

The psychoanalytical language in Human Sciences: the visible and the invisible in

Freud and Walter Benjamin

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Abstract

The field of Social Psychology is presented as a fertile territory, in contemporary times, to be constituted as a laboratory for the production in Human Sciences as, in the 20th. Century, the social took increasingly a path towards the psychological. In this field, our struggle is around the way we understand the hyphen that is presupposed in the psycho-social integration. The author proposes that, between the psychological and the social, the hyphen dominates, as it is the proper relational essence that is inherent to each of these elements. She suggests that the model proposed by Freud to understand man and his circumstances imbricates in an undissociable way the psychological and the social, ontogenesis and phylogenesis, with a potency that had an impact on the whole field of Human Sciences. Psychoanalysis is an hermeneutic instrument to collaborate in the elucidation of social phenomena. The author uses images constructed by Freud and Walter Benjamin to strengthen the understanding of the psycho-social hyphen both in its multidimensional action and organization, that make possible a production in the psycho-social field that is at the same time a redemption of memory, re-signification and reparatory act.

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Walter Benjamin (1940/1974), in his book *On the concept of History*, opens up that powerful text building the enigmatic image of an unbeatable chess winning machine:

It is well-known that an automaton once existed, which was so constructed that it could counter any move of a chess-player with a counter-move, and thereby assure itself of victory in the match. A puppet in Turkish attire, water-pipe in mouth, sat before the chessboard, which rested on a broad table. Through a system of mirrors, the illusion was created that this table was transparent from all sides. In truth, a hunchbacked dwarf who was a master chess-player sat inside, controlling the hands of the puppet with strings. One can envision a corresponding object to this apparatus in philosophy. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is always supposed to win. It can do this with no further ado against any opponent, so long as it employs the services of theology, which as everyone knows is small and ugly and must be kept out of sight.

This peculiar image built by Benjamin at the beginning of the 40's of the past century seems to be useful to map the state of affairs in that theoretical-philosophical clash in the field of the History of Philosophy, at that time. In that image, Historical Materialism is able to win the theoretical tournaments thanks to the intervention not only of a somewhat complex specular mechanism that produces an illusion - but also with the aid of the crafty and mangled game partner. Through the specular mechanism, what the puppet dressed as a Turkish man aspires through the nargileh mouthpiece are the old theological speculations, leveraging the impact of his moves to win the game. The power of the Historic Materialism in the intellectual tournament would be given to him by Theology, albeit Materialism, in the disturbing image displayed by Benjamin, would be the one conducting the moves.

This is the image with which Benjamin opens his thesis on the Philosophy of History, and which is a thesis in itself. Benjamin's assertion implies a strange make up of

models in which Historical Materialism can serve as a puppet, to call it something, for the ventriloquist Theology, that is, for the conception in principle most antagonistic to itself. It is worthwhile remembering that this image was not built by any thinker, but by a controversial opponent of the irrational idealism in Philosophy, but also of the reductionist and mechanistic aspects of Historic Materialism. However Benjamin, as he shows in these theses, always thinks on History when thinking of theoretical models. And he knows, as he puts forward in the thesis ensuing this one, that the ruins of the past – and part of these are all of the conceptions about man that were set forth – never truly become silent, and can be reborn in a transfigured voice, such as Theology through Historic Materialism, where the revolutionary expectations of the latter are fed by the old historic power of Theology's redeeming expectations. Perhaps the core element in the image created by Benjamin is not the puppet dressed *a la* Turkish, nor the hunchbacked dwarf, but the system that produces the illusion of a table – transparent in all senses – that binds together periods of thought that are distanced from each other.

Freud, upon creating and mobilizing what we could call the psychoanalytic metaphor, that is, the extremely powerful and unique way of simultaneously studying and giving dynamism to psychological phenomena, knew how to bring up an approach that, due to its implication in the history of Human Sciences, makes it, in our opinion, the legitimate representative to be understood in analogy to the hunchbacked dwarf of Theology, in Benjamin's image. Of course Psychoanalysis is not the substitute of Theology, although because of its potential for articulation, powerful remains of Theology could also be updated through its discourse. Let us consider the action of psychoanalytic language within the field of Social Psychology. Freud knew how to grant Psychology with a completely original statute, making it possible to signify relations that broaden our

understanding of how we build ourselves. An example that may be useful to illustrate what we are suggesting on the deep impact caused by Freud can be extracted from his essay from 1930, *Civilization and its discontents*. Even though the core ideas that Freud sets forth in this text may seem theoretical outlines that are not very successful, taking into account the developments in Anthropology, Ethnography, History, Psychology and even in Psychoanalysis itself, his more general approach and the model based on which he conceives man and his environment take on, in our opinion, a powerful legitimacy, upon inextricably linking the psychological and the social, the individual and the collective, even getting to the point of linking phylogeny and ontogenesis. Thus, for example, in his research about the reasons for which it is so hard for men to be happy (p. 86), Freud indicates the three sources from which our suffering comes: the superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies and the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society (p. 86). We can even disregard the entire argument that Freud sets forth subsequent to this. What is important is that he interlinks nature, subjectivity and culture in an inextricable way to understand a state of things.

