

# Freud and the Political

By Mladen Dolar\*

The political in Freud conceals under the air of innocence a most difficult, even impossible, topic. Both terms are far from being unequivocal—it is not quite clear, despite the appearances, what is meant by Freud, in spite of, or rather because of, the aura that surrounds his name and the general clamor that his fame provoked . . . and it is even less clear what is meant by the political, in spite of, or rather because of, the fact that one is constantly bombarded from all quarters by politics in all shapes and sizes. The trickiest of all is the possible intersection of the two. The temptation is great to adopt a deconstructivist rhetoric—instead of speaking about the topic, speaking about the impossibility of speaking about the topic. I will very much try to resist this temptation.

On the face of it, Freud was not a man of politics, to say the least. He never engaged in political life, not in any significant way, not of his own accord, not until it was thrust upon him in the most insidious form of rampant anti-Semitism and finally the occupation of his country, forcing him into exile. Apart from this staggering ending, his relationship to politics was anecdotal. One can pick out anecdotes about his aversion to Woodrow Wilson and co-authoring the unfortunate book about him; his inopportune scribbled note dedicating a book to Mussolini; his voting for the liberal party (in line with the whole Austrian Jewish community); his skeptical remarks on Bolshevism, inadequate by his own admission; his indulging in an extra cigar when the Emperor refused to appoint Dr. Karl Lueger the burgomaster of Vienna despite his electoral victory in 1895—the same Karl Lueger, one must add, who served as a role model to the young Hitler, who was roaming the streets of Vienna at the turn of the century. Lueger taught Hitler the tricks of the trade of anti-Semitism, as Hitler described in *Mein Kampf*. And, coming from Slovenia, I cannot resist picking out one anecdote, I suppose the most spectacular of all, of an event that happened during Freud's one brief visit to Slovenia. At Easter holidays in 1898, Freud visited Italy with his brother Alexander, and, on the way back, they stopped at the famous caves of Škocjan, in Slovenia (which are now actually a UNESCO heritage site). He gives his account in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess (14 April 1898), describing “a subterranean river running through magnificent vaults, with waterfalls and stalactites and pitch darkness . . . It was Tartarus itself. If Dante saw anything like this, he needed no great effort of the imagination for his Inferno.”<sup>1</sup> And whom did Freud meet at the bottom of this Tartarus, in the last circle of this Inferno? “The ruler of Vienna, Herr Dr. Karl Lueger,” who happened to be visiting the cave at the same time. He was with another party from the capital visiting the outskirts of the Empire during holidays, a place to run into people with whom he would never come face-to-face in Vienna

---

\* Mladen Dolar is Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana.

<sup>1</sup> *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*. Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, New York: Basic Books, 1977, p. 253.

itself. Freud, the paradigmatic Jew, meeting the paradigmatic anti-Semite in the Slovene Inferno, of all places—the image deserves to be seen, in retrospect, as an emblematic icon inaugurating the century, laden with forebodings of so much of what was to happen.<sup>2</sup>

However picturesque this anecdote may be, however indicative in many ways, there seems to be a glaring absence: Freud never proposed a political line that would follow from his discovery, a political stance to be taken. He avoided any reflection of the political impact that his discovery might have, in a way that cannot be unintentional, although never explicitly stated. He proudly refused that psychoanalysis should adopt any *Weltanschauung*, any “world-view,” including a political one, claiming that the scientific spirit precludes *Weltanschauung*. One can draw the conclusion that there is in Freud an inherent indifference to political matters—this is the line taken by someone like Jean-Claude Milner, a figure of some standing in today’s France, who sees in this *indifférence en matière politique* the proper way that psychoanalysis should follow, thus refusing what he calls “the political view of the world.”<sup>3</sup> One can of course quickly object that there is no such thing as indifference in political matters, that indifference is always itself a political stance that cannot evade endorsing the powers that be. One gives effective and unwitting support to a certain kind of politics precisely by refraining from it, so that indifference in politics appears to be a contradiction in terms (politics, like sexuality, being one of those things that one always practices, whether one practices them or not). So one may find this indifference regrettable, either as a sign of Freud’s conservatism, or of a secretly (or blatantly) conservative nature of psychoanalysis as such, which makes it implicitly or explicitly concur with, say, patriarchy, phallocentrism, etc. There has been no shortage of this type of argument. Alternatively, one may find it regrettable in the sense that Freud never took stock of the politically subversive nature of his discovery, so one should remedy his deficiency by proposing a radical politics that implicitly follows from his theory and which he didn’t want, or dare, to spell out. Enter Reich, Marcuse, and May ’68. *Nous voulons jouir sans entraves*.

