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Psychoanalysis and culture: A contemporary consideration

JULIANA MITRE BARBOSA, ELISA RENNÓ DOS MARES GUIA,
ANDERSON DE SOUZA SANT'ANNA & MATHEUS COTTA DE CARVALHO

Abstract

Although Freud's theory was born from an observation of individual phenomena and psychological suffering, Freud did not fail to relate and apply it to culture, to the social, and even to the arts and religion. In many of his texts, he dealt with social issues from the psychoanalytic viewpoint. Reviewing these texts and Freud's theories, this paper intends to show evidence of the applicability of the psychoanalytic perspective in current society and in contemporary organizations. In other words, Freud's work remains as ever present and relevant.

Key words: *Psychoanalysis, culture, contemporary society, organizations, capitalism*

Initially, we believe it is relevant to observe that applying psychoanalytic knowledge to social phenomena may seem curious to some people, as it is mainly known for its application to individual phenomena, particularly the psychic suffering clinic. Nevertheless, it should be made clear that Freud defended the pertinence of using psychoanalytic theory within the social environment, be it with religion, with life in society, or even with the arts. According to Assoun (1993), Freud also built his ideas about the social and collective through the same movement he used to systematize his theory of the unconscious.

Furthermore, in several of his texts, Freud dealt with the issue of social phenomena from the psychoanalytic perspective, as in the widely known 1930 text *Civilization and its discontents*, and in the less widely known but no less important "Totem and taboo," for example. It was in fact in his 1912 *Totem and taboo* (Freud, 1913) that Freud began to deal with the social, and we will use this work and its interpretation by Eugene Enriquez in "De la horde à l'État" to deal with the theme of anguish in current times.

In *Totem and taboo*, Freud deals with the advent of the social by taking primitive societies as a reference. It is a work that can be characterized, on the one hand, by its interdisciplinary nature and complexity, and on the other, by its polemic traits. Freud seeks to

reconstruct the reasons that led to the establishment of the basic rules for social intercourse: the horror of incest and the ban on killing.

It is based on this work that it is also possible to infer Freud's pessimistic view as regards civilization itself, whose birth stems from a murder, as we shall see later, and by which it will be indelibly marked. Therefore, the very murder of the primeval father, the act that gave birth to civilization – bearing in mind the persistence of this killing wish – puts an end to any possibility that mankind can find happiness.

According to Freud, there was in the beginning a violent and jealous primeval father who kept all the females for himself and drove the sons away as they were born. On a certain day, the sons who had been driven away banded together to kill and devour this tyrannical father. And so they did together that which would have been impossible for them to do individually, owing to their fear. It is Freud who states:

The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable

and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion. (Freud, 1913, p. 141)

With this father dead, this one with whom his sons maintained a relationship composed of ambivalent feelings, there emerges a feeling of guilt that will, in a certain way, make this father stronger than when he was alive. Thus, keeping in mind the psychological procedure that Freud calls “delayed obedience,” it is up to the sons to forbid the death of the totem, the father’s substitute, and to renounce the women, who are now free.

Freud’s paper also deals with the issue of the dead father, introduced into the unconscious, who already shared a position near the so-called “symbolic father.” Thus, the Freudian “totemic father” would represent the law, the castration, in Oedipus. Therefore, castration would translate the restrictions put up by civilizing processes and could be understood as a limit, as non-completeness, as the entrance into the symbolic universe. It would also consist in the “entrance” to the pulsional renouncement demanded by culture, without which it would not be possible to establish social bonds and so maintain civilizing processes – and without which the subject would not have access to the symbolic universe. Thus, through what Lacan will call the paternal function, the basic rules and conditions that will allow mankind to organize itself into society and to develop culture will be established: the ban on killing and on incest.

Lacan (1999) states that the “symbolic father” consists of the one who is responsible for structuring the subject in the Oedipal path. In the theory defended by the psychoanalyst, the arrival of the subject happens through the separation of the narcissistic mother–son cell, in a process within which it is essential that there should be something that will intervene, something that will promote such a separation. Therefore, the “Name-of-the-Father” would be responsible for this break, for setting up this limit that will define the passage from nature to culture, that is, access to the symbolic universe. We believe that Enriquez (1990, p. 76) clarifies this issue well:

But the father, in his mythical function, is the one who provokes reverence, terror and love at the same time, the father is the one who stifles, who castrates and who must be killed or at least conquered: furthermore, he is the carrier and the repository of prohibitions. His murder is followed by guilt and veneration. The real father is no more. The father is always a dead father, and the dead father is always a mythical father. As soon as the paternal function is recognized, the sons will be oppressed. They occupy a position of dependence, they are caught

between desire and identification. No culture can be conceived without the paternal reference. Access to culture depends on such a reference.

