

## Psychoanalysis, Democracy, and Dialogism / *Psicanálise, democracia e dialogismo*

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### ABSTRACT

*Psychoanalysis (theory and practice) is alive and well in some parts of the world like France, Brazil, and Argentina, but in countries like Canada and the United States it struggles to survive as it competes with other kinds of therapies. Psychoanalysts in these latter countries have been seeking to understand why psychoanalysis is “under siege” and to invent new, more relevant clinical and theoretical approaches. “What kind of psychoanalysis contributes best to the creation of a democratic mind?” is a (political) question asked by some contemporary relational psychoanalysts. The objective of my article is to suggest some answers to this kind of question by exploring the lessons we might learn from the work of a few key thinkers: the members of the Bakhtin Circle, Freud, Derrida, and some relational psychoanalysts of today. Two underlying assumptions of my article are: 1) an agreement with Stephen Mitchell that the practice and theory of psychoanalysis should provide a better understanding of “the relational matrix that makes our individual consciousness possible”; 2) that the dialogic principle (as developed by Bakhtin, Tzvetan Todorov, and others) can help achieve this goal.*

*KEY-WORDS: Bakhtin; Freud; Derrida*

### RESUMO

A Psicanálise (teoria e prática) está viva e bem em algumas partes do mundo como, por exemplo, na França, Brasil e Argentina, mas em países tais como o Canadá e os Estados Unidos ela tem lutado para sobreviver uma vez que compete com outros tipos de terapias. Psicanalistas nesses últimos países têm procurado entender o porquê de a psicanálise encontrar-se 'sitiada' enquanto buscam formas novas e mais relevantes de abordagens clínicas e teóricas. “Que tipo de psicanálise contribui melhor para a criação de uma mente democrática?” é uma questão (política) indagada por alguns psicanalistas relacionais contemporâneos. O objetivo do meu artigo é sugerir algumas respostas para este tipo de questão, através da exploração das lições que nós podemos aprender com trabalho de alguns pensadores fundamentais: os membros do Círculo Bakhtin, Freud, Derrida e alguns psicanalistas relacionais de hoje. Duas hipóteses de meu artigo são: 1) um acordo com Stephen Mitchell, que a prática e a teoria da psicanálise deve fornecer uma melhor compreensão da “matriz relacional que torna a nossa consciência individual possível”, 2) que o princípio dialógico (desenvolvido pelo Bakhtin, Tzvetan Todorov, entre outros) podem ajudar a alcançar este objetivo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Bakhtin; Freud; Derrida

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## Introduction

Psychoanalysts, like their analysands, have always been preoccupied with the notion of change – or the lack of it. We assume that people go into therapy with a desire to change. Those who become psychoanalysts believe that people can change. Some people even become psychoanalysts because they believe – erroneously, in my view – that they can change people. The causes of change remain, however, something of a mystery both for me and my analysands. I hear questions like the following ones almost every day in my consulting room:

Does psychoanalysis work? If it works how does it work? Can analysis change me? I know I can't change my past failures. What depresses me most is that I'm not sure analysis will change me in the present or in the future. Probably not.

Here is another example of what analysands have said to me:

My therapy is not helping me. I don't know why I bother to come to see you four times a week. Maybe you're not a good analyst? It would be easier for me if you were a woman. It would be better if you were stupid or older and didn't listen to me so attentively. I know what's wrong with me. Repeating it here, over and over, is a waste of time. Before I came to therapy, I had all these problems. Now I still have them, plus the problems therapy creates for me.

