Contexts

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POLITICS INC.
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A leap into the void is perhaps, nowadays, the only truly necessary gesture. To leap into the void with the calm of someone who has carefully dressed up in suit and tie, with the ironic certainty of someone who knew that one day this hour would come in its brute necessity, that now there is nothing else to do. Art has tried for decades to push the limits of the possible in various ways, but it should have tried to jump into the void more. For, as Yves Klein said, 'I believe that fires burn in the heart of the void as well as in the heart of man."[1] It is not a question of walking towards the void like one would when invited to the calm shelter of an ataraxia session. It is a question of remembering that the void has never been nor will be inert. Only a bad metaphysics that believed that nothing could be created out of nothing, that was daunted by the eternal silence of the infinite spaces, could be so wrong. In the same way that silence is only an ineffective conceptual abstraction, the void is merely the place in which we find nothing. A determined nothingness, however, as Hegel would rectify. For, perhaps, the question is not where that which cannot be found is, but whether one should stop looking for what will never be revealed to those who only let themselves be affected in a paralytic way. For the policemen who were looking for the purloined letter, the Minister's house was always empty, even if the letter was there. As everyone is well aware, a leap into the void is not for policemen. Unfortunately, there are too many policemen these days, even in philosophy.

Klein's photograph shows something of the desire to fly – with open arms, his chest lifted, looking up to the sky like one who believes he can fly. Yet we have always been told that flying is impossible. Since childhood we have tried and, since childhood, we have discovered our impotence. Even if it's not widely known, perhaps the only real function of art is precisely to make us pass from impotence to the impossible. It's to remind us that the impossible is only the regime of existence of what could not present itself within our current situation, although it does not cease to produce effects just like any other existing thing. The impossible is the place we never tire of walking to, especially when we want to change our situation. Everything we really love was once impossible.

However, as the enemy says, nothing is for free. Whoever touches the impossible pays the price. The ground awaits us, the accident – a break as sure and certain as the hardness of the tarmac. One can only imagine Klein's sardonic laughter after hearing such an objection. As if to say: but this is exactly what art, in its political force, exists for, to let bodies break. If we loved our bodies as they are, with their definite affects and their inviolable integrity, with their health to be compulsively preserved, there would be no art. There are moments in which bodies need to break, to decompose, to be dispossessed so that new circuits of affects might appear. Fixated with the integrity of our own body, we do not allow it to break, to unlearn its current form so that it may, at times, find itself recomposed in an unexpected manner.

A leap into the void was the way, so proper to Klein's singular historical-political consciousness, of placing himself on the threshold of a time blocked by the compulsive repetition of a stunted sensibility. If this atrophy has reached our language so

Previous page: Klein Yves, *Leap into the Void*, 1960, © Succession Yves Klein c/o ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022, Shunk-Kender © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

completely that it prevents us from imagining alternative figures, if we have had the experience, that Nietzsche described so well, of never letting go of God as long as we believe in grammar, then it's time to head towards the fundament, and hit the ground (if I was speaking in German, I would make a well-known dialectical pun about this heading towards the fundament). It's a bit like what Schoenberg used to say to Cage: 'You compose like someone who bangs his head against the wall.' To which the only possible answer was: 'Then I'd better beat my head until the wall breaks.'

Thus, with these impossible and necessary gestures, a gap opens on the imperceptible, on what Klein once accurately called 'immaterial sensibility'. This is the sensibility that causes us to be affected by what seems to have no possible materiality, but which simply disarticulates the grammar of the field of determination of present material existence. A speedy slowness, a time without duration or instant, a subject that transmutes into an object of painting, anthropometries that do not serve to measure anything, monochromatic repetitions that are exactly the same, industrially identical, but with different values. As if to say: what does value really determine and singularise? As if to say: 'French people, just make one more effort to reach the point of generalised indistinction of value, that zone of indiscernibility that makes worlds collapse and show us that we no longer need the support of a world.' Just one more effort to rid ourselves of what stunts our ability to think. Just one more gratuitous and impossible leap into the void of a suburban street.

