Has the unconscious moved?

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The unconscious from the beginning

As Margetts said, almost since the dawn of civilization man has suspected that there exists a mental activity beyond our waking consciousness (Margetts, 1953).

This statement seems to be evidence of an interest that has always existed towards the "unconscious" components somewhere inside each individual and about which we are still questioning ourselves today in the attempt to shed a little more light on the many shadows that hang over our present and future existence.

Lancelot Law Whyte, author of the work *The unconscious before Freud*, writes that he still had not learnt that the great conquests are usually the culmination of a cultural process extending over centuries (Whyte, 1970). He therefore discovers that in contrast to what he had erroneously and innocently believed, Freud was not the inventor of the unconscious but the one who inherited and systematized a line of thinking and of research that we could call almost archaic.

This is not said for the purpose of belittling Freud's achievement, which would be absurd, but in order to show that a vast background of constant thought, by a great number of scholars in many countries, influenced and "unconsciously" sustained even the most original of thinkers.

It often happens, however, that this "vast background of constant thought" falls into oblivion. Trying now to retrace its history and report on it would take a long list of thinkers and thoughts; nevertheless, we shall try, very briefly, to mention the most significant contributions.

During the 17th century European philosophical thought was dominated by three interpretations of the nature of existence. *Materialism* treated physical bodies and their movements as the primary reality; *Idealism* believed that this reality was made up of the spirit, or mind; while *Cartesian dualism* postulated two independent realms: the *res cogitans* (mental) and the *res extensa* (material). The first two schools had no difficulty recognizing an unconscious part of the mind, though under other names. But for the Cartesian school, the recognition of the existence of unconscious mental processes was a steep philosophical challenge because it required the rejection of the original concept of dualism, in that it was a conception of two independent realms, material in movement and a mind necessarily aware. For Descartes' followers, everything that was not conscious in man was material and physiological, and therefore not mental. The first two schools, which were ready to acknowledge the unconscious mind, could not contribute much to the progress, since their monisms were both relatively powerless.

The discovery of the unconscious took about two centuries, from approximately 1700 to about 1900. The idea of unconscious mental processes was in many respects conceivable around 1700, was topical around 1800, and became effective around 1900, thanks to the efforts of a great number of thinkers, of variegated interests and from many countries. During these two centuries the existence of the unconscious mind was established; the discovery of its structure began only in the 20th century. There were numerous factors that led to this development in thought and in procedure, but the most important was the recognition that the facts do not support the hypothesis of the autonomy of consciousness.

The history of the discovery of the unconscious after Descartes shows a predominant *German* contribution in the field of systematic ideas, an *English* contribution in the empirical field and the typical *French* verbal caution combined with a certain subtlety; in fact, despite one or two important names, French thinkers contributed relatively little to the theoretical understanding of implicit processes.

From the 18th century onwards there was growing interest not only in the normal rhythms of consciousness (sleep, dreams, daydreams), but also in unusual or pathological states (fainting, ecstasy, hypnosis, hallucinations, drug-induced states, forgetfulness, etc.) and in the processes underlying ordinary thought (imagination, judgement, selection, diagnosis, interest, sympathy, etc.).

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For almost two centuries, from 1750 to 1950, many rationalists tended to regard the unconscious as the realm of irrational forces threatening the social and intellectual order established over generations by the rational consciousness. Day was challenged by Night, the light of reason by the storms and conflicts of intuition and instinct, man's soul by an inner spirit of temptation and surrender, dark and frightening but desperately attractive. For others, the unconscious was not simply the realm of chaos, conflict and destructive passions, but also the source of all the forms of order created by the human imagination since the first and most extraordinary success in man's formation: the invention of language.