But on the other hand one can take a very different approach, not accepting the absence of the political in Freud at all. If the birthplace of psychoanalysis has been the treatment of the individual psyche, its symptoms and vicissitudes, and if politics is about constructing a collectivity, then this boundary has always already been crossed. On the first page of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud starts off by claiming that, ultimately, no such boundary exists:

The contrast between individual psychology and social or group psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it

---

<sup>2</sup> When a couple of years later, in 1900, Freud published his first great book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he put on the frontispiece a motto from Virgil’s Aeneid: *Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*: “If I cannot bend the Higher Powers, I will move the Infernal Regions” (cf. *PFL* 4, p. 769). One could make a conjecture that in the choice of this motto one can hear an echo of the Slovene episode. Freud is quoted from *The Pelican Freud Library (PFL)*, 15 vols., Harmondsworth etc.: Penguin, 1973-1986.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., his *Constats*, Paris: Gallimard, 2002.

is examined more closely. . . . In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well. (*PFL* 12, p. 95)

One may say that for psychoanalysis there is no such thing as an individual, the individual only makes sense as a knot of social ties, a network of relations to the others, to the always already social Other—the Other being ultimately but a shorthand for the social instance as such. Subjectivity cannot make sense without this inherent relation to the Other, so that sociality has been there from the outset—say in the form of that minimal script presented by Oedipus—a social structure in a nutshell.

Thus the reflections on the social which Freud increasingly undertook in his later life are not an addition, an application of psychoanalysis to a new field of research, but rather the unfolding of what has been there from the start. One can see the two terms of the title, group psychology and the analysis of the ego, as standing in a relation of mutual implication: group psychology relies on a certain structure of the ego and is made possible by it, and the analysis of the ego implies, always already, a group structure. So, Freud tries to present this as a seamless transition, a mere deduction, or a magnification and a multiplication of what was present on the small scale. The individual, the ego, and the subject are inconceivable without a theory of a social tie.

On this account, politics would be universally and ubiquitously present in Freud's work, to the point that there would hardly be room for anything else. Not a page of Freud's wouldn't imply political consequences. But this account is only possible at the price of a certain equivocation between the social and the political, a certain seamless equation of the two, and one can easily feel that this is not sufficient, that there is a seam to be made. Freud's keywords, in his "social writings," are group, mass, culture, civilization. One can consider those keywords precisely as a way to avoid raising the question in political terms. To put it harshly, they tend to depoliticize the problem, to present it as a cultural or a civilizational issue. The metaphor of a seam, of sewing, is by no means innocent here; Lacan made great use of it with his concept of *point de capiton*, the quilting point, the stitching point, which in a way stands very much at the core of the political. The quilting point is the very opposite of seamless, it is not an unfolding of a nutshell, it requires a stitch, an act, and a change. Can we find this in Freud, be it in an incipient form?

There are some ways in which Freud made something like a political move, in a broad sense, and they all raise difficult problems. They are perhaps ultimately the ways of how not to go about it, the models not to follow. In what follows I will consider three of them: the problem of establishing a psychoanalytic institution; the problem of relying on reason or on Eros, libido, as a solution to the social discontents, *Unbehagen*; and the problem of group psychology and its construction. They involve very different issues, but my wager is that the impasses they run into point to the same common ground, which can perhaps help to elucidate the matter.

There is, first, the question of the institution that would be the vessel and the guardian of this new discovery, securing its social standing, its professional standards, and its transmission. This is the part of the internal politics of psychoanalysis: what

would be the appropriate organizational form in which this new knowledge could be maintained and properly passed on, its specificity protected, its adversaries kept at bay, its social promotion secured? No doubt there is a political move here that endows a discovery, a knowledge, a practice, with an institutional framework, a social foothold, with permanence and with independence from the particular people involved, including and especially from its founding father. Apart from the practical concerns, there is a mission to this, a mission both social and political, a mission of a truth to be spread, in the hope that it would prevail. A truth to be spread by an organization (shall one say a Party?) and not merely entrusted to writings—this is where a politics comes in, where a seam has to be made between a knowledge and its social status. This is where a psychoanalytic association massively differs, on the one hand, from mere professional associations of, say, dentists or plumbers, which are there to ensure certain professional standards, and, on the other hand, from scientific associations. For what is at stake in science, in establishing a scientific field, is the guarantee of the repeatable: the experiment is that which is repeatable by anyone, universally available, and this is what ensures objectivity, achieved through processes of verification; whereas in psychoanalysis one constantly deals only with the singular, the singularity of symptoms, the singularity of a particular unconscious—i.e., one deals with the non-repeatable, and it is from the singular that the universal has to be constructed.

The universality of what is at stake here is of a different nature than that of scientific laws, the passage from singular to universal requires a different act, and this places psychoanalysis in a precarious situation: it is always exposed to the criticism that it is not really a science and cannot stand the test of repeatable verification, but at the same time it has never given up its claim to scientific credentials and to its entitlement as science. The passage from the singularity of psychoanalysis' object and the universality of its claims involves an edge of truth that is of a different order than the scientific truth, a truth without a guarantee, and this is where the organization, the psychoanalytic association, is placed into an impossible fix: that of appearing as the guarantee—but the missing guarantee—of that truth.<sup>4</sup> This peculiar situation, differing from both the professional and the scientific, places psychoanalysis and its organizations into the vicinity of the political, for a political act as well always intervenes into situations that are inherently singular and draws universal claims from there, claims with no simple guarantee, so the political organizations, parties, etc., are also called upon as the warranties of the warrantless. Can a psychoanalytic association ever measure up to that impossible claim? (And can, for that matter, a political one?)