Stephen Mitchell, probably the most important of the founders of relational psychoanalytic theory and practice in the United States, participated in a 1996 Forum on the topic of Dialogism in *New Literary History* and claimed that Tzvetan Todorov's work on Mikhail Bakhtin and the dialogic principle was useful in helping psychoanalysts better understand "(...) the relational matrix that makes our individual consciousness possible" (1996, p.40). My general objective in this article is to explore Mitchell's claim and to link this discussion to current debates on the value of psychoanalysis in contemporary democratic societies. In the first part of my article, as a way of providing a context for the specific discussion that follows, I survey very briefly some of the Bakhtin Circle's general positions on psychoanalysis and their understanding of historical immediacy. The second part of the article presents a hypothesis on Freud's position on psychoanalysis and democracy. The third section outlines some positions on psychoanalysis and democracy in the work of psychoanalysts who came after Freud. And in the final part of the article, I examine Jacques Derrida's prescriptive view of the role for psychoanalysis in contemporary civil societies. I conclude with some hypotheses about dialogism, psychoanalysis, and change. My article will probably not provide clear or simple answers to the kinds of questions about change that I hear in my clinical work. My discussion might help, however, to point in the direction of a *dialogic/democratic* approach to psychoanalysis, through which an understanding of "the *relational* matrix" of our "individual consciousness" becomes possible.

## 1 The Bakhtin Circle, psychoanalysis, and history

We know, in general terms, what Bakhtin and the members of his Circle thought about psychoanalysis. Ken Hirschkop, has pointed out that:

(...) independent work on both psychoanalysis and the philosophy of language was being pursued in the mid- and late 1920s [by Bakhtin and his friends]. Notes from the archive of I. I. Sollertinsky reveal the circle's plans for collectively produced works on psychoanalysis, and include the beginning of an article strikingly similar to the opening of the disputed text on Freudianism. (1999, p.139)

Hirschkop also reports that:

In 1924-25 the circle devoted time to study of the principal works of psychoanalysis, including not only works by Freud but also texts by Otto Rank and Ernest Jones; according to Bakhtin's own testimony, the member of the circle principally responsible for reviewing Freudian work was neither himself, nor Voloshinov, but Pumpiansky (1999, p. 161).

The members of the Bakhtin Circle believed that psychoanalysis ought to be taken very seriously, as this statement from *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* testifies: "Therefore, anyone wishing to comprehend the spiritual face of contemporary Europe more profoundly cannot ignore psychoanalysis: it has become too characteristic, too indelible a mark of contemporaneity" (quoted in Hirschkop:163, emphasis in original). In addition to underling its significance as a theory, the Bakhtin Circle members criticized and condemned psychoanalysis for its psychologism and biologism. Psychoanalysis represents, they argued,

"[...] theoretical reason which objectifies psychic life as a realm of physical drives"; splits "the field [it analyzes] into an objectivistic system of culture on the one hand, and, on the other hand, individuals whose actions relate to the system in a voluntaristic and contingent manner" (1999, p. 64).

Such a categorically negative assessment of psychoanalysis would seem to preclude a project like mine, which situates itself in a tradition that sees psychoanalysis as of potential benefit for individuals living in democratic societies. We perhaps need to remember that the Bakhtin Circle's critique of psychoanalysis could only have been based on Freud's early work and that we can never know, therefore, what they thought about Freud's studies from the 1930s in which his perspective and interests take a decidedly more social and historical turn. Bakhtin and his friends also focused their attention entirely on Freud's *theories* and wrote nothing about the *clinical practice* of psychoanalysis. My objective is not to debate the accuracy of the Bakhtin Circle's interpretation of psychoanalytic theory as they understood it. This would be an interesting project in itself. Rather, I am interested in the broader question of how Bakhtin's dialogic understanding of history and modernity might be connected to current debates about psychoanalysis and democracy.

In the context of discussing Bakhtin's notion of "historical worlds," Hirschkop gives a condensed account of Bakhtin's specifically dialogic manner of understanding modern historical events:

Bakhtin's implicit claim is that we fail to comprehend [the] power [of "empirical fear"] that might have been triggered by a political formation like Stalinism, or by that of [any other political formation], until we grasp these formations as historical worlds or frameworks in which events acquire a meaning and significance transcending their immediacy. (1999, p. 274)

For Bakhtin, democracy is essentially a "cultural-aesthetic" category, not primarily a political one (HIRSCHKOP, 1999, p. 274). The "lesson" from Bakhtin's work that can be useful for psychoanalysts, if I reformulate the quotation just given, is as follows: we stand a better chance of understanding the psychoanalytic events of the consulting room and the "relational matrix that makes individual consciousness possible" if we allow those events to acquire a meaning that transcends their immediacy. In other words, we must pay close attention to transference, countertransference, and the unconscious.