FEAR, HELPLESSNESS AND POWER WITHOUT A BODY

> My mother gave birth
> to twins:
> myself and fear.
>
> – Thomas Hobbes

We generally believe that a theory of affects would not help us clarify the nature of the impasses of sociopolitical bonds. In fact, we accept that the dimension of affects concerns only a subject's individual life, while the understanding of problems linked to social bonds would require a different perspective, capable of describing the structural functioning of society and its spheres of values. Affects would take us to individual systems of fantasies and beliefs, thus making it impossible to understand social life as a system of rules and norms.[2] Such a distinction would not only be a fact-based reality, but a legal necessity. For when affects enter the political scene, they could only imply the impossibility of guiding one's conduct based on rational judgments, which are universalisable since based on the search for the best argument.[3]

Nevertheless, one of the richest points of Sigmund Freud's intellectual experience is the insistence on the possibility of overcoming such a dichotomy. Freud never tires of showing us how fundamental a rethinking of the affects is in the sense of a systematic consideration of the way in which social life and political experience produce and mobilise affects that will function as a general basis for social adhesion. Reminding us of the need to develop a social reflection that starts from the perspective of individuals, he did not content himself with accusations of 'psychologism' nor with systemic-functional descriptions of social life. It could not be otherwise for someone who insisted that: 'For sociology, which

deals with the behaviour of men in society, can be nothing other than applied psychology. Strictly speaking, indeed, there are only two sciences, psychology – pure and applied, and natural science.'[4] Yet, instead of seeing subjects as utility-maximising agents or as the mere calculating expression of rational deliberations, Freud prefers to understand how individuals produce beliefs, desires and interests out of certain circuits of affects when they justify, to themselves, the need to acquiesce to a norm by adopting certain types of behaviour and repeatedly refusing others.

The Freudian perspective is not, however, only the expression of a desire to describe social phenomena from the intelligibility of their affects. Freud wants also to understand how affects are produced and mobilised to block what we would generally call 'emancipatory expectations'. Indeed, the psychic life that we know, with its modalities of conflicts, suffering and desires, is the product of different circuits of affects. On the other hand, the very notion of 'affect' is inseparable from a dynamic of imbrication that describes the alteration produced by something that seems to come from outside and that is not always constituted as an object of representational consciousness. For this reason, it is the basis for understanding both the forms of sensitive instauration of psychic life and the social nature of such instauration. A fact that shows us how, since the origin: 'the socius is thus in the Ego.'[5] To be affected is to establish [instaurar] psychic life through the most elementary form of sociability, that sociability which passes through aisthesis and which, in its most important dimension, builds unconscious bonds.

Such capacity to establish affects has major political consequences. This is because both the overcoming of psychic conflicts and the possibility of political experiences of emancipation ask for the consolidation of an impulse towards the mutation of affects, an impulse towards the capacity to be affected in another way. Our subjection is affectively constructed, it is affectively perpetuated and can only be overcome affectively, through the production of another *aisthesis*. This leads us to conclude that politics is, in essence, a mode of producing a circuit of affects,[6] in the same way as the clinic, especially in its Freudian matrix, seeks to be a device for the deactivation of modes of affection that sustain the perpetuation of determined configurations of social bonds. In this sense, the Freudian interest in social theory is not the result of a desire to build highly speculative theories on anthropogenesis, the theory of religions, the social origin of moral feelings and violence. Rather, Freud is driven, in his own way, by a quest of the psychic conditions for social emancipation and a strong theory regarding the sensible nature of its blockages.

On the other hand, in trying to understand the modalities of the social circulation of affects, Freud privileges the vertical relations typical of bonds with authority figures, especially paternal figures. It is basically these types of affects that establish psychic life through processes of identification. It could not be otherwise for someone, like Freud, who saw in this very peculiar form of empathy (*Einfühlung*) called 'identification' the foundation of social life.[7] The privilege that Freud accorded to these vertical relations has been the object of criticism coming from the most diverse traditions.[8] For, it seems, instead of accounting for the impact of the autonomisation of spheres of value in modernity and their modes of legitimation, Freud would have preferred to describe

processes of social interaction that never concern, for example, the ties between members of society in horizontal relations, but only their relation with the higher authority of a leadership figure or the relations between members mediated by the highest instance of power. It would seem as if subjects had always a direct relationship with personalised instances of power, as if sociopolitical relations were to be understood from the categories of individual relations between two subjects in a tendential situation of domination and servitude. Such a strategy would imply a strange remnant of the categories of the philosophy of consciousness transposed to the framework of the analysis of the logic of power. This would lead us to assume, for instance, that the institutional manifestation of the state would invariably tend to submit itself to the figure of a single person in a position of leadership.