The powerfulness with which Freud was able to integrate the psychological with the social had an impact, as we had mentioned, on the entire field of Human Sciences. Benjamin assumes a chess game in the field of the Philosophy of History. And we should keep in mind that this is not merely a clash of ideas, but that as a good Marxist, Benjamin knows it is about a clash in the field of life of men per se and its destinies, implying, beyond the culture, politics, economy and society. That is to say, implying power. It may be the same clash that we face at present. However, from our point of view, as we suggested, there is a new hunchbacked dwarf acting upon the destinies of such moves so that

of Psychoanalysis. The machine that Benjamin assembled in the field of ideas not only operates in resonance with the specular machine Freud (1900/1961) conceived when constructing his model of the psychic apparatus, in the renowned chapter VII of the *Interpretation of dreams*², but there would also exist, in the dynamics of the field of ideas, something like an unconscious, from where old ideational segments would act upon the unfolding of present-day conceptions, in a complex internal struggle in which whatever is new is always a reorganization of the demands of all human aspirations built throughout History. Upon installing a specular machine in the field of ideas that operates in analogy with the psychic model set forth by Freud in the first topic, in a certain sense we can say that Benjamin psychologizes the history of the spirit, by allowing us to understand the field of intellectual history in analogy to the field of psychic development, that is, there as here, reason suffers disturbances. In the field of rationality what is irrational may arise, as Adorno emphasizes so clearly in his work. This form of understanding social productions and ideology itself is the result of the psychosocial power in contemporary thinking. The entire School of Frankfurt worked in this way.

I hope not to be suggesting the reduction of all the complexity of the field of Human Sciences to a psychoanalytic conception. The application of Psychoanalysis, as a cluster of theories built throughout the history of this discipline, upon a specific context to be studied, greatly reduces the scope it would have to offer for the study of this phenomenon. For the model and for the psychoanalytic method to be more efficient, Psychoanalysis has to divest

² Let us recall that Freud used an optic model, that is to say, a specular model that describes his conception regarding the functioning of the psychic apparatus, taking into consideration his findings on oneritic production. This model should encompass his four essential findings regarding dreams: 1. a dream is an important and complete psychic act; 2. What mobilizes it is always the fulfillment of a desire; 3. The way it presents itself makes it impossible to recognize the desire, given the deformation fostered by the act of psychic censorship; and 4. Besides that act of censorship, what collaborates in the forming of the dream is the condensation and representation through images, and sometimes the care that enables the dream to present a rational and intelligent aspect.

itself from its theories, to such a point that it will silence them, because it is only in their silence that the phenomenon we are apprehending will arise, with its specificity. What is inherent in the construction of knowledge in this field is the setting up of an observation and intervention process, whose unfolding is taken seriously into consideration through an intense reflection of the phenomenon, in a dialogue with a series of theories that support and serve as reference for psychoanalytic intervention, but that grant the phenomenon observed a privileged standpoint, where the latter can never be displaced or eclipsed by any theoretical conception adopted *a priori*. Theories tend to be very noisy, and when applied to the field of Human Sciences, translate into ideologies very easily. However, if Benjamin is right, if in the visible clash there is an enormous over-determination of aspects of the invisible that operate in an irrational way, Psychoanalysis as a model and a method can help us to indicate the presence of the invisible in the social phenomena, therefore expanding our knowledge about them. Obviously human production is essentially historical; and the understanding on how we understand History is essential. For this reason, the most imperious moves in Human Sciences still occur in the field of Philosophy of History, as this is the field where History gains its meaning. If we privilege Psychoanalysis as a model and method, we do not do so with the aim of incrementing the psychologizing of the social. Quite the contrary, if it is true that Psychoanalysis has deeply penetrated within the Philosophy of contemporary History, that is, in the ways of conceiving History, our proposal is that of using the psychoanalytic model and method to help locate the social phenomena studied as part of History, and not within an exclusive psychological framework, as it is the historic consciousness that makes it possible to fully elucidate the social phenomena. Because of that, Psychoanalysis is not the end, but a hermeneutic instrument to collaborate towards elucidating the diversity of phenomena approached.

If everything we are setting forth is correct, it leads us to concluding that History involves psychology, that History is also a psychological achievement, in the same way that the body is a historical achievement, without ever having stopped being an achievement of Nature. Let us go back to Freud. When he locates the human phenomena in Nature, in the body and in History, and when he interconnects them in such a way that it makes them inextricably tied to each other, bringing up between them relationships that interchange the places occupied by each other, depending on the phenomenon that is being studied ó because it's intrinsic to the psychoanalytic method and model not to establish a fixed and stringent hierarchy between the fields of Nature, body and History to understand human phenomenon -, this is done without ever reducing one to the other or all to an exclusive field, otherwise they would not be Nature, body and History. Freud is never one dimensional. His own model of the psychic apparatus, which is also the psychoanalytic model, was set up precisely to account for the multiplicity of determinations in human production. If the phenomenon of the dream is the model for the production of the psychic apparatus, then, precisely because of this, the model should be able to account for the over-determination in the production of the dream, based on different instances that never reduce themselves to the others, but that operate internally as parts of a mechanic of intimate interconnection. And not only this: the model should also account for the multi-diversity with which human phenomena materialize in reality. Much like the dream, all of the human phenomena are over-determined from a dimensional multiplicity, because the unconscious is not exclusively intra-psychic, but perhaps the manifestation, in crude forms, of all human deeds throughout History. Freud (1930/1961) elevated to the status of law a strange and surprising hypothesis, one with a deep meaning for what we are attempting to say: what has

been lived never disappears. Forgetting never means the complete elimination of a mnemonic trace.