My other, underlying contention (or "lesson" from Bakhtin) is that, just as in the early works by Bakhtin (*Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, the *Author and Hero* essay), from his so-called neo-Kantian period, where we see an epistemological shift away from what could be called the "individual as isolate" (Mitchell's description of Freud's view of the psychoanalytic process) toward the category of "the social," so in later twentieth-century psychoanalysis, there has been a definitive movement away from the idea of a one-person psychology (as evidenced in some "ego psychology" and "self psychology" approaches to psychoanalysis) toward a relational model and a more socially and politically informed position (see section 3 below).

## 2 Freud, psychoanalysis, and democracy

In his 1915 essay on "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," Freud makes direct and indirect comments on matters relating to civil society. As many commentators have pointed out, the First World War had an intense impact on Freud and his theories. It is claimed by some that the development of the notion of the "death instinct" is linked closely to Freud's observations on the impact of the war during those tragic years. Freud writes: "We cannot but feel that no event has ever destroyed so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity, confused so many of the clearest intelligences, or so thoroughly debased what is highest" (2001, p. 275). Freud asks some very basic questions, like the following one, about how society might encourage moral behavior among its citizens (I am hypothesizing that 'moral' is perhaps a synonym for 'democratic' in Freud's way of thinking): "How, in point of fact, do we imagine the process by which an individual rises to a comparatively high plane of morality?" (2001, p. 281). He goes on in this same study to explain what he calls the "law of the ambivalence of feeling, which to this day governs our emotional relations with those whom we love most" (2001, p.293):

The most easily observed and comprehensible instance of [man's primitive impulses] is the fact that intense love and intense hatred are so often to be found together in the same person. Psychoanalysis adds that the two opposed feelings not infrequently have the same person for their object. (2001, p. 281)

Freud then reflects on what he observes in individuals and in society:

This extraordinary plasticity of mental developments is not unrestricted as regards direction; it may be described as a special capacity for involution – for regression – since it may well happen that a later and higher stage of development, once abandoned, cannot be reached again. But the primitive stages can always be re-established; the primitive mind is, in the fullest meaning of the word, imperishable. (2001, p. 286)

We see here the pessimistic trend in Freud's thinking that some later critics have chosen to emphasize above everything else. At the end of his essay, Freud draws a parallel between individuals and nations:

Having in this way once more come to understand our fellow-citizens who are so alienated from us, we shall much more easily endure the disappointment which the nations, the collective individuals of mankind, have caused us, for the demands we make upon these should be far more modest. Perhaps they are recapitulating the course of individual development and today still represent very primitive phases in organization and in the formation of higher unities. It is in agreement with this that the educative factor of an external compulsion towards morality, which we found so effective in individuals, is as yet barely discernable in them. (2001, p. 287-8)

Freud concludes by admitting his inability to understand the causes of war and the destructive impulses of nations: "It is, to be sure, a mystery why the collective individuals should in fact despise, hate and detest one another – every nation against every other – and even in times of peace. I cannot tell why that is so" (2001, p. 288). Some twenty years later, in his exchange of letters with Einstein in 1933, Freud was still uncertain about how a civilized, pacifist, and democratic society might be created:

And how long shall we have to wait before the rest of mankind become pacifists too? There is no telling. But it may not be Utopian to hope that these two factors, the cultural attitude and the justified dread of the consequences of a future war, may result within a measurable time in putting an end to the waging of war. By what paths or by what side-tracks this will come about we cannot guess. But one thing we *can* say: whatever fosters the growth of civilization works at the same time against war. (Freud's emphasis, 2001, p. 215, emphasis in original)

These quotations show that Freud does not make an easy or direct connection between psychoanalytic treatment and the development of democratic behaviors, but we can

assume that Freud saw psychoanalysis as “fostering the growth of civilization” and therefore as working against war.

