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FREUD'S SOCIOGENESIS, AND OURS: THE "HISTORICAL
TRUTH" OF DEMOCRACY

A decade ago: United States citizens were beginning to realize that the occupation in Iraq was not a victory for democracy. The housing bubble burst. A plane – a small one this time – flew into a New York city building. Seven men were arrested for planning to bomb the Sears Tower. Riots and attacks in France by Muslim youth. Homosexuals demanding to marry. Public intellectuals said: "there is too much democracy".¹ Jacques Ranciere (2006) argues that, no, the positioning of governor and governed rests on the "equality of the one who commands and the one who is commanded," both of whom are speaking beings (48). Democracy isn't one form of government among others, but is ontologically primordial. The "part that has no part" is not a segment of society to be counted but the fundamental absence of any inherent right to rule, any authority for deciding how the parts of society are even to be counted. As "the dissolving of any standard by which nature could give its law to communitarian artifice via the relations of authority that structure the social body" (41), democracy – which is to say, politics – "begins whenever the power of birth is undermined, whenever the power of the highborn who lay claim to some founding god of the tribe is declared for what it is: the power of property-owners" (44). Ranciere's reference point is "first of all those Greeks, who severed links with the divine shepherd and set down, under the double name of philosophy and politics, the public record of its farewell" (33).

Ranciere's argument would not have impressed the political thinkers or revolutionaries of the Enlightenment, most of whom preferred Rome to Greece, and Sparta to Athens (Roberts 1994). Robespierre and Paine notwithstanding, it was German aesthetics and not American or French politics that wiped the shit from Athens and democracy and gave them a new shine.² Greek anti-Ottoman expatriate nationalists, having themselves come under the

¹ Although Fareed Zakaria's concept of "illiberal democracy" dates back at least to the 1990s, it was his *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (Zakaria, 2003) that put the theory of "too much democracy" on television and in mass media in the United States. Benny Levy's Levinasian *Le Muerte du Pasteur* (Levy, 2002), which argues that political philosophy since Athens, in contrast to Jewish political thought, has repudiated a foundational authority, played a similar role in France at the same time.

² Thus, Winckelmann's 1755 *Reflections on the imitation of the Greeks in painting and sculpture* attributes the flourishing of Athenian art to its democratic constitution. Herder cites this attribution with approval in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, adding that the demagogue Pericles did more for the arts than ten kings would have done ((Herder 1800): XIII.3.3). Schiller's lectures on universal history at Jena in 1789 contrast the limited mind, insensitive heart, despotism, slavishness, and gracelessness of the Spartan to the gentleness, tenderness, polite intelligence, hospitality, delicacy and decorum, and patriotic ferocity fostered under Athenian democracy, noting that the latter and not the former encouraged art and intellectual inquiry (Schiller 1988).

influence of these newly-polished twins, used them to promote an international network of *political* philhellenes (Konstantinou 2012). The British philosophical radicals George Grote and John Stuart Mill rewrote Greek history as an argument against Sparta and for an Athens of flourishing arts and scientists, the empowerment of the common people, and secularism (Biagni 2002). Democracy became the antonym of the oriental, the despotic, the monotheistic: the Muslim, the Jew (Leonard 2012).

2015. Populist movements surge. Syriza in Greece, but also Golden Dawn; Podemos in Spain; Bernie Sanders in the US, but also Donald Trump. Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005) was the theoretical inspiration for both Syriza and Podemos (Hancox 2015). In this work Laclau, who died a few weeks before Podemos burst on the scene, agrees with Ranciere that what is at stake in politics is the principle of countability as such, but does not think that the implications are necessarily emancipatory. No political force is a pure excess, there is no democracy without a people, and there is no people without the name or the empty signifier that crystalizes a chain of equivalences where before there was only a multiplicity of demands. Only a movement involving an integration of demands, only a movement under a name that gathers that excess and constitutes a people, can exert political force. Since the "part that has not part" is neither essentially one nor a set of demands linked together by any inherent commonality other than exclusion, this name can serve its function only inasmuch as it is emptied of meaning, but no name is *purely* empty. Otherwise, we would have "a purely psychotic universe," a "pure floating without any partial fixation," and not a movement of the *demos* (Laclau 2005: 133). Instead, a heterogeneous mounting frustration against the status quo meets a particular demand that "acquires at some point an unexpected centrality, and becomes the name for something exceeding it, for something which it cannot control by itself but which, however, becomes a destiny from which it cannot escape" (120). This "something" is an absent fullness, the completeness that the social order lacks. The name that crystalizes a people can but need not be the name of a leader. Peron in exile, for example, when his word "lost none of its centrality, but the *content* of that word could allow for endless interpretations and reinterpretations" (216), became a name that constituted a people. The name and the people: not a formless excess or a form that contains all, but a couple that can never quite be one and can never quite be two.

