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Psychoanalytic contributions to the political analysis of affect and identification

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In his *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1974) offers what, to a prospective scholar of affect, can only appear to be a series of demoralizing (even derisory) comments. He dismisses a trend of psychological interpretation that, to his mind, withdraws from the intellectual realm and focuses its attentions instead on the ‘field of affectivity’ (1974: 207). He speaks in scathing terms of such a ‘naïve attempt’ to reduce observable aspects of human activity to ‘inarticulate emotional drives (1974: 207), arguing that we should instead reject any explanatory appeal to ‘vague emotions’, foregoing thus any attempt to derive analytic ideas from such a source. The philosopher Jean Hyppolite, Foucault’s teacher and Lacan’s frequent interlocutor, concurs, and indeed extends Lévi-Strauss’s position: ‘There is no pure affective on the one hand, entirely engaged in the real, and the pure intellectual on the other’ (in Lacan, 1988: 293). Lacan is no less biting, as is evident in his own invective against the idea of affect as unmediated channel of expressivity:

The affective is not ... a special density which would escape an intellectual accounting. It is not to be found in a mythical beyond of the production of the symbol which would precede ... discursive formulation (1988: 57).

At first glance, these comments may seem to justify Baldacchino’s (2010) position that “‘Structuralist’ ... theories are at best incomplete, and at worst seriously undermined by their inattention to affect’. This is a view that deserves reconsideration. After all, for the social anthropologist, like the psychoanalyst, affect would appear to be an omnipresent factor within one’s field of analysis. Whether we have in mind the birth-rituals so famously analysed by Lévi-Strauss, or the tortured reminiscences of the suffering analysand, affect cannot simply be ignored. As such, the question is not whether affect is ignored in a way that makes a given analytical frame incomplete. The question is, rather, how affect can

be accommodated within such an explanatory frame in a way that does not considerably weaken it as a result (i.e., resulting in a type of incompleteness by way of *inclusion*).

One response then to the call for a greater consideration of collective sentiments in the substantiation of national identity is to sound a precautionary note. The problem with crude appeals to feelings or affect in understanding identity is that virtually anything can be ‘explained’ – indeed, *explained away* – via a loose recourse to emotion. A quick thought experiment: what aspects of social life cannot be given an emotional explanation? There is an incredible (pseudo)explanatory range afforded by the vocabulary of affect: from laziness to humility, arousal to aggression, honour to *schadenfreude*, what social interaction cannot be made intelligible via such a style of explanation? It is precisely the attempt to avoid such a (traditionally) individualizing and psychologizing set of values that leads a ‘poststructuralist’ such as Foucault (1980) to exclude such a mode of explanation from his genealogical frame of analysis. A variety of discursive powers, alongside the workings of various productive ensembles of regulation and knowledge, are obscured, indeed *elided*, by appeals to the affectivity of key social actors (Foucault, 1980). (This is also why, contrary to Baldacchino’s (2010) assertion, post-structuralist approaches – certainly those of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault and Edward Said – most certainly *do not* operate on a cognitive view of the subject: the prioritization of a discursive frame follows precisely on the need to avoid the tendency to forms of psychological reductionism).

Rather than a simple error of omission then, the Structuralist and poststructuralist aversion to explanation by way of affect has much to tell us about the epistemological and political failings of such a means of accounting for social acts. The challenge here is that of how affect might be meaningfully factored into forms of analysis that take seriously the role of symbolic/discursive systems in determining facets of subjectivity, firstly, and that are wary of the de-politicizing effects of explanation by way of ‘natural passions’, secondly. The focus of my comments in what follows – a response to Baldacchino’s ‘The eidetic of belonging’ – will be on qualifying and sharpening a prospective analytics of affect, such that we may attempt a meaningful *political* analysis of affect grounded within a given socio-symbolic domain, and linked to a series of subjective (psychical) operations. I will begin by

pointing out a series of recurring conflation characterized by much writing on affect, and indeed, by Baldacchino's own paper, conflation that might be remedied by the provision of a series of basic but vital distinctions.

Differentiating affect and emotion

A first distinction concerns the important difference between affect and emotion, two concepts that Baldacchino leaves undifferentiated in a way that undermines the conceptual strength of his analysis. Such a distinction is to be found in the social constructionist literature, in the terms of a differentiation between energetic affect and the more delimited, discursive factor of emotion (Billig, 1999). It can equally be made via reference to psychoanalysis: '[I]f affect represents the quantum of libidinal energy' say Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008), 'we could say that emotion results from the way it gets caught up in a network of signifiers (or "ideas" in Freudian terms)' (2008: 267). What becomes apparent here – a second important analytical qualification in applying the category of affect – is that any properly psychoanalytic engagement with affect needs to be aware of the libidinal aspect of this notion, of the fact that such intensities involve a paradoxical libidinal enjoyment-in-excess. So, to quote Bruce Fink: 'there is a kind of basic equivalence between affect and *jouissance*...[or] in Freud's terms, between affect and libido or libidinal discharge' (1997: 215).