Summing up, Freud states that civilized life imposes on the individual the sacrifice of submitting himself to the Law that is imposed by the so-called paternal function. It is truly a sacrifice, as from reading Freud it is possible to state that man keeps within himself the desire to murder and to practice incest, because if that were not so, it would not be necessary to establish any law forbidding such acts. Therefore, one can come to the conclusion that there cannot be a social body without setting out a system of collective repression that will impede the direct carrying out of sexual pulsion.

“Discontent” in contemporary society

Freud always made it clear that life in society implies pulsional renouncement: a group cannot live in society if it is not governed by organizations, codes, laws, bans, and interdicts – that will necessarily deal with sexual ones. However, such restrictions consist of the minimum condition to set up and maintain social bonds, as cultural organizations imply pulsional renouncement. According to Freud, “discontent” resides in the conflicting relationship between pulsion and culture, so such “discontent” has always been present in civilization. However, how can contemporary society, which some sociologists call postmodern, be characterized? – modernity, postmodernity, contemporaneity, cultural crisis are words now commonly used to qualify the present times.

According to Julien (2000), we have moved from a community model to a society one. By losing the community model and throwing himself into society’s anonymity, the individual has been left to himself more than at any other time. However, such a society will also equally characterize itself by the predominance of a capitalistic economy on a global scale, one in which we can observe a strong market orientation enacted by using intensive marketing techniques that aim to occupy growing spaces in the fierce struggle for market space. At the same time, we are living through a period of capitalism that is marked by growing unemployment, mainly in industry, even as regards specialized labor, as it is the services sector that is the dynamic one in such times.

Within such a context, capital seeks to know the consumer and to attract him, just as it seeks to maximize profit and survive in this environment. Furthermore, it does not take into account its effects on workers and communities. That is, capital is interested in dealing with the subject in his condition as a consumer, individually, and not – as in the past – as

an organized and politicized worker. Capital does not mind if unemployment is on the rise as long as the consumer circuit remains active. Unemployment is but a non-controllable effect of the “rational” decisions taken by corporations.

Capital impositions on society

It can be said that the advances made by capital in the world of labor ignore the workers’ human dimension – as if such a model took this dimension into account only when it fitted its interests. Thus, it is possible to think that such advances will also lead to the break-up of such symbolic; that is, if earlier it was believed that a job was a synonym for stability, support, and safety, this new model leads workers to face a different reality, as organizations will no longer protect them. On the contrary, the subject becomes disposable and replaceable. Together with the goal of this stability and safety ideal, the subject is faced with lack of support.

Here it is the organizations themselves that play a mediating role in the subject–capital relationship, that become helpless and even the victims of capital, in its financial dimension. This leads us to the issue of anguish, as within such a context the subject is faced with the effects of the movement of capital in its most violent dimension and with a lack of institutions that will be able to mediate such a relationship. The increasingly isolated contemporary subject will find himself living in anguish. It means living in permanent economic instability from an individual point of view, as the subject can be dismissed from his job at any moment and find himself without the conditions needed for his survival. To minimize such a risk, workers will submit to the demands of capital, to long working days, and to generating high profitability. The subject is forced to submit to the law of capital, to the law of the market, to survive.

Within a society that is marked by hyperconsumerism, the position of a subject who is unable to afford his family the goods and services provided by capitalism is one of impotence and anguish. To a contemporary subject, marked by hedonism and by the pursuit of immediate answers, there is nothing that better explicates his condition of fragility than such a position that will not allow him and his family to enjoy the party made possible by unbridled consumption. It is consumption that allows the quest for the completeness that is promised by capital, and the creation of an illusion that it is possible to escape from his condition of being castrated and divided.

And how is it possible to react to the violence of capital that denies work opportunities to people while at the same time placing them in the position of consumers through the bounteous offer of goods

and services? According to Julien (2000, p. 50), when subjects are unsure about their professional future they will fear unemployment, loneliness and abandonment. Thus, if every project will surely lead to despair, there emerges a pressing demand for a “boss” who will rise and speak up to order what must be done:

These despicable political leaders who have no real power, professional or religious ... in whom it is not really possible to believe! When everything goes wrong, only a true master can save the day. To call him up, the only language that youth has available to it is that of violence against a world that is seen as being “corrupt”: violence is the sign of an appeal for uncontested authority, in the image of the ideal Father. ... The quest for the ideal Father is a continuous demand, a barrier against evil and unhappiness, and, more than ever, it is a current one.

