damage associated with the great markets of identities.

It would be announced that there is no longer any “impossible” and that all of us can and even are expected to achieved small pleasures ourselves. Whether it is created by the discourse of general uniformity or by the generalized “*métissage*”, this ideological error only our Parisian ethno-psychiatrists can only produce, as announced by a surprisingly prophetic Lacan, the rise of segregation, identity cults and victim attitudes, despite the imperative of uniformity in consumption and pleasure modes, which Lacan has identified in the “Discourse of the Capitalist”.

Let us push this logic proposed by Lacan to its most severe consequences. The divisive power of capitalism meets resistance which, paradoxically, reinforces it. Nowadays, there is a strong proliferation of identity or “community” groups that are trying to build themselves from a homogenization of modes of enjoyment and a stigmatization of other ways of enjoying life. Such groups are usually composed without any identification to an ideal characteristic, but more with the condemnation of scandal and the disturbing nature of the other pleasures. Capitalism and scientism can aim at a standardization and lead at the same time to a segmentation of social relations. Moreover, the resistance to standardization that they produce – but according to a mechanism that reinforces the logic of globalization – creates fewer and fewer groups which question the great concepts that foster difference: history, love and sex. Since many aspects of social ties are made up by matching with an identity feature often considered as the victim’s, the individual is, in return, asked to be proud of what they are much more than what they can risk to accomplish. If the individual is excluded from the logic of legitimacy, they would be asked to accept their dominated condition of minority, not looking for justice or rebellion, but for “globalized reparations”, the strong term employed by Monique Sélim (2019).

Such psychoanalysts’ pessimistic look on our obscure modernity cannot, however, lead to the slightest reactionary nostalgia. The psychoanalyst’s responsibility is to revive a discourse on these concepts: history, love and sex. The essence of psychoanalysis is to open up culture to another way of talking about love, poetry and the desire for emancipation. This responsibility can no longer ignore

Lacan's thesis stating that there is no such thing as a metalanguage, there is no Great Other on whom to unload one's discomfort. It is not the responsibility of psychoanalysts to serve this or that political or religious nostalgia.

Lacan, and Freud even more so, lived in times when the very notion of the State was prevailing, in a sense that the State was the place of power. Today, we live in a neoliberal era where capital is at a distance from the State. Paradoxically, the latter can defend some freedoms against the unstoppable dominant logics that economic globalization apply on our lives and intimacy. The political question on the agenda is twofold: whether the fragile but still quite strong alliance between capitalism and democracy will hold up, and whether the new forms of contestation of the neocapitalist homogenization will not lead to dangerously murderous identity and fundamentalist radicalizations.

Conclusion

The point is to establish the role of psychoanalysis today, which can only hope to survive through a rebirth. Either it adapts, not without cynicism, to the state of discourse and proposes that its scope should be defined by a small tinkering with its modes of pleasure and its small inventions, or it finds again its subversive edge, by depriving itself of the moral comments on the world which too many are so indulgent with. In the latter choice, the goal is to invent forms of governance and of transmission of analytical institutions that, with democratic decisiveness, reinvent social links among psychoanalysts. Without this commitment to keep existing in a non-dormant democracy, the psychoanalytical clinic will not be able to question political philosophy.

The key challenge that arises from a psychoanalytical understanding of politics is no longer to propose a new writing of the unease in culture, but to complete this understanding with a definition of a particular form of alienation, the one that obstructs for everyone the understanding of this malaise. Psychoanalysis further alerts that something in each of us can be threatened, that speech can be extinguished, reduced to chatter, communication, noise.

Psychoanalysts have sometimes been courageous, also naive, to consider anthropology. It is up to us to hope that an anthropological understanding of current psychoanalytical ideas will be explored. This would, I hope, help to break down the resistance of our psychoanalytical worlds to the current challenges of psychoanalysis.

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Notes

- ¹ Allow me a word here about the “me too” movement. How can we not rejoice that a word is made free, and that deadly guilt is no longer encouraged. There is no irony in that. I have already said so. Nevertheless, I remain sensitive to some theories of “radical” feminists who also fear that in a secondary effect, this movement, whose audacity I once again praise, will also become a rhetoric of essentialization of gender roles (cf. Sélim et al., 2019).

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