Nonetheless, Freud can be said to be claiming that the relationship with the leadership is the veritable *blind spot* of contemporary political reflection. There is a constant demand for the expression of power in the form of a leader, as well as a logic of incorporation that stems from the constitutive nature of power in the determination of collective identities. This is evident in both so-called democratic and authoritarian societies. In fact, for Freud, there is no political sphere in which the relation with authority is not a constitutive part of collective identities due to the strength of the processes of identification, and hence the tendency to phenomena of incorporation.[9] At first sight, as we shall see later on, this seems to be the inevitable, but not for that less problematic, result of the Freudian tendency not to rid the figure of the political leader from political-familial or theological-political analogies.[10]

The centrality of this discussion on the nature of leadership within a consideration of the political should not be understood, however, as the natural expression of the alleged need of humans, as political animals, to submit themselves to authority figures, as if they were bound to look for a master, no matter that Freud in some moments seems to suggest precisely this. In fact, Freud insightfully recognises that sovereignty, whether actually effective or virtually present as a latent demand, is the constitutive problem of political experience, at least of that political experience that marks the specificity of Western modernity. Contrary to theorists such as Michel Foucault, Freud does not believe in some kind of decline of sovereign power in the wake of the advent of an era in which individualities are constituted through disciplinary dynamics and social control. He rather thinks that sovereign power, even when it is not effectively present in political institutionality,[11] persists in latency as a phantasmatic demand of individuals. The continuous recurrence, even in our contemporaneity, of overlaps between the representations of the political leader, the head of the state, the father figure, the religious leader and the company founder should tell us that we are facing a phenomenon more complex than just the regression of individuals incapable of 'democratic maturity'. Understanding the nature of this demand for the sovereign position of power, as well as the libidinal force responsible for its resilience, is a task that Freud, in his own way, took on.

However, it is not only a matter of understanding this, but we must also think of possible ways to deactivate it, ways to – if we want to use an analytical term – traverse such a fantasy. Yet, as in analytical work, it is not a question of believing that, 'once the libidinal trap of the political is unveiled, one ought to abandon it to the declining

history of its Western delirium, and substitute for it an aesthetic or a moral doctrine."[12] Such a belief would transform psychoanalysis into a model of critique that contents itself with the unveiling of the mechanisms of production of social illusions, in the expectation that the unveiling of such nature has a perlocutionary force capable of modifying behaviours. We would be more faithful to Freud if we understood the process of crossing over as inducing internal mutation in the meaning and the circuit of affects that fantasies produce. Freud works to explore the ambiguities of our social fantasies, to deconstruct (and this word is not here by chance) the apparent homogeneity of their functioning, thus allowing other stories to appear where we thought we would find only the same stories. This is not a critique in which social illusions are denounced on the grounds of a potential, albeit still latent, normativity that would serve as a foundation for another form of social life – as if it were just the case of discrediting a present normativity from the perspective of a virtual normativity of which Freud was the appointed spokesperson. The Freudian critique is a kind of opening to the possibility of transforming norms through an exploration of their internal ambivalence – in our case, the transformation of sovereignty through the exploration of the as-yet unheard-of effects of power. In the hypothesis of sovereign power there is something that cannot be completely dismissed as a regressive figure of domination; there is something in its place that seems to pulsate well beyond the effects of subjection that such a power appears to necessarily imply – one need only to recall both the discussions on *popular* sovereignty and the constitution of sovereignty as the locus of emancipated subjectivity.[13] This perhaps explains why Freud presents two distinct paradigms of authority figures. One derives from the fantasies linked to the primal father, first outlined in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and later developed in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921). The other, which is almost the internal negation of the former and opens us up to a re-evaluation of the political dimension of Freudian thought, will appear in a charged way in the palimpsest and testamentary work that is *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

Originally published in *O circuito dos afetos. Corpos politicos, desamparo e o fim do indivíduo*, Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, 2015, pp.41–54. Translated from Portuguese, Brazil, by Elisa Adami with permission from the author.