No doubt there is a part of black comedy involved, if we look back on the history of psychoanalytic organizations. Lacan, who had many reasons for personal grievance in this regard, remarked: “We leave in suspense [the question of] what drove Freud to this extraordinary *joke*, realized by the constitution of existing psychoanalytic societies, for one cannot say that he wanted them to be otherwise.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> I can refer here to Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, London/New York: Continuum, 2004, pp. 80-2.

<sup>5</sup> “Proposition du 9 octobre 1967”, first version, *Analytica* 8, Paris 1978, p. 8.

The official organizations, such as The International Psychoanalytic Association, no doubt present a part of success, both in securing an international institutional framework and in assuring the standards of a profession, this new widespread global profession. Yet this is perhaps the part where their own success ruined them, to use Freud's formula from another context. This is the part that Lacan refers to as the joke: everything is secured except the essential. The professional has dislodged the political, the edge of difficult and unsettling truth has been blurred, and one would be hard put to imagine that truth has prevailed in this global spread. But what would it mean for the precarious psychoanalytic truth to prevail?

There is, on the other hand, the part of failure epitomized by the constant strives, rivalry, exclusions, sectarian discords, opposition, controversies, the moves of revisionism vs. orthodoxy, already in Freud's time and then particularly around the figure of Jacques Lacan. This is the part where the doctrine appears to be far from secured, despite the institutional safeguards to secure it, or rather because of them. There is hardly a clear-cut stock of knowledge to be transmitted, and there is no set of well-defined practices—it all seems to be subject to constant controversy, institutional splits, renegades, and the possessors of the true ring. If psychoanalysis has always raised the claim to the status of science, then this is a far cry from what a science is supposed to look like: no piece of knowledge is granted as acquired, no procedures are established beyond dispute. This part of failure is far more interesting and indicative. Louis Althusser, in a classic paper on Marx and Freud,<sup>6</sup> forcefully argued that psychoanalysis is a conflictual science, the feature it prominently shares with Marxism. Conflict is its home ground; antagonism is the air it breathes. The moment it is turned into a part of cultural heritage, the moment Freud is turned into a 'cultural hero,' or the moment it is part of the established clinical know-how, its edge is lost. One can draw some grim satisfaction from the fact that this move of gentrification has never quite succeeded, despite a century of efforts at domestication and pacification, so that the mere mention of Freud's name still tends to provoke controversy and disagreement.

It is not just a question of external resistances, refusal and opposition—there was never any lack of those (in our times this takes, for example, the shape of a wholesale dismissal on the part of neurosciences, or cognitive sciences, which wave the banner of the accepted notion of science in face of this false pretender). Many scientific discoveries were initially met with harsh opposition, but once their knowledge could be established, once they could present the scientific credentials of verification, their progress was secured, they could proceed by gradual accumulation of knowledge along the well-defined paths. But this was never the case with either psychoanalysis or Marxism: they both raised the claims to the status of science, but proceeded only by way of conflict and split—not just the conflict with external hostility, but through a series of internal conflicts, as if the external opposition was constantly transposed into an internal strife, a conflictuality which could never be stabilized in an agreement.

This history—and this is the gist of Althusser's argument—is but an effect of the nature of truths that are at stake in both: they both deal with a truth which is itself

---

<sup>6</sup> "Sur Marx et Freud", in *Écrits sur la psychanalyse*, Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1993, pp. 222-245.

antagonistic, a conflictual truth, although they deal with seemingly unrelated notions of class struggle on the one hand and the unconscious and repression on the other. There is no neutral piece of knowledge which could be free from this antagonism: every piece of knowledge means taking sides, moving in a battlefield, in an antagonism which is simultaneously and indistinguishably both internal and external, an externality in the very inside. So the paradoxical result would be that the minimal political move of providing an organizational framework for psychoanalytic discovery could yield either a success at the price of utterly depoliticizing the edge of truth at stake, or else could yield the seeming failure, a series of disasters, but which testify, if *per negationem*, to the political, antagonistic, conflictual nature of psychoanalysis, the impossibility of turning it into a neutral field of knowledge, be it scientific, clinical, cultural, or political. On this account, the political impact of psychoanalysis emerges precisely with the constant failure to establish even a minimal “political” consensus. But can this be enough for a politics? Can we be happy with acknowledging this conflictual nature? Can there be a complacent satisfaction in brandishing conflictuality?

