

Freud on tolerance, indifference, and spectacle: the crisis of psychoanalysis in present times

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Abstract:

Having as points of departure the reverberations of the talk-show and the psychoanalytical talking-cure in the spectacle society, this essay debates the crisis of psychoanalysis in present times. It discusses *Civilization and its Discontents* in the context of modernism, the cultural movement that was contemporary to the emergence of psychoanalysis. While the present times dilute the civilization crisis into the spectacle society, compulsively filling in blanks and hesitations, modernism exposes them, tones up the silences of modernity, transforms its impasses into paradoxes to be analysed. *Civilization and its Discontents* presents such paradoxes, upholding the crisis of modernity.

Key-words: psychoanalysis, modernism, spectacle, indifference.

Introduction

Nowadays there is a great discussion about the crisis of psychoanalysis. Derrida, in his lecture at the General State of Psychoanalysis, which took place in 2000 in Paris, made a statement that serves as a point of departure for the debate concerning the future of psychoanalysis in present times: "Psychoanalysis can no longer submit reality to criticism and thus enters its own crisis" (Derrida, 2001: 70). This understanding can be placed within the spectacle society framework, where conflicts and crisis are toned down as tools for social and individual change.

Indeed we live at a time that privileges the noisy talk-show in detriment of the abstinent talking-cure. Despite the fact that the latter expression may suggest a simple conversation, the pauses in narrative, prolonged silences,

doubts and hesitations are also part of the treatment. These characteristics thus imprint a rhythm that is distinct from that of a conversation. This is the talk-show priority: a lively, upbeat and funny conversation, just like a spectacle. Into this format recorded laughs are inserted. They hide the silences of the narrative, establish a rhythm and make the audience feel at ease.

It seems that the uneasiness regarding psychoanalysis in present times is closely tied to the spectacle culture of western society. The silence and hesitation, out of place in such culture but active in the construction of the psychoanalytical knowledge, are elements that frame such uneasiness. For if there is hesitation, there is no hurry. On the contrary, there are comings and goings, turns and setbacks, nothing that could produce a painless conversation. There is no added rhythm that could soften the problem which, addressed to the analyst, then makes itself present. If there is the possibility of hesitation, a lively conversation is under threat. Instead we face the emergence of the psychic conflict. So what a surprise it was when president Bush, in a talk-show some months ago, had his pronouncements concerning the war in Iraq mixed with pauses and laughs in off. There seems to be no crisis, even among bombs and suicide-bombers. The conflict is lost, despite its evidence.

Evidences are little things in a society whose main concern are images and appearances. The tragic aspect of psychoanalysis is lost in this strange scenario. How can one sustain a conflict when only farces seem to be in display? In terms of Derrida's argument, how can we submit reality to criticism when the "the end of politics" has been announced – a domain which theoretically administers the crisis – or, at least, when politics seems to have lost its aim?

We need to establish the main epistemological differences between the so-called post-modernity and modernism – the moment in modern culture when psychoanalysis emerges – in order to relate contemporary times with the crisis of psychoanalysis, and both with the crisis of modern civilization. Such historical interconnectedness will help us understand the dissonance between Freud's proposal and the present transformation of social bonds into a spectacle. However such dissonance will be cherished here, since it could be taken as a criticism toward contemporary society undertaken by psychoanalysis, and not the opposite.¹

Our aim is to explore the possibility of using Freudian theory in this debate in the hopes of enlightening the obscure social and political scenario in which we find ourselves. We will take *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) as psychoanalysis's master modernist text. There we can find Freud's main suggestions concerning the historicist impasse of modern civilization. We will also suggest how Freud might react to post-modernity. In order to do that we will resort to a passage in his work where he expresses concern over significant features of such social configuration: tolerance, radical relativism, and indifference. Finally we will review Derrida's contention regarding psychoanalysis's failure as a critical tool for present times.