Freedom, autonomy, choice, and creativity are the concrete democratic values that psychoanalysts (especially relational analysts) after Freud have emphasized (see section 3 below). The source of these values comes, in part, from the foundational ideas of Freud on how to preserve what “is precious in the common possessions of humanity.” By highlighting Freud’s thinking on war and related topics, I am also providing evidence that the Bakhtin Circle’s critique of psychoanalysis (specifically for its psychologism and tendency to see the relation between subjects and historical events as “voluntaristic”) is somewhat reductive and in need of revision. The Bakhtin Circle is correct when they characterize early Freudian psychoanalysis as placing emphasis on “psychic life as the realm of physical drives,” but they neglect to appreciate the extent to which Freud, in his later work, espoused a dialectical view of the role played by history in the lives of individuals. In the final section of this article, I turn to the work of Jacques Derrida whose ideas can be seen as a continuation of the spirit of what Freud wrote about war and destruction and who proposes a specific role for psychoanalysis in civil society.

### **3 Current debates around democracy and psychoanalysis**

The specific questions asked by my patients, quoted in my introduction, are connected to the broader debates that I hear in conferences organized by psychoanalysts. One of the strongest, contemporary positions on how psychoanalysis can play a positive role in democratic societies was formulated by Robert L. Pyles, President of the American Psychoanalytic Association, in a plenary address given at the association’s annual meeting in New York on November 25, 2000. He declares that: “Psychoanalysis today is under siege” (2003, p. 23). His position leads him to claim, as he scrutinizes psychoanalytic theories and attitudes, that: “(...) the persistence to the present day of this view of psychoanalysis – that it must exist in “splendid isolation” for the protection of its central tenets – seems to me the root cause of many of our current problems (2003, p. 25). He criticizes the so-called “managed care” model currently in place in the health care system of the United States. In describing how such a model came to be, Pyles states that: [“Business-men and insurance executives”] “articulated the assumption that underlies managed care – that if a diagnosis can [be] made on the basis of specific descriptive and symptomatic factors, the type, length, and cost of treatment can be accurately predicted and controlled.” Under such a system, the insurance company provides the insurance and decides “what care will be delivered” (2003, p. 30). Pyles is nevertheless optimistic and reports convincing evidence that psychoanalysts and their lobby groups have made significant progress in slowing down some of the negative impacts of the managed care model, especially those initiatives that affect privacy issues and patients’ ability to have some control over their health records. He predicts confidently that: “Managed care (...) will fail (...)” because it is “antithetical to the deep human need for choice and freedom” (2003, p. 35-36). If I extrapolate from this last statement, we can see that Pyles is making

an indirect connection between psychoanalysis and democratic values. Psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic institutions, in this view, provide individuals with an alternative to the values represented in the managed care model and help foster and protect two fundamental “needs” that are essential in democratic societies – a need to choose and a need to be free.

So what can psychoanalysis do in this regard? This is the simplistic version of a basic question that psychoanalysts have been asking for a long time. If we look for examples at earlier analysts and their views, we could cite disciples of Freud like Otto Fenichel, who believed that psychoanalytic treatment can foster freedom and independence of thought – values that are central to a democratic society: “A democratic society favors the ideals of independence, self-reliance, and active mastery. Societies in which “authoritarianism” and “democratic” elements are struggling will be contradictory in their ideals as well” (1945, p. 587).