There are some other ways in which Freud approaches something that could be broadly understood as a political line, by proposing a precept, a guideline, a remedy to cure social ills. There are some places in his work where Freud emerges not as a proponent of democracy (notwithstanding his self-description as “a liberal of the old school”), but of a dictatorship, *Diktatur*. Not just any dictatorship, but the dictatorship of reason, if this is an alleviating circumstance. In the famous exchange with Einstein, dealing with the question “why war?” and how to prevent it, he makes the following suggestion for the ideal remedy against war: “The ideal condition of things would of course be a community of men who had subordinated their instinctual life to the dictatorship of reason. Nothing else could unite men so completely and so tenaciously, even if there were no emotional ties between them. But in all probability that is a Utopian expectation” (*PFL* 12, p. 359-60). The formulation is no coincidence, we find it repeated in the same year, 1932, in the *New Introductory Lectures*: “Our best hope for the future is that intellect—the scientific spirit, reason—may in process of time establish a dictatorship in the mental life of man” (*PFL* 2, p. 208). The suggestion sounds rather baffling, coming from a man who devoted his whole life to describing the forces that escape the control of reason, be it as the forces of the unconscious that unstopably play tricks on what reason purports to do, or as the forces of the drives, those indomitable giants which always force their way to satisfaction, including the most unlikely and strenuous ways. One has often enough imagined psychoanalysis rather as promoting the dictatorship of those forces, as opposed to reason. How can reason bend them to its dictatorial power, what can it rely on faced with this formidable adversary, unbeatable by Freud’s own account? At the same time there is a sort of disavowal in play, for Freud speaks about the dictatorship of reason in the lecture devoted to *Weltanschauung*, that is, to demonstrating why psychoanalysis should not espouse any *Weltanschauung*, while he actually demonstrates most blatantly some of the salient features of what one could call the Enlightenment *Weltanschauung*: faith in reason and progress, the scientific spirit, reason as an enlightened monarch. Is this the best one can hope for? Doesn’t Freud simplify matters by setting up the duality of

reason on the one hand and the unconscious and the drives on the other? Shouldn't one be reminded that the Freudian unconscious is not something simply unreasonable or irrational? Freud never described it as something simply opposed to reason, but rather as a glitch of reason, its slip, its inner torsion. And on the other hand, isn't the ego, the usual site of reason, precisely the agent of aggression and repression, a more likely agent of wars than the id? Is not reason, by Freud's account, always inextricably linked with rationalization, rationalizing something which is not reasonable? Hasn't one been looking at the picture from the wrong angle? I cannot pursue this any further here; I tried to do it elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

There is another way in which Freud describes the conflict, not as the opposition between reason and the instinctual life, but as the opposition among the drives themselves, between the two sorts of drives that in his later work he describes as libido, or Eros, and the death drive, the supposed agency of aggressivity and destruction. In the famous closing paragraph of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he draws the picture of an internal strife between the two:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. . . . [a]nd now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers,' eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result? (*PFL* 12, p. 339-40)

It is rather odd that Freud wages his hopes at once on the power of reason, its dictatorship, against the power of the drives, and then, almost in the same breath, on one of the drives against the other—the Eros, supposed to be the force of union, concord and alliance, as opposed to the death-drive, the supposed force of aggression and (self)destruction. In what way can reason be aligned to libido and Eros? Is reason erotic? Is Eros reasonable?<sup>8</sup> Is unification their common denominator?

One can see that one is in trouble with this line of argument, and the trouble stems, I think, from the way in which the duality is constructed, setting up the basic opposition between reason and the drives on the one hand and between Eros and the death drive on the other. In both cases the division between the two splits the good part from the bad part, the positive from the negative side, with the consequence that one should rely on the good part against the bad one, in a strife that is posited as eternal. What is missing is precisely the inherent ambiguity of both parts, which precludes pitting them one against the other in that way. The profound ambiguity of the drive is what drove Freud to splitting it into a positive and a negative part, but this

---

<sup>7</sup> *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT, 2005, pp. 91-5.

<sup>8</sup> Freud himself tacitly and without further ado subscribes to an equivalence of the two when, in *The Future of an Illusion*, he speaks about the duality of Logos and Ananke (relying on Multatuli, *PFL* 12, p. 238) and a couple of years later, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, about the duality of Eros and Ananke (p. 290). What is then the relationship of Eros and Logos, given that they are both structurally opposed to Ananke, necessity, fate?

move leads to conceptual simplification. The profound ambiguity of both reason and the unconscious precludes their simple opposition. So that the appeal—a political appeal?—to rely on the one against the other leads one to think: “there will always be a conflict between Eros and aggressivity, or between reason and the drives, and the best we can do is to keep our fingers crossed for the more likeable opponent.” Or, “let’s work for the one, although we know very well that the other one can never be defeated and that our struggle is Utopian—but nevertheless. . . .” Politics would thus mean envisaging the psychic and the social as a conflictual battlefield, where one should support the good forces against the bad ones, but the paradox is that the bad ones are precisely those that psychoanalysis has discovered in the first place: the unconscious, the drives, the death drive. Thus the aim of psychoanalysis would be to try to do away with its object, ultimately to abolish it—that would seemingly put an end to the trouble, to drive the analyst out of business. The psychoanalytic Utopia would thus be the world that didn’t need psychoanalysis.