In 1879, the young Sigmund Freud translated a volume of J.S. Mill's essays, including the latter's review of Grote's work, for German Hellenist Theodor Gomperz (Gay 1990). Freud, for whom Gomperz both a friend and a mentor, named the latter's *Greek Thinkers* as among his favorite books (Stok 2011). Gomperz's epistemological and political philosophy was profoundly shaped by Mill, and his conviction that he could find the origins of this philosophy in fifth century Athens was profoundly shaped by Grote (Weinberg 1963). For Gomperz as for Mill and Grote, Athens symbolized both the radical egalitarianism of direct democracy and the freedom of the mind from the shackles of religion and tradition. Never since Athens, wrote Gomperz, "has there been so complete a fulfillment of the conditions" laid down by J.S. Mill in his political writings (Gomperz 1905: I.I). The pinnacle of this period, for Gomperz, was represented by Pericles, whose memorable funeral oration shows us a life "bright and joyous, free from all vexation that comes of a fretful spirit" (Gomperz 1901: IV.I). Pericles and the *demos*. The name and the people.

In 1904, Freud and his brother Alexander made a trip to Athens. Freud recalled it in *The Future of an Illusion*, and again in a letter

written to Romain Rolland in 1936. In the former, he writes that "I stood for the first time on the hill of the Athenian Acropolis, between the temple ruins, looking out on the blue sea" and felt "astonishment mingled with my joy" (Freud 1961: 24). This astonishment "prompted me to say: then in reality is true, what we used to be taught at school!" Freud remarks that his belief in "the real truth" must have been "shallow and weak" as a youngster if he could be so astonished. In the letter to Rolland, Freud writes that "the person who gave expression to the remark ('So this really *does* exist, just as we learnt in school!) was divided, far more sharply than was usually noticeable, from another person who took cognizance of the remark" (Freud 1936: 240). One side of him was like someone who caught sight of the Loch Ness Monster, and the other side was astonished that this side had ever doubted Athens's existence. Freud has realized that the attribution of doubt to his younger self was a defense against this "feeling of derealization." This happens, Freud writes, when "we are anxious to keep something out of us." Freud concludes that his derealization resulted from guilt since "the very theme of Athens and the Acropolis in itself contained evidence of the son's superiority" to his businessman father for whom Athens "could not have meant much." Athens, for Freud, meant exiting the narrow confines of an uncultured and, it must be underlined, a Jewish identity and joining the secular *demos*. This exit was also a betrayal, so even as he stood at the center of Athens he could not believe in Athens. But was the Athens he beheld from the Acropolis really the Athens he had learned about, the Athens of Schiller, Grote, Mill, and Gomperz, the "fulfillment of the conditions" of secular Millian liberty? Did Freud ever stand in *that* Athens? Has anyone?

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud distinguishes illusion from error and from psychiatric delusion. An illusion may be but is not necessarily an error. It is not necessarily false. It is any belief motivated by the wish that it is true. A poor girl may wish that a prince will find her and take her home, and this may happen. The Messiah may come and usher in a golden age. But the belief of the poor girl and the belief in the Messiah are not compelled by evidence, they are compelled by the need that they be true. Evidence is simply irrelevant to them. This and this alone is what makes them illusions. Is the Athens Freud learned about in school, the exemplary democracy that hasn't been seen since but may be possible again in the future, an illusion? At the close of *Future*, Freud admits the possibility that in seeking a world free of the tyranny of religion, a secular democratic possibility represented above all by Athens, "I too am chasing after an illusion" (48). Standing on the Acropolis in 1904, his dead businessman father whispered in his ear, "this is not it; you are not there." At this moment in Athens, the desire for democracy, for the sheep free of the shepherd, confronts what Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) would call "the truth of history."

Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (2001) concerns a series of couples, one collective and the other emphatically not. There is the clan and the taboo object shared by the clan, the clan and the animal totem that binds them together, the erotic instincts and the ego, and, at the conclusion of the book and the end of the sociogenetic trail, the primal horde and its violent primal father. Ambivalence characterizes them all.

The taboo is respected not like a moral rule, but compulsively without reasons or attempts at justification. Taboos "impose themselves on their own account" (22) and, like the prohibitions of neurotics, they are "lacking in motive" and "puzzling in their origin" (31). At the same time, the taboo positively invites

transgression. The taboo object contaminates, rendering anyone who transgresses it taboo because the taboo has "the capacity for arousing temptation" so that examples of transgression "are contagious" (41). Eye contact with fellow clan members is avoided to the precise degree that they are objects of intense sexual longing. The dead are feared as hostile to the degree that their death uncovers a hostile satisfaction in those who loved them in life.

The totem is for Freud the taboo object *par excellence*, the source of taboo. The totem gives its name to the clan, and its members "commonly believe themselves to be actually descended from it" (121). The animal bearing the clan name cannot be killed or eaten. Members belonging to the totem cannot have sex with each other. The clan members identify with the totem, even making themselves resemble it. But for Freud, Robertson Smith's concept of the totem meal is oddly compelling - oddly because, as he states, "many authorities have refused to attach any importance to the totem meal because it was not supported by any direct observation at the level of totemism" (161). Freud claims to find it persuasive, however, because of the ubiquity of animal sacrifice in religions, including in so-called primitive religions which, according to the classification scheme that by which totemism would be the *most* primitive, point toward it. The totem feast also underlines the theme of emotional ambivalence that Freud develops in the chapter on taboo, and adds something new to it. The totem feast, being a *collective* ritual, involves an exceptionally aggressive transgression of a taboo attached to the very source of taboos for which no individual member of the clan must take responsibility (158). Thus, the emotional ambivalence attached to the totem becomes the occasion for sharing in a collective crime, a crime that is essentially social.

Freud's discussion of the third couple in his series occurs in a chapter on magic and animism sandwiched between the chapter on the taboo and the final chapter on the totem. Animism for Freud represents a bridge between magic and religion that is repeated in the passage from and complexification of primary narcissism. Magical practices are a product "human wishes" and "immense belief in the power of wishes" (97). Whereas the child satisfies wishes "in a hallucinatory manner" through "centrifugal excitations of their sense organs," the adult primitive adds to this "what might be described as motor hallucinations" (98). Both the child's hallucination and the primitive's magic lack "the psychical phenomenon of doubt" arising from "a tendency to repression" (Ibid). The world and thought perfectly conform to each other and thoughts are omnipotent. The animistic stage - a kind of theoretical systemization of magic - marks the beginnings of a gap between thought and reality (91) that widens in the religious stage, though hardly becoming a chasm (102). The gods, after all, can be influenced by religious acts.

The essence of narcissism is not hallucination but the one, the ego. As Jean Laplanche has observed, primary narcissism is not so much the ego turned back on itself as the latter's very constitution (Laplanche 1976). In the *Three Essay on the Theory of Sexuality* (SE VII: 125-245), Freud had argued that auto-erotism adds to the vital needs a hallucinatory auto-satisfaction that immediately follows the need for discharge, occurring independently of anything external that might satisfy it (173). What narcissism adds to auto-erotism is integration. In narcissism, "the hitherto isolated sexual drives have already come together into a single whole and have also found an object," which is the ego itself (103). This basic framework for this theory is already present in the 1895 *Project* (Freud 1954). There, "wishful states" are occasioned by the presence of a buildup of energy in the nervous system associated with vital needs and

stimuli on the surface of the body similar to those that previously facilitated discharge (383). The result is a compulsive bodily movement. The ego comes along as a relatively stable reservoir of constantly catheted neurons that binds flows of energy to itself (396), enabling the deferral of bodily movement through "lateral cathexis" (385). Thus, the ego functions primarily to inhibit the drives striving for discharge. The ego – itself a cluster of encoded memory traces with a history – and the drives form a couple that, like the other two we have discussed, involves one "partner" that is not one and another whose very function is to integrate the former and to inhibit its demands.