A more specific question that interests me has been formulated by Marsha Hewitt, a psychoanalyst colleague who practices in Toronto and who agrees that there are democratic benefits in psychoanalytic treatment. She asks: “What form of psychoanalytic theory and practice contributes most to the cultivation of a democratic mind?” (2005:4). Hewitt explores the attitudes and ideas of some important critical theorists as they relate to psychoanalysis. She states that Habermas’ theory of communicative action neglects “the affective and emotional realities of the interlocutors in the communication community” (2005, p. 4). For Habermas and Hannah Arendt, the idea of “man” equals cognition, language, interaction. Hewitt points to a basic problem in such a view. Most critical theorists assume an *already* existing democratic mind that wants or desires to consider a plurality of perspectives without ever questioning this *a priori* position. Psychoanalysis, she argues, promotes an ability to imagine how the world looks from the other’s perspective and enhances an ability to hold feelings of dread, confusion, etc., when difference in the other is perceived and/or confronted. The liberal democratic model is problematical because it atomizes selves and assumes an individual’s autonomy. Relational psychoanalysis, in particular, promotes a participatory, cooperative, performative enactment of a democratic principle and, further, does not make the subject abdicate desire (2005, p. 7). Marsha Hewitt and Gary Rodin, in an unpublished paper, cite Donnel Stern, a prominent relational analyst, who defines the aims of psychoanalysis as follows:

[...] psychoanalysis is not a search for the hidden truth about the patient and the patient’s life; it is instead the emergence, through curiosity and the acceptance of uncertainty, of constructions which may never have been thought of before. (...) they are part and parcel of the new world patient and analyst are creating between them. (quoted in HEWITT AND RODIN, 2001)

Autonomy, freedom, creativity, choice – these are the values, the goals, or the “ends” that analysts, including Freud, have given for psychoanalytic treatment. They are also the values of democratic societies, as defined by the eminent theorists whom I have quoted. How can the debates of the critical theorists and the psychoanalysts be linked?

## 4 Derrida and psychoanalysis

Jacques Derrida, in addressing the “Estates General of Psychoanalysis” held in Paris in the year 2000, makes connections between psychoanalysis and socio-political issues – in other words, questions that are important in discussions about democracy. Derrida’s discussion here focuses on “cruelty” in modern society, a discussion that is connected to Bakhtin’s comments on “fear” and Freud’s analysis of the devastation brought about by war (see sections 1 and 2 above):

Psychoanalysis would perhaps not be the only possible language or even the only possible treatment regarding this cruelty that has no contrary term and no end. But “psychoanalysis” would be the name of that which, without theological or other alibi, would be turned toward what is most *proper* to psychical cruelty. Psychoanalysis, for me, if I may be permitted yet another confidential remark, would be another name for the “without alibi.” The confession of a “without alibi.” If that were possible. (KAMUF, 2002, p.240)

Derrida sees psychoanalysis as capable of undertaking enormously important social and political tasks:

As I see it, psychoanalysis has not yet undertaken and thus still less succeeded in thinking, penetrating, and changing the axioms of the ethical, the juridical, and the political, notably in those seismic places where the theological phantasm of sovereignty quakes and where the most traumatic, let us say in a still confused manner, the most cruel events of our day are being produced. (KAMUF, 2002, p. 244)

Derrida is urging psychoanalysts not only to find a way to participate in theoretical debates about the mutations that society is going through, they must do something about them. One of the most important mutations, according to Derrida, is “a mutation on the subject of the subject, of the citizen subject, that is, the relations among democracy, citizenship, and non-citizenship, in other words, the state and beyond the state. (KAMUF, 2002, p. 245). Derrida is talking about the theory and praxis of psychoanalysis: “One would venture to say that what should take place in a certain way at every analytic session is a sort of micro-revolution, preceded by some music from the States General chamber group, lending their voices to all the agencies and all the states of the social body or of the psychic body (KAMUF, 2002, p. 253). This is Derrida’s conclusion:

The task, which is immense and remains entirely to be done, both for psychoanalysts and for whomever, citizen, citizen of the world, or mega-citizen, concerned with responsibility (in ethics, law, politics), is to organize this taking account of psychoanalytic reason without reducing its heterogeneity, the leap into the undecidable, the beyond of the possible, which is the object of psychoanalytic knowledge and economy, in particular, of its mythological discourse on the death drive and beyond the principles. (KAMUF, 2002, p. 273)

The contrast between Derrida's language (psychoanalysis as a "leap into the undecidable") as and that of Robert Pyles (psychoanalysis should promote "the freedom to choose") is striking. But both are, in my view, on the same wave length, in the sense that they believe that psychoanalysis has the potential and the obligation to play crucial, revolutionary roles in democratic societies.