But is putting our hopes this time into libido, the Eros, against the death drive the only or the best option? Couldn’t one rather go back to the radical stance of the earlier Freud, say the Freud of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), who insisted not on the duality of the drives but on their ineradicable ambiguity? For the drive is a most paradoxical conjunction between, on the one hand, the conservative, that which constantly forces its way back to the site of satisfaction, endowed with a compulsory nature which inexorably drives towards “more of the same,” and, on the other hand, the disruptive alterity which makes it so that the drive is never simply a force of adaptation, of homeostasis ruled by pleasure principle, but produces the unsettling, the derailment, the excess, the surplus (the surplus enjoyment, as Lacan would call it). Couldn’t one see in this unsettling, disruptive force of the drive a better way to approach politics? The drive is not just what preserves a certain institutional order; it is at the same time the reason that this order cannot stabilize itself and close upon itself, that it can never be reduced to the best arrangement of the existing subjects and institutions, but presents an excess which subverts it. That would entail not relying on the supposed unifying power of the libido against the disruptive death drive, but rather relying on the disruptive as an opening, a possibility of another sort of social tie, its transformation. It is not unification and union, binding together ever larger units, as Freud describes it, that is the basis of a political precept, but precisely its crack, its fissure, its impossibility, its untying that presents an opening for the political. It is the negative excess, the non-lieu constantly produced by the disruptive nature of the drives, that requires representation and an act. Freud seems to say that one has to turn into an agent of Eros, as it were, to oppose the dangers of destructiveness and disintegration, as if forgetting to what incredible extent unification and love can have a murderous underside. But couldn’t one, on this rather speculative and abstract level, suggest turning into an agent of the (death) drive, untying the glue of social bonds, in the hope of establishing the possibility of another kind of relation in the social non-relation?

But in this way we arrive again at the negative condition of the political, to the point where the political opening is present precisely in the impossibility of social unification—and the death drive may function as a name for this impossibility. Its



negativity points to a necessary fissure of the social tissue, the crack where the political should engage, but it doesn't tell us anything about the ways to go about it.

Another way of approaching the tricky nexus of psychoanalysis and the political would take us back to the seminal text on *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. We have seen that the supposition on which the text opens is a mutual implication between the group structure and the structure of the ego, a smooth—seamless—transition between the two. What exactly are its terms? Where do we start? Where do we arrive? By what way? One spontaneous way of looking at things would be the following: Freud started off with the “individual” psychic structure, which itself involved a minimal core of social relations epitomized by Oedipus. The individual could be turned into a subject only in the “family” structure, and the key to all authority, its hidden spring and source, its secret, was to be sought in the relation to the instance of the father. What Freud is doing in this text appears to be, if not a deduction of the social from the family, then a magnification and a multiplication of Oedipus. The family with its Oedipal nexus would be the presupposition, firmly established by prior psychoanalytic elaboration, and the social, the various vicissitudes of group ties, would be the consequence, the result of a certain understanding of the minimal social nucleus. The familial would thus be the familiar from which to explain the unfamiliar as a version of the familial.

This understanding is, incidentally, at the source of a massive criticism of psychoanalysis presented by Deleuze and Guattari under the banner of anti-Oedipus. Psychoanalysis is blamed for finding the universal clue in this family romance; any complex psychic or social arrangement can be reduced to a story of mummy and daddy. If one can be brought to believe one's desire is to be aligned with mummy and daddy, then one can easily be prey to other forms of domination, to concurring with molar groups, in the extreme consequence with fascism. And bringing one to believe this is the part of normalization implied in the basic assumptions of psychoanalysis, normalization as opposed to the nomadic, to the multiple and the becoming. I am simplifying, but not much.

Another line of argument could see Freud's move as embedded in a venerable tradition of political philosophy which goes back to antiquity, to the vulgata of Aristotle's *Politics*, where there is a basic congruence, the possibility of mutual transposition and translation, between the three levels of the individual, the family and the polis. In the same way as one is to be the master of one's own passions, one's body and its inclinations, the higher faculties of the soul wisely guiding the lower ones; in the same way the father is to be the head of the family, the *oikos*, the domestic life, wisely guiding the children, the wife, the slaves, and their economy; in the same way the ruler is to wisely guide the polis. Only someone capable of ruling oneself and one's *oikos* is apt for ruling the polis with proper authority, and all authority is at its root shaped on the model of the father, the source of natural authority. Is this what Freud can be taken as saying? Does he give us a modern version of the ancient political doctrine under a new disguise? Although taking the model of Oedipus, of all things, after all a Greek myth, can only be seen as highly ironic in that respect, this is

a dysfunctional family if there ever was one, to say the least. Can Oedipus serve as a model family?

But one can see already here that Oedipus can hardly count as a reduction to the family, but rather as the impossibility of any such reduction. It is what deroots the family, dislocates it, prevents its normal function, thwarts it in its goal. It makes any assumption of social functions and roles laden with a conflict with uncertain outcome; it doesn't secure social and family roles, but subverts them. The father is divorced from his "natural" authority, his authority becomes a function of identification, every subject is placed into an impasse, no subject can simply occupy his or her place, every role is subject to strife. As Balibar lucidly put it: "the family structure is not based on Oedipus, but Oedipus, to the contrary, inscribes the conflict and the variability of subjective positions into its core and thus hinders any possibility for the family to impose the roles which it prescribes as simple functions for individuals to fulfill 'normally' . . ."<sup>9</sup> So Oedipus is not a reduction to *oikos*, but rather the inner disruption of *oikos*.