This couple too is plagued by ambivalence, accounting for the passage from magic to animism. That which makes the drives count as one is only partially successful. Its burden is to bind to itself "different impulses" all of which are "striving for omnipotence" (108). It cannot bind contradictory drives without tension. It must split, and part of it must be projected outside itself. In "On Narcissism," Freud focuses on the "wholly loveable ego I once was or will be," but in *Totem and Taboo* he suggests that "the firstborn spirits were evil spirits" (Ibid.), the aggressive impulse expelled from what must count as one. The ego ideal and the malevolent spirit are both derived from the child's (or the primitive's) ambivalent ego. This ambivalence "compels him to hand over some of his omnipotence to the spirits," which is a "first acknowledgement of Ananke," necessity. The ego's ambivalence, together with its derivation from the process of memory formation, suggests that something more primordial lies hidden in its history, something passed on like a tradition.

The entirety of *Totem and Taboo* leads up to the final couple, which reappears in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1961), and *Moses and Monotheism*. For Freud, this couple is not mythical but historical. It holds the key to the event of sociogenesis. In the primate horde, writes Freud, "the oldest and strongest male" is the father who can kill (145). He drives out his male children, the brothers. "One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father" (164), incorporating him into themselves (165). After their corporate crime, the affection for him that had been mixed with fear rose to the surface, provoking a "sense of guilt" (166). The dead father was stronger than the living one. The brothers "revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for the father" and instituted exogamy, creating the two fundamental totemic taboos (167).

Freud calls the result "the original democratic equality" (172). In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud calls the primal father's murder "the deed of liberation" (103). The granting of equal rights "to all members of the brother horde" is a "third law" alongside the two totemic prohibitions (Freud, 2001: 153), the sole prohibition that "ignores the father's wishes" (Ibid). Freud, then, would agree with Ranciere that democracy is ontologically prior to the political institutions through which command and obedience are distributed. It is the primal *social* mode of existence. But democracy rests on the sense of a common substance that transforms the primal horde into an erotically charged society of bodies with egos lodged inside of them, bodies haunted by a longing for the father.

Freud's conviction that democratic equality must always appear to itself as both liberation *and* crime prompts him, in *Group Psychology*, to reject Trotter's notion of the "herd instinct." For Trotter, the leader is an unnecessary postulate for explaining either guilt or the sense of a common substance. Speech, owing to "its aptitude for

mutual understanding in the herd," is sufficient and no father need be discerned in it (46). The herd instinct, augmented by speech, accounts for the "most generalized form of assemblage" of the *bion politikon*. "The herd is without a herdsman." Freud observes that (1) the child's anxiety is not alleviated by the approach of any random member of the herd, but only by that if its mother, (2) the initial reaction of the older child to the younger child is not one of solidarity or imitation but of jealousy, and (3) this reaction only yields to "mutual identification" and the demand for "equal justice" when the older child discovers that it cannot act on its hostility without damaging itself (47). Mutual identification is preceded by rivalry to occupy the place of the other of maternal desire – the empty place of the father. Freud's derivation of democratic equality from the primal couple, the father and the brothers, lies behind his observation in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that "the present cultural state of America" illustrates the "psychological poverty of groups" that is most threatening "where the bonds of society are chiefly constituted by the identification of its members with one another" (69-70). Where there is no leader to occupy the ambivalent place of the lost father, anxiety finds the rival in minimal differences that separate "us" from "them."

In *Group Psychology*, Freud admits that signifiers - ideas, abstractions, shared wishes – may substitute for a human leader. The "invisible head" of monotheistic religious groups is a "transitional stage" between that of the embodied leader incarnating the lost father and the populism of modern democratic regimes. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud argues that this transitional stage is most fully developed in Judaism, wherein the innovations of Moses, the Egyptian devotee of Aton who added the injunctions against graven images and against speaking the name, have produced a spirituality that simultaneously reveres the lost father and consigns him to oblivion. The cultivation of a radical monotheism, an asceticism toward name and image, and a sense of chosenness, represents a profound technique for managing humanity's founding trauma.