In my conclusion, I summarize the "lessons" learned from the thinkers whose ideas I have discussed and turn to the question that I posed at the outset – what kind of psychoanalysis can best contribute to the creation of democratic minds?

## Conclusion

What I have argued in this article is that there is agreement among several thinkers, some of whom are psychoanalysts and some who are theoreticians, as regards the role that psychoanalysis can play in modern democratic societies. Freud, in my reading of his work, emphasizes, among other goals for psychoanalysis, a moral, civilizing one, whereas Robert Pyles underlines the potential of therapy to help individuals develop democratic values like independence and the freedom to choose. Stephen Michell's view of psychoanalysis which I would call dialogic (thus I align it with the way the Bakhtin Circle and Tzvetan Todorov developed their ideas about history, alterity and language) is relational, in the sense that individual consciousness is understandable only within a "relational matrix" constituted by the "I" and "the other." Marsha Hewitt espouses a similarly relational position that sees the analyst and analysand as co-creating a world under conditions of uncertainty and in which desire is not abandoned. Derrida sees enormous potential in the power of psychoanalysis (knowledge and practice) to revolutionize contemporary debates about subjectivity and citizenship, especially in times of crisis. The distance between Freud and contemporary thinkers is, of course, enormous. Patricia Dailey and Alessia Ricciardi sum up the difference between Freud and Derrida as follows:

It is in the hiatus between knowledge and performance that we can locate what Derrida defines as the impossible, a dimension with which psychoanalysis must come to terms if it wants not only to survive but to be truly revolutionary. Against Freud's painstaking effort always to integrate ethics, law, and politics into an economy of what is possible and appropriable, Derrida insists on the importance for psychoanalysis of thinking the impossible and in particular of envisioning what lies beyond the pleasure principle, beyond cruelty and sovereignty. (2005, p. 475)

In a quotation that I have just given, Derrida points to the "micro-revolution" of the individual psychoanalytic session. What would such a session look like? Perhaps we can turn, for one possible answer, to Julia Kristeva's (dialogic and relational) formulation of the objectives of analysis (she is writing about the question of forgiveness):

One can imagine that the unforgivable can be forgiven in the way indicated in my example, not as an erasure but as a recognition of the suffering, the crime, and the possibility of beginning again. This is possible in psychoanalysis – even in the case of horrible crimes like murder and pedophilia – since this is a place where people who have had such experiences demonstrate the possibility for change, albeit sometimes temporarily and falsely. We can therefore accompany them in this movement of transformation and rebirth. (2001, p. 282)

The key phrases here, it seems to me, are “accompany” and “beginning again.” Equally important is Kristeva’s adherence to the important Bakhtinian principle that the events of the consulting room must be allowed to acquire a meaning that transcends their immediacy (see section 1). In other words, the struggle in psychoanalytic practice is to accompany the analysand and promote a sense of the self as “becoming” or as “coming to be”. The questions asked by my analysands that I quoted at the beginning of this article are symptoms of this difficult struggle. Relational analysts, as I have already pointed out, refer to the process as reciprocal, participatory, performative, and cooperative – a process in which democratic principles have the potential to be enacted. Here, in summary, is another contemporary, relationally and dialogically informed view of how selfhood (or identity) is produced:

[...] whether we exist in a close, distant, complementary, or adversarial relationship, self and other are always reciprocally constituted. As a result, one’s sense of identity is never simply a product of unmediated introspection, but is a synthesis of refracted self-appraisals, of elements of one’s self that are experienced and expressed in dialogue (and in conflict) with others. (BURSTON, 1996, p. 76)

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