Can one say that Freud presents the father as the source of every authority, thus also as the clue to any political authority? There needs no Freud come from the grave to tell us this, to paraphrase *Hamlet*; this was rather the traditional view of authority that is precisely being put to scrutiny here. It is not that Freud reduces everything to relations to father and mother; he rather deprives them of their "natural" roles and presents them as functions laden with structural conflict and instability. Freud—and this is a rather massive hypothesis—discerns the function of the father and its vicissitudes precisely at the time when this traditional account has historically lost its sway.

To be sure, Freud proposed his myth of the murder of the father, of the dead father acquiring more force as the living one, ruling as the Name of the Father, as the symbolic authority, authority of the symbolic, giving rise to the bonding of the brothers who killed him, etc. But one could say that with the advent of modernity—the French Revolution marking a symbolic cut and presenting a shorthand for many different processes—it was *the dead father himself who died*. He lost his symbolic impact, his name stopped being the foundation of authority, it was revealed as an imposture. Fathers, both "real" and symbolic, lost their power, which could then be retroactively seen as tainted with imposture from the outset. So these massive historic presuppositions made it possible for Freud to discern the father, not as a source of authority, natural, religious or symbolic, but in the contingency of his function. It was not that any father or ruler or god could no longer measure up to his function, but rather the symbolic function itself lost the power of measure. There are many ways and vocabularies to describe the ascent of modernity, and this could be one economical proposal: the dead father, the reference point of symbolic authority, has met his demise. However, the outburst of joy at this dwindling of authority would be premature, and this is one of the stakes of *Group Psychology*, for what comes after the overthrow of kings and the decline of symbolic authority is not just the happy spread of triumphant democracy, but rather the rise of the underside of the symbolic father, and the psychoanalytic name for it is the superego. This rule is more intractable, or

---

<sup>9</sup> Étienne Balibar, *La crainte des masses*, Paris: Galilée, 1997, p. 337.

far more difficult to cope with. Lacan had a great knack for inventing slogans, and this is one of them: *Père ou pire*, “Father or worse.” The patriarchal rule was bad enough, but what we are facing with its demise is even worse. All this gives Freud a historical background that he always avoided, intentionally or not, but that never stopped him from taking stock of it in the most perceptive and lucid way, surpassing by far all those who swear by historicity and historicization.

To come back to *Group Psychology*, I think that the spontaneous reading which takes the family as the secret core of the social is looking at things the wrong way, although Freud, as always, offers various occasions for misunderstanding. One should take the suggestion of a mutual implication more seriously—that is, not in the sense of one-way implication, the familial implying the social and the artificial ties, but as at the same time the social, artificial ties shedding light on the family, something in the family which is neither familiar nor familial. The unconscious is neither individual nor collective—an individual unconscious depends on a social structure, whereas a collective unconscious would demand a defined collectivity, a community to which it would pertain, but no such pre-given community exists. The unconscious “takes place” precisely between the two, in the very establishment of the ties between an individual (becoming a subject) and a group to which s/he would belong. Strictly speaking there is no individual or collective unconscious; it intervenes at the link between the two. But what is the nature of this unconscious?

Freud opposes two kinds of masses: there are, on the one hand, what he calls artificial masses, exemplified by the army and the church (one could say the repressive and the ideological state apparatuses, to use Althusserian terms, although Freud never proposes any theory of the state here, as Hans Kelsen was quick to point out in a most interesting exchange which appeared in *Imago* in 1922).<sup>10</sup> They present stability; they secure the permanence and the reproduction of certain social ties as well as certain ideas; they embed the subjects in a fixed hierarchy, assign them certain social functions, put them into proper slots; they present the face of order and arrangement. On the other hand, there are masses that Le Bon’s account deals with (an exchange with Gustave Le Bon was Freud’s starting point), the ones that act rather as hordes and present the loss of individuality, giving up one’s own will, critical judgment and ethical standards, the thrust towards immediate goals and instant gratification, the high degree of suggestion, the contagion of feelings, intolerance, and the obedience to the mysterious authority of the leader. Acquisitions of civilization are readily thrown overboard, the mass looks like a regression to some more primitive barbaric stage, supposedly from man’s phylogenetic past, an earlier uncivilized phase, thus testifying to an unconscious root, even more, to a reenactment of the primal horde. Both ultimately share the basic structural feature of the mass, namely that of being “a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego” (*PFL* 12, p. 147). But they do it in radically different ways: the artificial one upholds social ties, assures their permanence and stability and allows for individuality within them, while

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the French translation: Hans Kelsen, “La notion d’État et la psychologie sociale”, in *Masses et politique*, Paris: CNRS, 1988.

the 'primal' one dismantles social ties: it is ephemeral and threatens with an instant disintegration; it deprives its members of individuality. The first one stands for durability and solidity of social ties, the second one for their untying, and in that untying supplants them with primitive ones, the relic from the primal horde and its boundless submission to the primal father from whom the leader borrows the charismatic features. (Hence the importance of hypnosis, this "vanishing mediator," the paradoxical "mass of two," *Masse zu zweit*, the incipient form of mass formation.)