1 [TN] Yves Klein, *Chelsea Hotel Manifesto*, New York, 1961, available at http://www.yvesklein.de/manifesto.html (last accessed on 6 September 2022). A transcript of the original written in French by Klein is available at https://www.yvesklein.com/en/ressources?sh=chelsea#/en/ressources/view/document/19721/yves-klein-chelsea-hotel-manifesto?sh=chelsea&sb=_created&sd=desc (last accessed on 8 November 2022).

2 For a critique of such positions see, for instance, Rebecca Kingston and Leonard Ferry, *Bringing the Passions Back In: The Emotions in Political Philosophy*, Toronto: UBC Press, 2008, p.11.

3 The standard argument for this legal requirement has been critically elucidated by George Marcus: 'From the perspective of impartiality and universal application, passionate citizens are thought to have abandoned the rational use of the mind, which might, however fallible, be able to undertake the task of fair and equal consideration.' George Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen. Emotion in Democratic Politics*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, p.22.

4 Sigmund Freud, 'A Philosophy of Life', in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, New York: Carlton House, 1933, p.245.

5 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'La panique politique', in *Retreating the Political* (ed. Simon Sparks), London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p.10. It follows that: 'for methodological individualists, the idea that a feeling such as anxiety or guilt may be a property of a group is likely to prove puzzling. Seeing the individual as the basic unit in society, they are led to assume that feelings, like meanings and intentions, are somehow the "property" of the individual. This under-socialized concept of the human subject, one shared by some traditions within mainstream psychology, is unable to see how feelings bind the group, contributing substantially to its coherence.' Paul Hoggett and Simon Thompson (ed.), *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*, New York: Continuum, 2012, p.3.

6 Let us remember, in this respect, the analogies between modes of government and the character of the individuals that are already found in Book VIII of Plato's *The Republic*. In his enquiry on the character and personality proper to the 'democratic man' living in a democracy, the 'oligarchic man' living in an oligarchy, and the 'tyrannical man' living in a tyranny, Plato is not only drawing an ingenious analogy. He is, in his own way, recalling how circuits of affects underlie the inner rationale of specific modes of government. Hence statements such as: '"Well, then, are you aware that for individuals also there must necessarily be as many kinds of character as there are kinds of regime? Or do you think that regimes somehow come into being "from oak or stone"? Isn't it rather from the characters of people in the city, which tip the scale, as it were, taking the rest with them?"'. Plato, *The Republic* [ebook] (ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith), Book VIII, 544d; 544e, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.501. It would appear that the real basis of a collective political identity was a common ethos, with its emotional qualities.

7 For, 'Identification is, for Freud, social feeling and it is therefore the realm of affects as such [implied by identification] that must be interrogated.' P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.-L. Nancy, 'La panique politique', *op. cit.*

8 For example, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Le lien affectif*, Paris: Aubier, 1992 and Jean-Claude Monod, *Qu'est-ce qu'un chef en démocratie? Politiques du charisme*, Paris: Seuil, 2012.

9 It was Ernesto Laclau who best articulated the consequences of this constitutive role of leadership from Freud's psychology of the masses. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London and New York: Verso, 2005.

10 This has led certain commentators to state that: 'the Freudian analysis, in certain aspects, undoubtedly belongs to a moment of polemical reaffirmation of a pastoral metaphor that partakes of a historical disillusionment with the "moral progress of humanity", a disappointment in the face of the regressive tendencies of the so-called "rational" civilisation and a problematisation of the hopes of the Enlightenment.' J.-C. Monod, *Qu'est-ce qu'un chef en démocratie?, op. cit.*, p.237.

11 This is certainly not our case, at least if we take into account elaborations such as those presented in Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (trans. Kevin Attell), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

12 P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.-L. Nancy, 'La panique politique', *op. cit.*, pp.1–2.

13 Georges Bataille, 'La Souveraineté', in *Œuvres complètes*, v.VIII. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.