Systematic research into the unconscious and psychic dynamism is relatively recent. However, if we go back to the origins of dynamic psychotherapy, we see that it can be connected to a series of precursors and antecedents. Some medical and philosophical teachings of the past, some ancient methods of healing offer surprising hints of those discovered concerning the human mind which we would tend to attribute to a more recent period. For many years the descriptions of cures practised among primitive peoples by shamans, witch doctors, medicine men, etc., were regarded as the domain of historians and anthropologists. Witch doctors were believed to be superstitious, ignorant individuals, capable of curing only those patients who would have recovered spontaneously anyway. Today the attitude is different, and not as negative. Based on exhaustive demonstrations, historical and anthropological research shows that among ancient populations there were many methods in existence which, though in different forms, are used today by modern psychotherapy. It is therefore not only anthropologists and historians who have an interest in studying primitive healing techniques, in that they are the root which, after a long evolution, gave rise to psychotherapy. One of the first scientists to recognize the scientific importance of primitive healing was the German anthropologist Adolf Bastian (1826-1905).

A little-known figure, *C. A. Crusius* (1715-1773), philosopher and theologian, was the link between the first thinkers emphasising cognitive aspects and the thinkers whose fundamental interest was the unconscious mind as the seat of the passions. Crusius divided the faculties of the soul into two classes: those of thought and those of the will. In his view, consciousness was the inner faculty of feeling, and external perception could occur without involving this inner consciousness.

Kant (1724-1804) suggested that the creative activities of the genius were guided by an unconscious "purpose".

Between 1775 and 1800, the study of the human personality by doctors was breaking new ground; this was the beginning of a movement that laid the foundations of 19th and 20th century medical psychology.

F.W.J. von Schelling (1775-1854), the representative of the German school of *Naturphilosophie*, is of great significance in that he was a link in the chain of thinkers leading from Boheme's mysticism to Freud's protoscience. For Schelling the unconscious nature is the potential mind, intelligence in development. The unconscious nature becomes conscious of the Self. Consciousness is a secondary phenomenon due to the conflict of subject and object. A single unconscious formative energy lies at the basis of everything and reveals a movement towards consciousness.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the idea of the unconscious mind took two main directions which can be considered separately, although some thinkers followed both of them. The *first direction* continued the scientific examination of detailed facts, approaching unconscious mental processes with caution: from above, as it were. This was the direction taken by thinkers like Leibniz, Kant, Wundt, Fechner and many others who contributed to the so-called "inductive" school.

The *second direction* presented philosophers who tried to identify in a single stroke the character of all unconscious processes, in nature as a whole and in the human mind (both individual and collective). The most important examples in the area of philosophy are Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

They were anti-classical, anti-European and anti-Enlightenment, because they rejected the progressive advance of knowledge thanks to careful discrimination, postulating instead dynamic universal principles by means of which the conscious person could identify himself and his emotions and from which every other thing could be deduced. For them the apparent clarity of analytic thought took second place to a dynamic of feeling. The disputes between the two schools were full of quibbles, because both viewpoints were indispensable.

The research from 1850 to 1880 was mainly exploratory and educative, a further step away from the general context of speculation and philosophy of the first period towards the later specialized quasi-scientific methods of thought and enquiry.

The creation of a relatively banal term may signal a new direction in thinking, and *W. B. Carpenter* (1813-1885), English doctor and naturalist, is remembered today for coining in 1853 the expression "unconscious celebration": an unconscious reflex action of the brain, or a process of modification of the brain, of which only the results enter the consciousness. This term attracted physicists and physiologists because it stressed the activity of the brain and offered the promise of a monistic interpretation, yet to be discovered. For Carpenter, the fact that the doctrine was expressed in metaphysical and physiological terms, in terms of the mind or in terms of the brain, had no practical consequences, provided it was recognized as having a positive scientific basis.

G. T. Fechner (1801-1887), the German psychologist, exerted a strong influence through his contributions to psychophysics, his work on the threshold of consciousness (he compared the mind to an iceberg most of which was submerged and moved by hidden currents as well as by the winds of awareness) and through his conceptions of mental energy, of a topography of the mind, his principle of pleasure-displeasure and his principle of constancy (the universal tendency towards a regular, stable form).

W. M. Wundt (1832-1920), the German physiologist, developed Fechner's ideas between 1860 and 1880, and argued that we become conscious of our activities mainly through resistance and conflict, that is, when there is frustration.

F. Nietzsche (1844-1890), never doubted that the mind was the instrument of unconscious vitality, and invented the term "Id" to define the psyche's impersonal elements subject to natural law, which Freud took up on Groddeck's suggestion.