What is the relation between the two? "These noisy ephemeral groups . . . are as it were superimposed upon the others," says Freud (*PFL* 12, p. 161). The ephemeral is superimposed upon the permanent and the enduring, the untying is superimposed upon the ties, the horde is superimposed upon civilization. But shouldn't one read this as a structural relation rather than as a temporary regression to some primitive stage? Do not the two structurally belong together? And even if one uses the term regression, as Freud does, isn't one of the lessons of psychoanalysis precisely that there is no such thing as regression? For every regression is not going back to an earlier point, since the apparent going back is always a response to the present deadlock, so that the previous that one goes back to is entirely mediated by the present from which one regressed, and hence belongs to the present constellation. So the primitive, 'primary' mass is a response to a deadlock of the artificial one; it presents its underside, its undoing as operative in its making, in its functioning and reproduction. It testifies to the precarity of the established ties, their conflictual nature, their contingency. It is their symptom. It displays the same structure (putting the same object in the place of the ego ideal), but in a blatant way that exposes the suppositions of the "normal" tie. So the argument would be the reverse of the spontaneous reading: it is the primary mass that is derived from the artificial one, although it may retrospectively seem that it was historically at its origin.

The opposition between the structured and permanent ties of the artificial masses and their undoing, even if ephemeral, in the primary masses is the very space of politics, one of the ways of looking at it. We arrive, by a different way, to the same point, that of the undoing of the established social ties as inherent to their tying, which is what opens the space of the political. Not of the political taken as an arrangement of power, or taken as relations of individuals to the community, or as the best way to run the state and institutions, as the key question of the traditional political philosophy "what should be a good government?"<sup>11</sup> but of the political as a dislocation of the existing social entities, as shifting the ground of what holds the existing relations together.

To be sure, Freud looks at the emergence of 'primary' masses with some degree of horror. He doesn't exactly see them in the light of the '68 slogan, "*Ce sont les masses qui font l'histoire*," to say the least. These masses don't make history; they unmake it. There is a mark of contempt for the mob in his stance, a stance of some standing and

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jacques Rancière's guideline that "politics is not an affair of ties between individuals and the relations between the individuals and the community, it springs from the count of 'parts' of the community which is always a false count, a double count or a miscount" (*La méésentente*, Paris: Galilée, 1995, p. 25). It is an excellent starting point that I cannot pursue here at greater length.

a long tradition in the Enlightenment. It never occurs to him to see them as the revolutionary masses that could give rise to a hope for change, for a political transformation, for the end of domination, doing away with social injustices, the hierarchy and unfreedom of artificial masses. Quite the contrary, they appear as a regression to the harshest form of domination, the reflex of the primal father and the primal horde, the crumbling of all the achievements of civilization. He envisages them as paramount instances of the return of the repressed, and the repressed is not the strife for freedom but a tendency to archaic submission, the lure of the loss of individuality, the instant gratification, the promise of spoils based on a leader who, by his authoritarian stature, can undo the validity of existing rules. The primary mass is like the state of emergency that Giorgio Agamben speaks about; it instates a leader who can suspend the law, something that points to the very modern and sinister paradoxes of sovereignty. The thrust for immediate enjoyment has, on the other hand, all the makings of the superegoic injunction to enjoy, that is, to enjoy under the auspices of the submission to the archaic father. What opposes the present hierarchical institutions like the army and the church, authoritarian as they may be, is an unbounded rule—rule of the superego? So even the army and the church, detested by Freud, particularly the latter, may appear as outposts of civilization in the light of this comparison, their mitigated authoritarianism appearing as preferable to the unmitigated one. One can describe the opposition between the two in terms of the symbolic father, the symbolic authority sustaining the army and the church, and the rule of the superego, the dark underside of the Name of the Father, sustaining the mass. And one could see in that not a regression to an archaic stage, but rather a clue to modernity, something that can shed new light on the common suggestion that we live in a “mass society,” something to be tied up with the demise of the symbolic father and the new rule of the superego, celebrated as a feat of democracy.

But no doubt the grim lesson Freud draws from it is not the only lesson that follows. It again deprives the process it describes of its ambiguity, and it is its ambiguity that points to the site of the political. There is again a danger of setting up a duality, where the artificial masses would appear as the proponents of stability, progress and our best hope for an ordered social existence, whereas the primary masses would appear as the black pits of regression, disintegration, and disarray under the banner of a primeval authority. But both terms of the opposition are ambivalent: if the primary masses are the symptom of the artificial ones, they bring to light their hidden conflict, the repression at the price of which the latter can be set up. On the other hand, the emergence of primary masses also has an effect of lifting the repression (isn't lifting the repression one of the aims that Freud assigns to psychoanalysis?), shall one say of liberation and emancipation alongside regression, although they present at the same time the moment of the greatest danger of sinking into the crude authoritarian rule? No doubt one shouldn't oppose Freud's grim vision with a rosy one, with the romantic view of revolutionary masses aspiring for freedom, breaking their chains and instituting a direct democracy once they have shuffled off the coils of domination. But there is a moment of ambivalence in untying the social ties that Freud describes as the mass, which can go either way, neither simply back to the primal father nor simply into the reign of new freedom and “radical democracy”—

and it is this moment of ambivalence that is the site of a political seam, a stitch to be made, the space where a *point de capiton* has to intervene. “Masses” don’t make history, for the good reason that they are not political agents but the site of a political intervention.

