

Freud as a Thinker of the Political Body: Fear and Distress as Political Affects

The main goal of this paper is to show how we can find a very innovative theory of political bodies in Freud. We know how Freud shows us political bodies being created through the transformation of the amorphous masses into a collective identity. This is the main topic of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Such transformation is produced by the affective identification with a leader positioning himself as the central axis for the ideals of the ego. This scheme focuses on the constitutive nature of vertical identifications with figures of authority and was used specially by Adorno and Reich to describe the libidinal structure of totalitarian political experiences such as fascism. But by using the Freudian scheme exclusively to describe totalitarian political experiences, Adorno and Reich left the impression that the relationship between politics and psychoanalysis would be useful only insofar as it describes the libidinal mechanisms of authoritarian regressions. Hans Kelsen has made the same remark in his review of Freud's *Group Psychology*.

But in this paper, I would like to insist on another point. Actually, I would like to show how we can also find in Freud something that we should call: *a theory of political bodies without collective identity*, an important topic in a discussion about what democracy could be. If we want to understand the nature and structure of such a theory, we should also pay attention to the affects that are able to create political bodies. Normally, we accept that political bodies are created by two main affects: fear and hope. But the innovative character of Freudian theory becomes evident through his elucidation of how we can create social bonds also through another kind of affect, much more important from a Freudian perspective, an affect that every analyst must know how to deal with, namely distress. The main

hypothesis of my conference is then: Freud opens us to the possibility of understanding how to create political bodies through the circulation of distress. A distress that will not be an object of care, as if we were facing something that could and should be erased. In psychoanalysis, distress is something that circulates dispossessing identities, whether collective or individual. Something that produces by dispossession.

To speak about political bodies without collective identity might seem to be a contradiction *in adjecto*. We habitually accept that the notion of “political body” presupposes ideas such as unity, organization *partes extra partes*, and hierarchy relative to a functional center. The political body would be the expression of an identitarian organization, grounded in a sovereign power able to repress the antagonistic nature of the social bonds. Contrary to this trend we can find some important criticism against the idea of an identitarian political body, for example, in the thought of Claude Lefort. Lefort asserts the needs for a theory of democracy grounded in the “dissolution of the social body”[1]. For Lefort, there is democracy just when societies don’t understand themselves as a body grounded in a sovereign power. Instead of bodily metaphors, democracy insists on thinking power through a theory of an empty place that operates as a *pure signifier*, a power able to express “a society without positive determination, unrepresentable through the figure of a community”[2].

If we accept these ideas, we’ll be obliged to say that a political body without collective identity should be impossible, a mere academic play on words. Bodies have unity and organization; they establish identities through the submission of a multiplicity to an operation of belonging. But if I insist on saving the idea of political body, it is because we are not only dealing with a metaphor whose history would be incredibly long and problematically linked with a non-democratic view of the political life. The different uses made by Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau and, in recent times, Deleuze and Guattari (with the notion of bodies without

organs) show us how the theme of a political body can't be restricted to the expression of just one model of political experience.

Nevertheless, there is something that unifies these examples that are based on the notion of political body. Those philosophers understand that there is no political instauration without the constitution of a body. The question is: which type of body we are able to constitute, what could a body be? The impossibility to think the political instauration without using body metaphors must not be understood as the expression of an irresistible drive toward authoritarian ways of thinking. Actually, these metaphors show us how the establishment of political bonds is linked with the capacity to be affected, to enter a sensible regime of affection (aesthesis). The metaphors of the political body don't necessarily describe a search for an organic social cohesion. They can describe the nature of the regime of affection that establishes social bonds. This is why it is so important to understand the grammar of affects inherent to each body. A body produced by fear doesn't act in the same way as a body produced by trust or distress.

But the metaphors of the political body show us another important thing, namely, that there is no politics without a kind of incorporation. There is no politics without the local incarnation of the existence of social life in its totality of relations. An incarnation able to affect the subjects, showing how just a body is able to affect another body. We live in the political field as bodily subjects, as subjects in a sensible regime of affection. But if we didn't have a political body as the incarnation of social life in its *totality of relations*, if we just had particular bodies in mutual affection, then the political field would be reduced to the space of immediate contact, of immediate visibility. We would then have a very weak and precarious politics because the social constitution of particular bodies is largely dependent on the affection produced by another kind of body, a body that occupies the place of a generic universality.