From the beginnings to the Freudian unconscious

In his work on the Unconscious (1915), Freud specifies that the contents of the unconscious are made up of representations of drives. They are structured in an imaginary plot, composed both of fixed patterns and traces of personal experience.

In the unconscious the intensity of investment is particularly mobile: one representation can surrender its investment (shift) to another or appropriate the investment of several representations (condensation). The characteristics of the unconscious are: the absence of reciprocal contradiction, primary process, investment mobility, a-temporality and substitution of external reality with psychic reality. In themselves, unconscious psychic processes are unknowable but can be reconstructed through their derivatives (dreams and symptoms first of all). This reconstruction can be carried out through psychoanalysis, which allows the understanding of fragments of experience which would otherwise be meaningless.

Psychoanalysis therefore represents the science of traces, made possible by the principle of psychic determinism which denies any fortuity in the psychic realm, and links all our acts in a strict chain of association. By bringing the unconscious back to the realm of intelligibility, psychoanalysis manages to achieve effects of truth and therefore of change.

To capture the enormous importance of Freud's insight, we must remember the psychic determinism hypothesis and of course the importance of the dynamic point of view. Freud explicitly introduced the dynamic point of view in dealing with unconscious mental processes, in the second of the "Five conferences on psychoanalysis" held in the USA in 1909. The author states that our psychic apparatus is divided into zones. This division is to be attributed to the play of conflicting psychic forces. Initially, Freud argues that the dynamic forces in any conflict derive solely from the area of drives. In other words, the conflict within the individual is between incompatible drives: those of the Ego, which opposes those of a sexual nature and their free expression (conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle). Sex drives push to become conscious but their content is unacceptable for the consciousness, which is therefore forced to censor and repress them. Notice that dreams (the primary way of reaching the unconscious) and symptoms representing sex drives, though manifesting themselves as derivatives, are still capable of reaching the consciousness, leading to the failure of repression (which should have the task of blocking the

road to drives). In other words, Freud not only claims that all the phenomena that occur in our mind have their roots in the unconscious, but that the content and the nature of the unconscious (desires, fantasies or, as Freud says, representations of drives) are incompatible with the waking consciousness (this is the sense of censoring and repression).

As can easily be imagined, it emerges that for Freud psychic events always have a meaning in that they are the expression of unconscious desires of a sexual nature, which are prevented from becoming conscious. Moreover, these desires are manifested from infancy, which confirms that mental life (another of Freud's insights) is characterised by a deep, underlying continuity.

From the Freudian unconscious to the collective unconscious

It is to one of Freud's students, Jung, that we owe a re-elaboration of the psychology of the unconscious of extraordinary importance. Jung hypothesized that along with personal memories, in every individual there are great original images, the inherited powers of the human imagination, unchanged since the beginning of time. Jung does not consider representations as such, but the possibility of representation. What is represented? Or what are we capable of representing? Elements, legendary motifs, in other words, images.

So it is that for Jung in treatment there may be the reproduction of fantasies not deriving from personal memories but manifestations of the deepest state of the unconscious, where there lie dozing the original shared images of all humanity, called archetypes by Jung, which then go to construct the collective unconscious which differs in content from the personal unconscious.

Archetypes are the archaic images that belong to all humanity, which are made manifest for individuals in dreams and fantasies and, at a collective level, in myths, fairytales and works of art. The unconscious, in this sense, has two levels: the personal and the collective. The personal unconscious contains memories that are lost or repressed because they are painful, while the collective unconscious goes back to original images, to humanity's more general, more ancient forms of representation. Therefore for Jung the unconscious does not just contain personal elements but also collective, impersonal ones in the form of inherited categories, or archetypes.

From the collective unconscious to the social unconscious

While Jung proposed a new way of conceiving the unconscious, from our point of view a real Copernican revolution arrived with the creation of group analysis.

The consideration of more social, collective components begun by Jung, found in Foulkes a continuation and systematization of great importance and prestige.

As Brown and Zinkin write in the introduction to The psyche and the social world (1994), group analysis is an attempt to extend psychoanalysis — in which the focus is on the inner world of the individual patient — to a very different conception of the individual as a being in dynamic interaction with others, in various types of social grouping.