Modernism: denouncing modernity's crisis

Joel Birman indicates that the crisis of psychoanalysis in present times is the crisis of that psychoanalysis which is ethically and politically linked with modernism, "that is to say, with the critical discourse directed at modernity, such

¹ We are aware of the controversies regarding post-modernity. Some concepts such as hypermodernity or late modernity suggest a link with modern society. However we will use post-

as Freud voiced it in *Civilization and its Discontents*" (2000: 130). We could add Birman's argument to Derrida's analysis: psychoanalysis can no longer submit reality to criticism and thus enters its own crisis because its ethical commitment to modernism, such as it was expressed by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, has been lost. We will indicate briefly modernism's main characteristics, and then the main epistemological concerns of *Civilization and its Discontents* – a key reading for the keeping of psychoanalysis's critical stance.

The modernist movement is contemporary to the emergence of psychoanalysis. They were both born around 1890 and they both reached their peak after World War I. Modernism ended in 1939, the year Freud died (Bradbury, 1989). They were contemporary to the crisis of modernity, to the crisis of the ideas of progress. They both have crisis and conflict as the cement of their principles, concepts and premises.

During the 20th century, God's death, such as proclaimed by Nietzsche, reverberated in postmodern minds and also, some time before, in the beliefs of many a modernist – especially those who reconsidered their futurist utopias and embraced nihilist premises (Megil, 1994). Nietzsche criticizes illusions of transcendence as well as the ideology of progress, suggesting that modern civilization neither has, in its historicist repertoire, solutions for the impasses of the civilizing process, nor the means to keep the promises of the Enlightenment.

The crucial question that links present times to modernism, the last car of modernity – in case one accepts the existence of a post-modernity – is the critical consideration of modern civilization's progressive direction. Such

modernity because our aim is to question an aspect that is much emphasized by postmodern theories: the bet that tolerance is a privileged social bond of present times.

consideration results in important differences as far as modernist and postmodern thinkers are concerned. While postmodern critical thinking incorporates Nietzsche's emphasis on a-historicism and immanence, modernism understands it as an impasse.

Modern civilization's impasse is experienced self-consciously and is connected with what literary critic Arthur Nastroviski calls "modernist irresolution" (Nastroviski, 1996), a privileged stance which submits modernity's major impasses to criticism. Such irresolution infiltrates into modernism's defining aspect: the negotiations involving the "difficult passage from a historical culture to an a-historical culture" (Schorske, 2000: 177). In face of the uncomfortable impossibility of being the avant-garde of modern times while retaining the criticism to progress, modernism comes up with *ironical paradoxes* which criticize modernity even if it retains some modern characteristics. The ironical paradox allows the artist to work with contradictory perspectives. In a world with static references this would be impossible, but here there are no sanctions (Maingueneau, 1997: 98).²

Modernism is characterized by two main paradoxes. The first results from the two conflicting tendencies that haunted the modernist spirit: progressiveness and nihilism, historicism and a-historicism. Amidst the destruction brought forth by World War I, modernism was the first cultural movement to question decisively the destinies of modern civilization, to consider critically the association of modernity with the ideals of betterment and progress (Said, 1995). The second paradox tackles an issue that constituted modernity

² In modernist literature irony is equivalent to Nietzsche's double face, multiple perspectives in photography, Einstein's relativity or Picasso's cubism. Irony is closely related to the destruction of a privileged point of view to access reality, a fundamental premise of modernism (Everdell, 2000).

from beginning to end, since the scientific revolutions (Negri & Hardt, 2001): the tension transcendence/immanence,³ also present in romanticism (Loureiro, 2002). Modernism privileges then the frontal criticism of the very definition of modern civilization, forged in the 18th century, and at the same time considers critically modernity in its foundations.

[Modernism was simultaneously] futurist and nihilist, revolutionary and conservative, naturalist and symbolist, classic and romantic. It praised and denounced the technological era. It believed happily that the old cultural regimes had come to an end but also expressed uneasiness for such end. It was sure that the new forms were a flight from historicism and the pressures of time but it was also sure that they were the expression of such things. And in most countries 1890 was the restless decade (Bradbury & MacFarlane, 1999: 35).