Let us remember Marx talking about the “social body of labor,” a body able to affect our bodies in a way that they became one dimensional, as we see in the Marcus Agrippa’s fable which represents the human being as a fragment of its own body. If we accept that there are no political bodies with a force of generic implication, then the social body of labor, produced by the logic of Capital’s self-valorization, will define our regimes of affection, the velocity of our desires, the movement of our affects, the geography of our physical presence. We must have a political body to limit the power of false universality of the social body of Capital.

The true sculptor of social life

But let us turn briefly to the problem of the structure of affects in its relation to political bodies. We must remember here a central Freudian assumption that the affect that opens us to social bonds is distress. At first, this might seem like a modernized version of Thomas Hobbes’ conception of fear as the central political affect, an affect that would lead us to acquiesce to the norm, making possible a life in society contrary to the state of nature. Let us remember in this context, some important features of this Hobbesian idea.

“During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe,” Hobbes said in a well-known passage, “they are in that condition which is called State of War; and such a war as is of every man against every man.” The output of the State of Nature and its “war of all against all” would be countered by the internalization of an “awe” constantly reiterated and produced by the force of law of a Sovereign power. For Hobbes, the individuals are animated by something like a drive directed to excess. There can be no common good because there is an excessive desire within individuals resulting from the fact that “nature has given for each man a right to all”. The excess, as a common trait of all men, can only lead us to desire the same thing. “Many at the same time, have the appetite for the same things.” Thus, Hobbes describes how the historical emergence of a

society of individuals released from all forms of natural place or predetermined collective regulation can only be understood as the advent of a "society of total insecurity."

Against the fearful destructiveness of this excess that puts individuals in perpetual motion, making them desire the desire of the other, leading them easily to violent death, appears the government. This shows how the existence of the government would be linked to the circulation of fear as an affect responsible for installing and conserving relations of authority. This fear would have the strength to stabilize the society, paralyzing the movement and blocking the excess of passions. This leads commentators, such as Remo Bodei, to insist on a "complicity between reason and fear," not only because reason would be powerless without fear, but mostly because fear is, at least for Hobbes, a kind of "universal calculator of passion" accounting for the traumas inscribed in memory, while serving as ground for rational deliberation and predictability of actions.

Thus, politics appears as the space where the protection produced by security and stability is transformed into an affect able to sustain the social bond. A politics in which, according to Carl Schmitt, "*protego ergo obligo* is the *cogito ergo sum* of the state." The key fact here is that the legitimation of sovereignty through its force of protection and security needs the continuous perpetuation of the danger of disruptive violence, it needs the image of an imminent violent death if the social space ceases to be controlled by a sovereign power with no limits. If we accept that society is nothing more than "a civil war constantly prevented by an insurmountable force," the state would need to continuously provoke distress as an affective companion to the imminence of a state of war, converting it immediately into fear and vulnerability, and thereby legitimizing itself as a force that cares for us, perpetuating our dependence.

Politics of distress

The emphasis on similarities between Freud and Hobbes is a classical topos. However, we must not confuse fear and distress, at least in this context. Since Aristotle, fear implies preparation for and reaction to an imminent danger, real or imagined. Following Aristotle, Freud makes a classical statement differentiating fear and anxiety: "The anxiety has an unmistakable relation to expectation: is anxiety of something. In it there is a feature of indeterminacy and absence of object; the correct language comes to change the name when anxiety finds an object and replaces it by fear [Furcht]." In other words, we can say that fear is anxiety that has found an object, in the sense of a reaction against a danger caused by an object that can be represented. Hobbes, for example, says that fear is the "expectation of an evil." The possibility of representing the threatening object is a precondition for the affective experience of fear that triggers physical reactions including the redoubling of attention and the acceleration of breath as if waiting for an attack. Distress, like anxiety, involves a collapse or paralysis of possible reactions, as in the case of primal dissociative shock, or the extreme vulnerability of exposure to an Other on whom one depends but whose response can neither be predicted nor deciphered.

Psychoanalytic theories typically link the experience of distress with infantile prematurity, functional incompleteness and motor insufficiency. Freud, however, is not content to describe distress as an affective initial state of impotency to be overcome within the individual maturation process. Freud acknowledges the paradoxical potency of distress, drawing on it to explain the persistence of phenomena such as the uncanny (Unheimlichkeit), our sense of vulnerability to the other, the phylogenetic inheritance of traumatic memory and the impetus to forming religions to counter unbearable helplessness. Gradually, it becomes clear how distress passes from the condition of a "given biological fact" to an "essential ontological dimension, proper to the psychic life."