Foulkes introduces another way of considering the role of the society and therefore of the external world. Foulkes argues that as group-analysts we do not share the psychoanalytic juxtaposition of an "inner" psychological reality and a physical or social "outer" reality, which for psychoanalysis makes sense. What is inside is out, the "social" is not external but much more internal, and it penetrates the innermost essence of the individual personality (Foulkes, 1973).

For Foulkes, therefore, the external world permeates and impregnates all the psychological structures of the single individual who will end up not only inhabiting it but also being inhabited by the social realm which every day he will traverse, attributing intentions to its behaviour, attitudes, thoughts, actions, dreams, etc.

Thanks to the work of Foulkes (and of all the authors who followed him) group analysis became the protagonist of an epistemological advance of great depth and power concerning the knowledge and the treatment of man, putting an end to the classical antinomies between mind and body, internal and external, nature and culture, the group and the individual.

Foulkes writes that each individual is essentially and inevitably determined by the world in which he lives, by the community, by the group, of which he is a part. The old contrast between the external

and the inner world, nature and nurture, individual and society, fantasy and reality, mind and body, cannot be maintained (Foulkes, 1948). This new way of seeing the social aspect as something that traverses and permeates the individual's inner world, has obviously served to break the ground for the possibility of rethinking and re-systematizing the major theories on the unconscious.

Foulkes starts from the distinction between "social unconscious" and "Freudian unconscious" placing the latter in the Id. He abandons the idea of a conflict between drives (biological aspect) and consciousness (cultural aspect), since the Freudian Id itself is cultured, and has a social component. Unlike the Freudian unconscious which is both repressed and unconscious, the social unconscious postulated by Foulkes is unconscious (being beyond consciousness) but not repressed. It is not determined by heredity or biology, but by experience.

In a sense, in stating that the unconscious is structured from the outside, Foulkes seems to be approaching Lacan's idea that the unconscious is structured by language (which is still something external).

From Foulkes to Hopper

In Foulkes's tracks we find Hopper with his construct of the social unconscious. Strictly speaking, the concept of the social unconscious is neither Foulksian, nor Hopperian (just as the traditional concept of the unconscious was not formulated for the first time by Freud, as we have said) but Foulkes and Hopper were able to offer a brilliant systematization of this concept in a psychological key.

Originally, in fact, the concept of the social unconscious had its roots in sociology (Durkheim, Weber, Marx), in anthropology (Le Vine), in dramaturgy (Austen, Roth), and in social psychoanalysis (Fromm, Horney), but found an interesting theoretical elaboration with Earl Hopper who attempted to study the profound interconnections between social systems and mental systems.

Hopper, in direct opposition to some of the constructs belonging to the psychoanalytic doctrine, was extremely interested in how far and in what way social systems condition (in this case the word conditioning is not meant as an inhibition, limitation or brake, but also as facilitation, development and transformation) people and their inner worlds and, at the same time, in what way fantasies, thoughts and unconscious feelings have a decisive effect on social systems (Falgares & Di Maria, 2002; Falgares, 2003). Hopper (2003) introduced in this way the concept of *social unconscious*, to refer to the existence and the conditioning exerted by social, cultural, relational, communicational mechanisms, of which people are unaware but which have a profound effect on their existence.

It should be pointed out that the unawareness derives from the fact that individuals do not recognize (they deny) these mechanism and do not consider them at all problematic, insofar as they are not examined with the proper detachment and objectivity. This is obviously a hypothesis of great importance especially at the level of clinical treatment, since it shifts the therapist's fundamental interest to the here and now, leaving fantasies, desires and memories connected to the patient's childhood in the background.

In Hopper's view, whoever is involved in individual or group clinical activity cannot disregard the social unconscious. It can be considered a real "therapeutic error" to focus attention only on the psychological context of the patient, neglecting the social context and its effects. As Di Maria and Falgares recalled (quoting the view of Carli, 2004, p.107) in the previous issue of this journal: " […] this makes us very critical towards the models of psychotherapy (actually only a few) that are still victims of the classic individualist stereotype, "that leads to considering the behaviour of the single person, his belief system or his motivation as if the single person characterised by all these variables exists *independently of the context in which he lives*" (Carli, 2004, p.107).