We can see that all three lines of inquiry intersect at a certain point, although they arrive there by very different ways. The point has been variously named as conflictuality, antagonism, rift, a crack in the social tissue, an excess, the point of ambivalence, untying of social bonds, negativity. This point runs through all of Freud’s works; one can detect it at work in different contexts and under different concepts. One can see it in the conflictual nature of psychoanalytic institutions; one can see it as designated by the death drive or by what Freud calls the primary mass. Those terms and those three approaches have different impacts and ramifications, but I have been trying to single out a core around which they turn as their common ground. And this core, I have been arguing, has to be conceived as the site of the political, ubiquitously inherent in Freud’s work—as a site. But designating this site is not establishing a politics, taking a political line, making a political act—something that Freud has always meticulously refrained from doing. It is as if psychoanalysis circumscribes a site, a locus of the political, without ever quite stepping into this site itself. It is as if it describes and dissects the space of the political without ever quite engaging in politics; it displays the stuff that politics is made of without making politics of it. I would go even a step further and say that psychoanalysis and politics share the same ground; they share the same condition, but they treat it in a different way. They differ in the manners in which they relate to it. The common core that binds them together is at the same time the place of their disjunction.

The difference is not that between “theory” and “practice,” for psychoanalysis involves a practice of its own, a practice that is always also a social practice, although on the basis of one-by-one, not of collectivity; and politics always involves a theory. One could put it this way: if psychoanalysis refrains from making a step, from deciding the ambivalence, filling the crack, proposing a new tie for the untied, if there is a missing step where a step would have to be made, then politics makes a step too much. It decides the ambiguity; it proposes a new tie; it engages what Badiou calls fidelity to the event, a subjective stance, a process of truth without a guarantee, a transformation. It turns the negative condition into a positive project, a movement, a party, a militancy. It proposes a new master signifier, although it may well be aware of its contingency. No doubt it thereby obfuscates the crack; it eludes the contingency and the ambiguity; it represents the unrepresentable—that is, it misrepresents it—but this is the price of taking the step. On the other side, psychoanalysis is not simply apolitical; rather, its circumscribing the site of the political is something that calls for politics, for an engagement in that site, for a step too far, although one can only do it at the price of entering into another logic than the one that sustains psychoanalysis. The circumscription of the site is no neutral description; it requires a step, although it itself doesn’t prescribe what this step should be.

Another way of putting it: psychoanalysis does engage with the mass, but only at its core—that is, at the point of *Masse zu zweit*, the mass of two, the point of the van-

ishing mediator of hypnosis, the missing link that Freud interposes between the phenomena of love and the mass formation. The vanishing mediator returns with a vengeance, for psychoanalysis itself can be described precisely as the reenactment of the mass of two. This is its home ground, but the whole point is precisely to undo what has been tied together in hypnosis—that is, to unravel the amalgamation of the ego ideal and the object that has been put into its place. It is in these terms that Lacan describes psychoanalysis' mission on the last pages of the seminar on the four fundamental concepts: "Now, as everyone knows, it was by distinguishing itself from hypnosis that analysis became established. For the fundamental mainspring of the analytic operation is the maintenance of the distance between the I—identification—and the *a* [the object] . . . it isolates the *a*, places it at the greatest possible distance from the I . . ." <sup>12</sup> Analysis is about undoing the knot on which mass is based; it unties the mass at its core. But politics has to reestablish the link between the two, at its own risk, without a prescription and without guarantee.

In his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, Lacan at some point discusses the relationship of analysis to moral action, and he gives the following general statement: "it may well be that analysis prepares us [for the moral action], but at the end of the day it leaves us at its door [*en fin de compte elle nous laisse à sa porte*] . . . Why does it stop at this threshold? . . . the ethical limits of analysis coincide with the limits of its practice. Its practice is but a prelude to moral action as such. . . ." <sup>13</sup> Couldn't one say that an analogous statement can be made about politics? Analysis stops at a threshold—it cannot pass a certain threshold without ceasing to be analysis—but it circumscribes a locus in which a step should be made; but this circumscribing a place is itself a political gesture, a political opening, the opening of a door through which we must make a step.

I suppose one could describe the relation between the two by the term used by Slavoj Žižek, the parallax view: a shifting perspective between two points of view, between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. One can only see the one way or the other, although one is looking at the same thing. The two may be two sides of the same thing, but they can never meet at the same level; there is no neutral common space; there is a non-relation, but this ties them together. There is a parallax gap. <sup>14</sup> Maybe this metaphor, this model, is not a bad way of conceiving how psychoanalysis and politics belong together but can never quite meet or converge. And it is not true that everything is political. It is rather the opposite: politics is rare. It's a very scarce thing, and so is psychoanalysis.

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, London: Penguin 1979, p. 273.

<sup>13</sup> *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Seuil 1986, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT 2006.