Looking for a structural definition, Freud then associates distress with the inadequacy of the "assessment of our strength in comparison to the greatness of

the situation of danger or excitement.” This inadequacy between my responsiveness, my capacity for control, in short, my capacity for representation in the form of an object, and the magnitude of what I have in front of me, gives the situation a traumatic character. The disproportion, mainly thought in the sense of absence of possible measure, is the condition of distress.

In this sense, to be in distress is to be without help, without resources when faced with an event that is not an actualization of possibilities. There is a suspension, even if temporary, of the capacity for action, representation and prediction. The situation of distress always implies the recognition of a sense of impotency, both of the subject in his agency and of the symbolic order that supports his determination. This suspension of the symbolic order is the function of distress at the end of analysis, bringing us closer to what Lacan meant by the experience of the real.

For Freud distress is a prerequisite for social emancipation, not an experience of resignation or vulnerability, a demand for care by proto-parental figures, or a continued political experience of exploitation of fear. What we have in Freud the affirmation of distress as an ontological insecurity with the political function of reducing demand for an authority based on the phantasmagoric constitution of sovereign power. *All political action is initially the action of a landslide and only distressed people are able to act politically.* Freud shows us how a truly emancipatory politics is based on the affective circulation of experiences of distress, not on building fantasies to defend ourselves against it. In this sense, politics can be thought as a practice that allows distress to appear as a productive negative ground of new social forms, preventing the transformation of this negative ground into social fear, opening us to events that we don't yet know how to experience.

Taking Freud's theory of distress into consideration, I propose to find its application in a Freudian text that serves as a testament to a political body under

erasure, *Moses and Monotheism*. Through a discourse on distress and politics, I propose an interpretation that tries to find in the Freudian Moses a model for thinking the conditions for an emancipatory politics that is able to transform the affective constitution of social bonds through the circulation of distress. This transformation produces a political body that deconstructs the corporeality of the political.

Moses and the collapse of the people as a political category

Freud begins *Moses and Monotheism* with the following:

“To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken lightheartedly—especially by one belonging to that people. No consideration, however, will move me to set aside truth in favor of supposed national interests. Moreover, the elucidation of the mere facts of the problem may be expected to deepen our insight into the situation which with they are concerned[3].”

The goal of the Freudian text seems clear: to break with the illusion that sustains the link between politics and the production of collective identities. Freud shows how in the heart of the identifications with the sovereign power that constitute the people as a unity, something deprives the people of the security of relationships of filiation. Freud does not deny the constitutive role of vertical identification between the authority and what will be the people. To refuse this idea would undermine his thesis on the productive nature of the libidinal ties. Instead, Freud affirms that "the man Moses created the Jews." He grants that there are imaginary identifications that determine the repertoire of ideational images that will guide the Ideal "I", and that there are symbolic identifications that define the ways that subjects assume symbolic functions. But beyond that there are what we must call "real identifications" that confront subjects with an unassimilable and un-representable core in the Other. These identifications remain unbearable as

long as they dispossess the subject from stable and secure determinations. They produce an encounter that, though initially refused, will continue to sound until they create new political ties. In fact, Freud uses Moses to talk about these real identifications as a creative force of political subjects.

We know how the ground of Freud's argument is the idea that Moses was an Egyptian who gave to the Jews the monotheistic religion of Ikhnaton, the Aton religion. A foreign leader, a strange and unassimilable body in the heart of power. There is no possible narcissistic identification here. Moses is not like his people, he doesn't speak the same native language, he doesn't have the same history and he doesn't act from the same affects. His religion is without an imaginary, it is refractory to any ritual. It is the expression of a God who is silent when asked who he is, answering with just the empty tautology "I am who I am."

There is no specularity between the Egyptian Moses and the Jews. Moses is so strange to the Jews that he didn't leave any determination to be transmitted in a common language of representations. All he leaves is a trace, something which appears in the biblical texts as distortion (*Entstellung*). A trace that de-completes the text, pointing to "another scene" where we find the effects of the intolerable nature of a "highly spiritualized religion," unable to care for the Jews and to give them a "satisfaction of their necessities." In the case of Moses, the social bond isn't grounded on a gesture of care. It arises from an assertion of distress supported by a mechanism of dispossession. The violent murder of Moses by the people he created establishes the ontological primacy of distress.