As a result the two ironical paradoxes feed on this irresolution regarding historical progress and transcendence, two crucial issues of the modern age, according to Megill. Upholding its impasses, modernism breaks out the crisis of the modern spirit. While the spectacle of present times deflates the tensions, modernism inflates them – and sustains the crisis by means of the production of ironical paradoxes.

Paradoxes in *Civilization and its Discontents*

Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) also highlights the impasses of modern civilization. The leading argument of the essay is the criticism of modern man's unhappiness vis-à-vis the trans-historical civilization,

³ A distinction will be made here between the notions of modernity and modern civilization, two different historical constructs. Modernity, according to Negri e Hardt, begins with the sixteenth and seventeenth-century scientific revolutions and goes on up to the end of World War II, when modernism ends, the last movement of the modern age. It is characterized by the tension transcendence/immanence. The notion of modern civilization in turn is born at the end of the eighteenth century (Elias, 1994), tied to the notions of betterment, progress and historicism.

such as Freud conceptualizes it in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Nevertheless sometimes Freud refers to “our present civilization” (Freud, 1930: 108), and then we have a *historical* civilization. In chapter three, where he refers many times to “our present civilization”, he states categorically that the control of nature is not the only goal of culture (Freud, 1930: 107). Since Bacon, Descartes, Galileo and Newton, the control of the real, inspired by the natural sciences, was the main goal of modernity which then beginning (Santos, 2001). How can we understand such paradox in Freud’s idea of civilization?

Freud seems to be working with various excluding, ironical perspectives. The paradox mentioned before is the first Freud upholds. But we should also note that such paradox reveals the defining tension of modernity – the tension between transcendence (represented by a trans-historical, symbolical order) and immanence (represented by contingent civilization, placed within historicism). Freud further complicates his argument when in the core of historicism’s immanent perspective, he opens up one other double perspective, formulating and upholding two other paradoxical stances. At another section of chapter three, he affirms: “we took care not to agree with the prejudice that civilization is a synonym of betterment, that it is a road to perfection, pre-ordained for man” (Freud, 1930: 117). The very definition of modern civilization is under critical consideration; there is no assurance that the future holds enlightened certainties. On the contrary Freud points to another illusion – man has not become happier with progress. The irony is absolute: instead of fighting illusions, the enlightenment has also been converted into a creator of illusions. And yet Freud concludes with an indication of some future. That is to say: Freud criticizes progress from beginning to end in *Civilization and its Discontents* –

questioning modernity's historicist legacy – and concludes the essay still envisaging a future.

So the second paradox is a criticism to historicism, and being a criticism directed at the foundations of modern civilization it can be equated, as far as epistemology is concerned, with modernist criticism. Sustaining a comprehensive criticism to the modern spirit, *Civilization and its Discontents* bears, in simultaneous perspectives, the two defining features of modernism: the criticism to historicism/progress and the criticism to transcendence, even if there is not a choice of pure immanence. As if this was not enough, this dynamics of contradictory perspectives seems to be sustained by irony – another telling feature of modernism.

There seems to be no way out from the essay. If Freud questions the progressive stance of modern civilization, since the first chapter, he also tells us there is no way back. Fighting the illusions of the “oceanic feeling”, Freud also debars archaic romantic solutions: there is nothing in the past that could serve as foundation for a re-presentation of the present. Such aspiration is caused by the desire to re-instate the lost paternal protection (Freud, 1930). A pessimistic conclusion could be expected. In terms of the enlightenment, it should be. Discarding the mere opposition between pessimism/optimism, Freud is careful regarding the keeping of certain bets, in a scenario with little room for the risks involved.

Freudian orientations

Bauman suggests that post-modernity is an opportunity for modernity, that tolerance is an opportunity for post-modernity and that solidarity is an

opportunity for tolerance (1999: 271). The emphasis on tolerance is the axis that renders a certain optimism to some post-modern thinkers. A lot of conviction in tolerance is needed in order to believe that tolerance is an opportunity for post-modernity – more conviction than post-modernity can bear. And wouldn't this belief (that post-modernity is an opportunity for modernity) be a re-visitation to progressive illusion?