Among the merits that must certainly be recognized in thinkers like Foulkes and Hopper there is that of having been able to move in the ambitious, fascinating direction of linking (in a non-causal way) individual events, the unconscious, to the microrelational spheres, such as the family, in turn linked to the macrorelational spheres of organizations/institutions, of culture and of *politics.*

And it is precisely the idea of politics, its effect on men's psychic life, that opened up a new field of enquiry which we shall now consider.

The proposal put forward by scholars like Foulkes and Hopper concerned the possibility of making a clinical-psychological reading of the dynamics at work in psychopolitical groups and their effect on the individuals that are part of them; in this sense, the intention was to lay the foundations for an understanding of the connection between group processes, political dynamics and psychic life.

The English movement, for instance, at times running the risk of falling into the so-called "deterministic trap", has long investigated, from a "group standpoint", the role of social factors in the unconscious psychic life of individuals (probably in the attempt to free themselves from psychoanalysis, which saw political and social facts as being interpretable through the classical individualist standpoint).

But it is above all to the Palermo school (Di Maria, 2000) that we owe the in-depth investigation of this area, carried out with the contributions of clinical, social and community psychology. Fiore (1994), for example, argues that "politics is not a phenomenon with an origin and a life of its own, but an epiphenomenon, a product of the human mind, which is why it bears the indelible signs of the inner history of those involved in it" (p. 49). According to this view, the human being is conceived as the producer of culture and is part of a context that is external and internal to him. In spite of the pressure to submit exerted on him by the environment, man responds with a strong motivation to transform the environment; this motivation is the foundation both of political behaviour and of the propensity to be with other human beings (politics as a sign of man's social nature).

Di Maria (1991) tried to interpret political phenomenology as the realization of a transpersonal process; in fact, while on the one hand it originates from the way people see their relationships, on the other, politics is internal and external to people. The idea therefore becomes that of conceiving politics as a mental space open to the faculty of designing, conceiving and actualizing transformations of the status quo.

We recall that Franco Di Maria and Gioacchino Lavanco, in some articles of 1991, began to hypothesise a sixth level of the transpersonal[1] called political-environmental concerning the particular relation between the subject and the context of which he is part and in which he lives. The icon chosen to symbolize this level is the Greek polis, the city states which constantly enliven their existence in the shared space for discussion, exchange and participation involving all the members of the community, the agorà. (Di Maria, 2005). Like everything that is transpersonal, also politics, as we have already said, is simultaneously internal and external to the individual and at various levels affects the life of groups and organizations. Politics is produced by the culture and at the same time is a producer of culture.

Here we propose to use the name "political unconscious" for the inner place in our psyche, not immediately accessible and vistable, in which political events (the term 'political' is meant in its original etymological meaning: from the Greek polis) find an immediate lodging.

Trying to explore or reveal this unconscious place, not immediately visible or visitable, entails being able to look "inside oneself". It is no coincidence that we talk about discovery (in the sense of removing the cover) or of revelation (removing the veil) insofar as we believe that through some derivatives of the unconscious (dreams, unfulfilled acts, slips of the tongue), the unconscious may reveal itself and appear in all its brilliance.

But the actors who play in our private theatres, who come to visit us in our dreams, are no more than the characters that act and inhabit our everyday theatres, our lives, our working environments, with our family and friends, characters that pass to and fro between inside and outside. Therefore as psychotherapists or workers on the unknown, as soon as we see the "outside" we already know something about the "inside." On the "outside", however, there are not only the people who are part of our life; there are also the events that we read in the papers or that we see on television and that inevitably end up getting access and burrowing into our inner world.

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[1] Let us briefly recall, for the sake of clarity, the five levels of the transpersonal postulated by group analysis research: 1) bio-genetic, 2) ethno-anthropological, 3) transgenerational, 4) institutional, 5) socio-communicative.

Think for instance of how our dream world has changed since the destruction of the Twin Towers and the great resonance this collapse has had in our internal landscape; research has shown, in fact, that since 9/11 many individuals (particularly Americans) have started to dream more often of planes, crashes and death.