But how can we respond to this appeal for authority? Mourning for the image of the ideal father seems to be a way out, so the response would not rise from public society at first, as Julien (2000) shows us. According to the psychoanalyst, such a response would come from *a certain man* who will take the place marked out by the mother as a woman. He is the only one who could allow, little by little, mourning for the ideal father to be carried out; however, for this to be true, the father should not take on this ideal image of a master. Thus, thanks to this founding retreat, the son who has mourned for the ideal father will be able to deal with the law of desire.

Nevertheless, would the social and economic model described above be the only anguish generator for the subject in organizations? It would be tempting to answer such a question in the affirmative, but first it is worth reviewing what Freud tells us about anguish. His concern about such an issue had been present since the beginning of his clinical practice, and according to the classic point of view, it is possible to identify two theories on anguish in his works.

The first one was structured between 1895 and 1900, and is an economic theory, an amount of excitement (sexual energy, libido), non-elaborated and not linked to any representation, which flows into the I as anguish. Such a process is the cause of and previous to repression, so the accumulation of such loads will happen as impressions that are equivalent to traumas.

The second theory, which was presented in the 1926 study “Inhibitions, symptoms and anguish,” is much more complex than the first one, and it is here that Freud postulates the concept of signal anguish. Anguish signals previous experience and rises as the

immediate destination of the libido when it is subjected to repression; unlike what happens in the first theory, repression in this case leads to anguish. However, this is not the only destination: neurotic symptoms would be new dressings for the libido. These happen when the idea's content is repressed, and affection, anguish in this case, links itself to other objects, ideas, and the body. This is an attempt by the I not to relive the traumatic situation, that is, to escape the libido when it signals danger. It would be a collateral way out, although not an ideal one, one which points to new links and meanings that have no bearing in the concreteness of symptoms.

Such a traumatic experience, whose prototype is the birth trauma, the utmost unsupported situation, remains not as a mark or a representation, but as an impression, a trace, something previous to symbolization, that is, of the order of the real. And when the I, which is imaginary, fails in its attempt at symbolization, the real breaks through in the psychic apparatus, or better still, in the I, and anguish emerges.

What happens today within the social context is a decreasing capacity for symbolization, a consequence of the weakening of social bonds, which thus removes the capacity for defense and for elaborating anguish at the group level. As a result, singularities are overloaded and flooded by anguish. However, it is anguish as the effect of a question about the other's desire that remains and will remain enigmatic.

As we have previously stated, the desire to kill to achieve the aims he strives for is not alien to man. And it was only the pact set out at the beginning of civilized life that made him let go of this savage manifestation of pulsion – which is natural to him – and so allowed civilization and culture to flourish. At times of war, war for jobs, and for the right to be a consumer, is the social experience pact still valid? Should it be maintained? If yes, at what cost?

Conclusion

Summing up, if we look at this from the perspective of the social pact set out by the myth described by Freud, we truly live in a society in which the basic conditions for social organization itself are being questioned due to radical individualism and the prevalence of the discourse presented by capital. As we have seen, such a breaking of the social pact causes extreme anguish to the individual as he does not know how to position himself within a society that has already been said to be “without a compass.” This may explain the constant quest for stability and for references, the quest for the ideal father.

On the other hand, we may be on the brink of a new kind of social bond that is still to be invented

and which is made necessary due to deep, ongoing economic changes that have brought us new challenges and issues that we are not able to deal with while using the usual references, although we should not ignore them. It is possible to list a series of other social phenomena that range from alcoholism to drugs, from cloning to the virtual world. To deal with these phenomena, will it not be necessary to establish a new gaze on reality that will allow us to see beyond what we can see with our current references, and so create the conditions for the rise of new solutions for current social stalemates?

Everything points to the fact that the best we can do is to follow Freud's example, as he always paid attention to what was happening in culture, and, when facing challenges, doubts, and difficulties, he always knew when to revisit his theory, rectify his position as necessary, and then advance. This might explain why, even when facing the challenges of the contemporary world, Freud's work remains even more current than it has ever been.

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Authors

Juliana Mitre Barbosa is psychologist and candidate of Círculo Psicanalítico de Minas Gerais.

Elisa Rennó dos Mares Guia is PhD student at Centre de Recherche Psychanalyse, Médecine et Société Université Paris VII – Diderot.

Anderson de Souza Sant'Anna is doctor in administration at Minas Gerais Federal University, professor at Fundação Dom Cabral and at Minas Gerais Catholic University and candidate of Círculo Psicanalítico de Minas Gerais.

Matheus Cotta de Carvalho is a post-graduate of economic theory, President of Banco de Desenvolvimento de Minas Gerais – BDMG, and student of psychoanalysis in the Psychoanalytic Circle of Minas Gerais.