Bauman is aware that tolerance is not enough for the achievement of solidarity (1999: 277). But he states that the transformation of tolerance into solidarity "is not only a matter of moral perfection, but a matter of survival" (270-1). This is to say that the present conditions of survival are not enough.

In *Explanations, Applications and Orientations* (1932), Freud foresees one of the main features of post-modernity, stating clearly that such epistemological outcome should be avoided. This is about the lure of tolerance, linked to the dangers that, in the future, Einstein's relativity proposal might be stretched to its extremes. Freud is dealing here with epistemological as well as sociological values: the continuity of the construction (and the trade) of knowledge and the quality of the social bonds that are produced. In one intervention only, he attacks the values that have become the currency of post-modernity: tolerance, extreme relativity, and indifference:

What other demands are you gentlemen going to make in the name of tolerance? That when someone expresses an opinion that we consider totally wrong, we should tell them: "Thank you for having expressed such contradiction. You are defending us from the crimes of complacency and giving us the opportunity of showing the Americans that we really are as liberal as they wish to be. To tell you the truth, we do not believe in one word of what you said but that does not matter. Probably you are right as much as we are. After all who can tell right from wrong? Despite our disagreement, allow us please to publish your point of view in our publications. We hope you will be kind enough

to find, in exchange, a place for those points of view you dispute". In the future, when the ill-advised use of Einstein's relativity reaches its peak, such behavior will be common as far as scientific matters are concerned. For the time being we haven't arrived there. In an old-fashioned manner we limit ourselves to the presentation of our convictions, exposing ourselves to the risks of making mistakes because that cannot be avoided, and we reject those ideas that are in contradiction with our beliefs. In psychoanalysis we have used the right to change our opinions when we think we have found something better (Freud, 1932: 177).

The solutions for the impasses of social life would not rest on the mere reinforcement of modern civilization's tolerance, constituted by the well-defined borders of the narcissism of small differences, nurtured in turn by daily doses of identity hatred. They would not rest on post-modern soft tolerance either, which does not break with social distance even if it does not produce identity hatred. It produces a false equivalence between my truth and that of other people, a mere performance of inclusion, a mere "spectacular" display of the acceptance of the other. In political terms, tolerance forges a logic of lack of commitment in which one is allowed not to take sides and not to defend one's convictions. "The spectacle is the no-place of politics" (Negri & Hardt, 2001: 208-9) and the no-place of conflict.

When Freud fights the fallacies of tolerance, saying that we should be as liberal as the Americans wish to be, he aligns himself with the criticism to the logic of contemporary control, to the liberal face of the Empire:⁴

Everybody is welcome inside its frontiers, regardless of race, belief or color... In its moment of inclusion the Empire is blind to differences; it is completely indifferent in its acceptance. It reaches universal inclusion setting aside inflexible differences that could lead to social conflict... The Empire is a sort of

⁴ A new imperial form of supremacy appears in present times. Its new format, called "Empire", includes everything. It does not work according to the logic of modern imperialism, when colonial subjugation was linked to the subversion of well-defined borders. See Negri & Hardt (2001).

flat space on which subjectivities slide, without resistance or substantial conflicts. The law of neuter inclusive indifference... A veil of ignorance (of the other) allows for universal acceptance (Negri & Hardt, 2001: 217-218).

Post-modernity is tolerant and so is the Empire. The present logic of power is immune to the liberating weapons of post-modern politics of difference: the Empire is also inclined to terminate the modern frontiers of sovereignty and to allow the differences to actuate across frontiers, celebrating “life without frontiers”, as we can see in contemporary propaganda. The risks of tolerance and post-modern theory are the helpless fall into the welcoming arms of the new power.

Solidarity is the construction of a knowledge in which knowing is the recognition of the other; it is the elevation of the other from the status of object to the condition of subject. Since solidarity is a kind of knowledge that is obtained through the recognition of the other, such other can only be known once he is taken as a producer of knowledge (Santos, 2001: 30). In Freud’s example, any knowledge might be accepted in his publication. Thus the other is not actually recognized in his difference: the knowledge he produces is irrelevant – and that ultimately transforms the other into someone who “does not make a difference”.