To use a metaphor, we could say that tsunamis do not just flood the spaces outside where we live but also the spaces that live inside us.

Research summary

In order to try and provide a practical-clinical translation of the theoretical concepts put forward so far, we will conclude by briefly reporting on a research project[2] already published in other works (cfr. Di Maria, 2001; Di Maria & Lavanco, 2002).

In the light of what has been said, the questions posed in the research were: how does the outside world interact and become in inner part of the internal world, changing the geography and the contents of our unconscious? What effects do socio-political macro-transformations have on the inner world, and therefore on the group-analytic group, in the sense of the place where the (invisible) inner world becomes visible?

The hypothesis was that the analysis group undergoes an emotional/cognitive effect due to profound macrostructural transformations.

Two groups of analytic therapy were therefore observed for three years to record the influences on subjective experience (specifically on dreams) of the marked national and/or international socio-political changes (such as third world immigration) and how these events came to determine new ways of emotionally and cognitively conceiving the Other, the diverse, the extraneous.

In the first year of observation, through a preliminary qualitative analysis of the observation protocols of about fifty sessions of group analysis, it was found firstly that these events led the transpersonal level defined as political-environmental to become visible; this level is closely connected to the environmental climate triggered by group processes.

It should also be underlined that in the three years of the duration of the research, the groups observed experienced two major macrostructurtal transformations. The first was connected to the phenomena of immigration and the confrontation with the diverse; the second to the dynamics of *feeling mafioso,* a mode of mental saturation through monistic, non-reflective codes; feeling *mafioso* underwent a profound change following the 1992 bloodshed, which broke into the analytical setting with great force.

The fact that the political realm broke into the psychotherapeutic setting made it possible to explore some salient nodes in the interpsychic and intrapsychic relations, in particular concerning a theory of mind from the group standpoint. The psychotherapeutic setting, being an anthropologically grounded space in which conditions of mental suffering are actualized, is the space in which the patient can re-read his emotional dynamic of deconstructing a state of mental saturation towards an idea of change.

Revelatory indicators of these processes in the analytic groups observed can be considered some dreams which we report below as evidence of the break-in, leaving the process of signification open.

1) A thirty-five year old Sicilian teacher, having emigrated and returned to her hometown, dreams she has joined the "Northern League" (*Lega*) in the south. In her dream the League ties (*"Lega"*) her up with ropes, forcing her to renounce her southern identity, and creating a mixture of pain and pleasure for the lost identity ("I won't be Sicilian any more", comments the patient);

2) A young doctor dreams he is Sciascia, in conversation with Totò Riina. The mafia boss criticises him for writing *The Day of the Owl*. When a member of the group asks him to explain the reason for this criticism, the architect explains that he too, at least once in his life, has accepted the

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"collusive" distinction offered by Sciascia of a society where one can tell real men from stupid useless men;

3) A young woman brings to the group a dream of a gypsy who steals her gold chain; the gypsy is her mother who then dies, while the young bride goes on to dream of the arrival of a young black man with an axe in his chest which he cannot remove and which ends up seriously wounding him.

The dreams described seem to show that the unconscious (which takes shape through dreams) is strongly influenced by the political climate experienced. It follows that the political-environmental transpersonal sphere, being connected to the environmental (of the "there and then") intermeshes (in the "here and now" of the group) with the changes, transformations, and catastrophes caused by political and social events. It is enough to think of the enormous changes in politics: the collapse of the communist regimes in eastern Europe, the war in ex-Yugoslavia, the massive phenomena of immigration, the Albanian exodus, etc, as well as the anthropological macrophenomena: mafia, camorra, corruption, the bribes scandal (*'tangentopoli'*), etc.

All these events are present not only in the worldly space, but also in the dreams, fantasies, and associations concerning psychopathology and psychic suffering (phobias, obsessive syndromes, persecution fantasies, etc.).

Exploring and attributing sense in terms both of an individual subjectivity and of a collective subjectivity can restore the meaning of the *Polis* (both intrapsychic and interpersonal). This meaning is no longer a totem but a project, modifiable, the result of subjective creative construction, and no longer manipulated and imposed by the subjectivity of the strongest, by a mysterious, omnipotent Other, extraneous and coercive.

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