Since we overcame the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory-trace ó that is, its annihilation -, we have been inclined to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish ó that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light. (p. 69)

The unconscious is the location of memory, and it is Freud himself who, to illustrate the phenomenon of preservation in action in the psychic realm, brings it closer to a fantastic understanding of Rome, which he literally presents in the condition of an eternal city.

Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past ó an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one. This would mean that in Rome the palaces of the Caesars and the *Septizonium* of Septimus Severus would still be rising to their old height on the Palatine and that the Castle of Saint Angelo would still be carrying on its battlements the beautiful statues which graced it until the siege by the Goths, and so on. But more than this. In the place occupied by the Palazzo Caffarelli would once more stand ó without the Palazzo having to be removed ó the Temple of the Jupiter Capitolinus; and this not only in its latest shape, as the Romans of the Empire saw it, but also in its earliest one, when it still showed Etruscan forms and was ornamented with terracotta antefixes. (p. 70)

The eternal city that Freud assumes condenses the entire human history in an architectonic image in which nothing is ruin, in the sense of completely losing its significant vitality. Everything that was continues to be alive and claims in the eternal city built by Freud. The eternal city is the origin of the diverse human manifestations, in all fields of activity. And, because of that, all human achievements, the development of each person ó which is also a human fulfillment -, the scientific and technical production, Human Sciences, literature, poetry and the other arts are over-determined elaborations of this gigantic and condensed living memory, that as it pulsates constitutes History itself, a terrain in which all human constructions are rooted. And if we say they are rooted, it means so in a dual direction: all constructions are one more construction in the eternal city. And, on the other hand, any construction is a construction erected based on the elements and the vitality placed at its disposal by the state of affairs in the eternal city. What is new does not surpass what is old. Between the old and the new, the dynamics are more structural. History is not diachronic.

Benjamin (1940/1974) also built an image that in a certain way allows us to deepen our understanding of History, working in resonance with the image of the eternal city set up by Freud. This is how the thesis number IX reads:

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the

Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm.

We redeem in Benjamin the dynamic and processual dimension that is inherent to History. A History that is not exactly the eternal city, but what is possible to apprehend here and now, in the uninterrupted storm of progress which, coming from Paradise, blows in direction of the future. Freud builds his eternal city preserving it from the flow of History. The eternal city is a sort of palimpsest where all of the multiple layers can be at our disposal, manifestly. Benjamin introduces the dynamic element. And therefore, the image of the rubble, of the ruin, should once again be taken into consideration. Because everything that in Freud is edifying, building, in Benjamin, who has his vision fixed on Paradise, that is to say, in the territory of expectations for enhancement and the redemption of mankind and of the human phenomena, is seen as rubble, demanding reparation. Each construction, each dead person makes a demand. The eternal city transforms itself into a terrain, not only of living memory, but of intense demands upon the angel of History, that the storm of progress continues to thrust forward. The demand is so intense that the angel would like to hold back and, taking seriously into consideration this demand of the dead and the ruins, to edify a reparation. But the storm does not allow it the time to do so. And all the angel is able to build in his reparation act is perhaps a poorly finished fragment that immediately thereafter, given the strength of the storm ó which is nothing more than the passing of time -, becomes transformed into a new ruin deposited under his feet, that is to say, a new demand that will join into the desperate cries of the ruins. And it is this desperate cry that is the fulfillment of History.

From our point of view, the images built by Freud and Benjamin can be complementary and, in this completion, they may strengthen our understanding of the human phenomena, in its multidimensional action as well as in its organization. Given the tension that settles in between the two images, between constructions and ruins, between the preserved and active element highlighted by Freud and the frustrated and disappointing element highlighted by Benjamin - from this tension what could emerge is a production in the psychosocial field that at the same time will represent a redemption of memory, a new meaning and an act of reparation. That is, a construction in the broadest sense of the term, as it involves both memory and reparation. Finally we deem it important to point out that Benjamin's image is powerful enough to help us understand how the construct that is erected doesn't mean only the work of History as a practice and a field of studies, but instead, in our opinion, this image is also able to shelter those processes for personal reconstruction that each human being must undergo. Because, in the personal reconstruction processes, a private angel of History ó if we wish to use the image that Benjamin puts on the scene looking through the painting by Klee ó is in action, with the same wide open eyes, the same open mouth, the same tension in the wings and mainly, the same implications with time: all he has at its disposal is the past, presented at the same time ó if we bring together the images by Freud and Benjamin ó in the form of memory and ruin, demanding its act of personal construction, which is how the future is fulfilled.

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