Tolerance produces an unbalanced relationship. Is the passage from tolerance to solidarity viable? Or does the permanence of tolerance serve only to broaden even further the distance from the collective construction of solidarity? Are we before a passage or an impasse – inaudible in the social configuration of the spectacle?

And yet, if Freud advises us against the ways of present times, he also doubts the promises of modernity. What we find in *Civilization and its*

Discontents and in *Explanations, Applications and Orientations* could be summarized in the following outline: 1. post-modern solutions, wrapped in tolerance, offers more dangers than opportunities for the construction of knowledge and satisfactory social bonds; 2. the solutions presented by modernity – by the enlightenment and by romanticism – are ineffectual before the progressive and historicist impasses of modern civilization; 3. nevertheless Freud, in the concluding lines of *Civilization and its Discontents*, points toward a future, rejecting once again the post-modern solution.

Conclusion

Tolerance will hardly allow for the passage to a point where the other will be recognized as producer of knowledge, with the same prerogatives of that who tolerates him. Such is the clue Freud leaves behind to highlight the impasses regarding the constitution of social bonds in present times.

Freud never had the intention of setting forth a systematic paradigmatic criticism. The few epistemological clues he left behind should be treated with care as if they were an inheritance. If we really are the inheritors of Freud's legacy, we know that the small details can provide the key to new, unheard of paths. We bet on the clues Freud left in these texts because we believe that we can move beyond the mere rational explanation of his legacy and paradoxes, in search of some "orientation" that might shed some light on the social configuration in which we find ourselves.

Even in the absence of an assured future solution, such as the enlightenment indicated, or in the absence of the archaic solutions set forth by romanticism, Freud still hopes for a better society (Freud, 1930). No progressive

illusions are left but there is still an insistence on the future. Freud somehow anticipates Santos's disquieting question: "how can we conceive progressive ruptures outside the notion of progress" (Santos, 2001: 35)?

Due to the honesty of his endeavor, Freud does not conclude, leaving many unresolved questions. In as much as he relies on the silences and hesitations of his patients, Freud does not silence the theoretical impasses of his work. If conclusions cannot be reached, he allows the impasses to speak up, in the hopes that the psychoanalytical community might advance the questions raised. He believes in transmission, community, and the future.⁵

That is not what we find in present times: inconclusive questions are not sustained and all blank spaces are filled in. Silence cannot prosper before the markets, since they are certain that the present times are the best world anyone can hope for. Silences are filled in quickly with laughs in off, for example, such as we can see in the talk-shows of the spectacle society. Nothing can be handed down, inherited, carried over.

Such is psychoanalysis's ethical edge. Whereas modernist productions transform the impasses of modern civilization into paradoxes, inviting a collective reflection while emphasizing the not-knowing about the destinies of the modern age, contemporary times (whatever label we give it) "solve" the paradoxes in favor of a-historicism and pure immanence. With ruined, inaudible paradoxes, immersed in the spectacle society, the impasses and conflicts of present times are deflated or even silenced. Therefore "the keeping of

⁵ The last example of Freud's epistemological honesty can be found in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937). Freud's legacy is the limitations of psychoanalysis before the powerful forces of masochism, restricting the possibilities of the success set forth by the analytical device.

psychoanalysis's modernist discourse is vital amidst the darkness of post-modernity" (Birman, 2000: 130).

If psychoanalysis can no longer submit reality to criticism and thus enters its own crisis, in a world, such as ours, that can only oppose hesitations and cessations, the first thing psychoanalysts should do is submit the present times to criticism. Psychoanalysts are invited to leave the privacy of their offices in order to submit the social and political realms to analysis. That is the meaning of carrying over Freud's legacy (and impasses). In an unpredictable world, devoid of fixed references, we have a privileged "orientation": to psychoanalyse society, in case we do not wish to allow the artificial laughs of the talk-show to stifle the acts and silences of the psychoanalytical talking-cure.

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