Moses has yet another major feature. He is the one that imposes movement and errancy on the Jews. As a leader he will not be the one who will establish links to the territory. He will be the one that will require of the people an errancy. Moses is the Egyptian who forces the foreign people into the wandering of nomadism and unrepresentability. He is the necessary figure of an authority that allows the people to identify themselves with a desire that does not appease itself within the

current conformity to norms, a desire that pushes us toward the possibility of being affected differently, of being created by another material. There is nobody better than Freud's Moses to show us how "what 'sutures' the identification of a social whole as such is the free-fluctuating element which dissolves the identity of any fixed intra-social element"[4].

From the murder of Moses follows the adoption of another religion and another god by the Jews. A sinister and violent volcanic god, who roams the night and fears the light of day, a god of the Arabian tribe of the Midianites: Jehovah. This new god, strange to the Jews, is announced by another prophet: a Midianite, also named Moses. But in an impressive double play akin to the mimetic power of decentering, the god of the religion of Aton will be integrated to Jehovah and the Egyptian Moses will be merged within Moses the Midianite. In this process of mimetic fusion where opposite identities are intertwined, the original trend will gradually disfigure the narrow limits of the current situation. The past explodes the limits of the present. Unlike the primordial father of Totem and Taboo, what comes from the repressed past is not a regression, but a loyalty to an event that, for a moment, ceases not to write, even if it makes the stability of the current situation precarious.

This is the Freudian way of showing how criticism doesn't operate through the attempt to build completely new principles, but through exploiting the ambivalence of what seemed familiar. Criticism is about building the estrangement, separating the real from its imaginary dressing. It operates by extracting fragments of another time, a time of unrealized promises, but never completely forgotten.

Let's emphasize that the political gesture of Freud doesn't need to be understood as a return to the collective identity produced by the second Moses. His political gesture is the opening to what cannot be represented, namely, an Egyptian Moses that makes impossible the movement toward origin, preventing the

formation of a collective identity. Freud's text will, in this way, show us how the political space is not the constitution of the people as a political body, with its illusions of unity, organicity and border. Rather it is the movement of deconstruction of the people as a self-referential unit, constituting a political body without nation, home, land and limits. A body supported by the identification with what has no representation and has the power to de-constitute the people as a political category. In its place, what appears is not autonomous individuals characterized by particular systems of interest, but political subjects traversed by identifications that dispossess them in a continuous decentering.

So, if Freud's study on Moses seems initially to fulfill the function of exposing the historical case of a collective identity without a state, I would say that there is a function more fundamental, specifically, to show how an awareness of the ground could facilitate the dissolution of the grounded (as Hegel once put it, a *zu Grund geht* that is also a *zugrunde gehen*). Understanding the origin of the people could catalyze the dissolution of its collective identity.

Freud performs the critical function of restoring the concept of political body. Politics doesn't operate in a vacuum, but in a saturated space of representations, significations, fantasies and bodily affects. It is in this saturated space that politics creates. But to create in saturated spaces we should identify where the hard points of saturation are, that is to say, we should locate the fantasies that support the structural integrity of the space. This identification transforms these fantasies, exploiting their instabilities, making them produce new affects and effects. So we can say that the first political strategy is always to identify the locus of the sovereign phantasmatic body which supports the affective bonds to power structures. The second strategy is to constitute another political body in a mimetic game of duplication, to constitute another political body in the same place but with different affects (a bit like Freud made with both Moses). This is the way that politics can disable bodies that always repeat themselves. Bodies that have formed notions such as state, party, nation, people.

But this can only be done through another incorporation, another constitution of sovereignty that is not based on the imaginary of a proper unitary body, but on the reality of the fragmented body. A fragmented body that expresses a field of affects that does not allow the creation of units, although it allows the creation of links. A body capable of constituting affects that fragment us, which lead us to think about synthesis in a completely new way.

At the end, we will understand that people as a political category must not appear as a social substance, but as a power of emergence. An emerging power that will grow its force only if incorporated into an unquiet political body, instead of the social imaginary of the unitary body. Politics is the emergence of what is not stabilized in existing situations. It is a gamble with an outcome which exists only as a trace. This is the politics that Freud left us.

[1] LEFORT, Claude, *A invenção democrática*, São Paulo: Braziliense, p. 25

[2] Idem, *Essais sur le politique*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 292

[3] FREUD, Sigmund; *O homem Moisés e a religião monoteísta*, Porto Alegre: L&PM, p. 33

[4] ZIZEK, Slavoj; *Menos que nada*, São Paulo: Boitempo, 2013, p. 283

[5] KANTORIWICZ, Ernst; *Les deux corps du roi: essai sur la théologie politique au moyen âge*, in: *Oeuvres*, Paris: Gallimard, 2000, p. 658