For Freud, Christianity's mutation of Judaism represents a regression. Christianity, to be sure, has a universal "democratic character" since "before Christ everyone is equal" with "an equal share in his love" (1922: 21). But precisely this universal equal love "in Christ" generates "extreme intolerance on the part of Christendom towards those who remained outside it," in marked contrast to the religious tolerance of the unloving pre-Christian Roman state (1961: 69). Given Christianity, the dream of universal brotherhood under the banner of a Germanic-Hellenic ideal with antisemitism as its complement is an unsurprising development. Freud's admiration for Athens, evident in his enthusiasm for Gomperz's work, his commitment to a social democracy with explicit links to 19th century philhellenism that he could not have missed, his frequent references to classical sources, and the intensity of the affect attached to the name Athens that culminated in his moment of derealization on the Acropolis, was tempered by an awareness that secular Hellenism was simultaneously Christian Hellenism.

In contrast to Judaism, Christianity incorporated and celebrated the Athenian tragic hero and his chorus. Tragedy is the only form of Greek theater that is specifically Athenian, specifically democratic. The tragic hero is "him who rebels against the father and kills him in some guise or other" (1939: 111). While the hero is a leader of sorts, he is a leader who is also one of many, whose voice is accompanied and challenged by the voice of the chorus, for Freud "the brother horde." The apostle Paul constructs his solution to the

dilemma of sociogenesis against this scene of universal democratic guilt. Paul, "a man with a gift for religion in the truest sense," inasmuch as he harbored "dark traces of the past" in his soul, knows that this crime against God is humanity's original sin, and that it can only be expiated through death. He transforms the judicial murder of the political-religious agitator Jesus into "a phantasy of expiation wherein a representative Son had sacrificed himself to remove from humanity once and for all the guilt of the murder of the Father (110). After this, the totemic feast becomes the communion meal where the believer incorporates the body and blood of this redeemer, partaking of this sacrifice and of the murder of the Father with guilt removed. In Christianity, the Son dethrones the Father and takes his place. His brothers share that throne with no need for reservation or loss. The Jews, charged with the murder of God or rather with denial of the murder of God, absorb the ambivalence from which the guiltless democracy of Christianity has washed itself clean. The *ekklesia* of Christianity, the church, speaks and ritually repeats the historical truth of the *ekklesia* of democratic Athens and shows the danger of regression that lies within it.

But what is this "historical truth?" It is not the material truth. As early as *Totem and Taboo*, Freud cites Andrew Lang's argument that the groups we call "primitive" are not peoples without a history and do not actually give us access to some earlier stage of human development. In *Moses and Monotheism*, he insists both that the historical event of sociogenesis is real, that humankind has a prehistory, and that "this history is unknown (that is to say, forgotten)" (101). Indeed, owing to the mechanisms of memory and forgetting, Freud tells us that we are in no position to arrive at truth of any kind directly. The intellect "has not shown itself - to be endowed with a very good scent for truth" or "displayed any special readiness to accept truth" (167). We accept and believe only "what - regardless of the truth - meets our wishes and illusions half-way." Just as the obsessions of the analysand form a pattern on the surface of which the lost truth is constructed, what we call "religion" is a network of obsessive gestures and speech that speak the truth of the social body. In both cases, the "historical truth" lies in these obsessive phenomena. What separates this "historical truth" from the symptoms themselves, from manifest religious doctrines and from the delusional content to which the analysand clings, is its power to short circuit narcissistic enjoyment and wish fulfillment. The "historical truth" is truth inasmuch as it delivers a narcissistic wound. Freud's insistence that his primal couple is historical truth, an insistence that he sustains against archaeological and ethnographic evidence, is all about this power.

And so, on the eve of an election in a country that endlessly tells itself how much it loves democracy, we are witnessing the uncertain outcome of what appears to be another populist moment. For some, this appears as a moment of danger from which we look to a regime toward which we harbor ambivalent feelings to protect us. For others, it may appear as a horizon that promises an absent fullness, the return of a lost greatness. If we listen to the voice of Freud, perhaps we can hear these two seemingly opposite affects animating us simultaneously. Of course, we will inevitably opt to approach that horizon or to flee from it into the arms of what Ranciere, following Foucault, calls the police. But regardless of the option we pursue, perhaps we can also stand for a moment with Freud on the Acropolis and notice that we cannot finally see what we see and we are not there where we are.

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