Back to the emotion/affect difference: as Stavrakakis (2007) points out: a similar distinction can be made in Deleuzian terms, as it is in Massumi (1996), who views affect and emotion as belonging to different registers. Whereas affect is considered along the lines of a bodily intensity resistant to domestication, emotion entails the channelling of intensity into meaning and functionality, into the mechanisms and operations of narrative, 'semantically and semiotically forced progressions' (1996: 221). Emotion thus represents an assimilation, a closure and containment of affect within symbolic means. The importance of the above distinction has much to do with understanding the relations between discourse and emotion on the one hand (a relation of relative commensurability), and discourse and affect (non-commensurability), on the other, a topic we will return to shortly.

Dimensions of identification

A second potential distinction that should be clarified: it remains insufficient in psychoanalytic thought to understand identification simply as ‘emotional tie’, as Baldacchino does in his introduction to Freud’s understanding of group formations. True enough, Freud (1924) does utilize such a rudimentary description at points in his *Group Psychology*, but it is in that same work that he sets in place a series of concepts that enables us, via Lacan, to differentiate between imaginary, symbolic and what we may guardedly refer to as extra-discursive, or ‘real’ modes of identification. Now although these registers are never fully separable – they are co-present, interlocking – they show up the limitation of thinking identification only as ‘emotional tie’. The symbolic axis of identification entails the *ego-ideal* aspect discussed by Freud in *Group Psychology*, that is, the shared facet of a symbolic ideal (God, country, nation). This setting in place of a given ideal – a kind of anchoring allegiance, a symbolic fidelity – is a condition of possibility for the development of a distinctive register of *imaginary* identifications, that is, ego-to-other relations maintained at the level of everyday inter-subjectivity (the *ideal-ego* aspect). Whereas the first order of identifications is *primary* for Lacan, and a function of historical structure and symbolic means (the inheritance of a name, a legacy, a place in the socio-historical order), the imaginary level of identification is *secondary* and dependent on the making and defensive maintenance of likeable images of ourselves derived from others. Importantly, this axis of identification entails an economy of aggressive, narcissistic rivalry, as famously illustrated in Lacan’s (2006) early paper on the mirror-stage. If we remain attuned to the ego-ideal dimension underlying various group identifications, we become aware that not all such identifications represent ‘a regression to a child-like or savage state’, to paraphrase Baldacchino. Such ego-ideal values also represent what are amongst our most cherished and vaunted notions (justice, solidarity, democracy, equality, etc).

A third mode of identification, more present in Lacan’s later work, is by way of *jouissance*, that is, by means of shared excessive or transgressive libidinal enjoyments (the bonding potential of *schadenfreude* provides a nice example). We may refer to such intensities, provisionally, as ‘extra-discursive’, ‘real’ in the Lacanian sense of not being easily codified, not reducible to symbolic

functioning. These affects thrill and trouble the subject in equal measure. They maintain a palpable bodily presence – hence Lacan’s (2007) reference to the ‘substance’ of *jouissance* – and are never fully assimilated into the horizon of imaginary or discursive meaning. More than this, such affects exceed and/or transgress the prescriptions of social law, thus in Žižek’s (1989) description of the obscene stain of enjoyment, the elusive residue of *jouissance* that evades explicit symbolic registration. This distinction between symbolic (ego-ideal) and ‘real’ modes of identification (those of excessive libidinal enjoyment) enables us to introduce a degree of nuance into debates on affective affiliation. It provides an interesting way, for example, of recasting Orwell’s (2001) distinction between ‘patriotism’ and ‘nationalism’ – i.e., between the non-aggressive cultural ideals that cement public life on the one hand, and the gratifications of excessive zeal that inevitably tend towards the aggressive, on the other – two ‘emotional attitudes’ that Baldacchino battles to find any significant difference between.

‘Extra-discursive’, not ‘extra-symbolic’

The above set of analytical tools enables greater sophistication when it comes to understanding the relation between identification and affect; it suggests we need to plot each of these intersecting trajectories of identification (symbolic, imaginary and real) if we are to gain an adequate sense of subjective and indeed societal, communal identifications. ‘Affective communities’ that is to say, are also always imaginary communities – *imaginary* in the Lacanian sense, not simply ‘imagined’ in Anderson’s (1991) famous phrase – and indeed *symbolic* communities, a factor which sometimes slips from prominence in the enthusiastic attempt to outline the bonding power of ‘collective sentiments’. We should thus be wary of isolating the affective (indeed, the *libidinal*) as a priority in the analysis of collective identities. We need likewise to be cautious of exaggerating the capacity of such libidinal or affective ties to over-ride the symbolic and imaginary bonds with which they are invariably entangled. This is a potential that seems to loom large in prospective extensions of Gandhi’s (2006) ‘affective communities’ thesis, one which invariably fuels the tired dualism between reason and affect that Baldacchino identifies.

A crucial possible error comes to light in this respect: the implication that affective force (i.e., that of ‘natural passions’) bypasses or exists prior to the symbolic, that it represents a primal, pre-verbal or archaic means of basic attachments or aversions, and that it hence warrants distinctive analytical attentions potentially set aside from symbolic and imaginary axes of scrutiny. It is for this reason that I have spoken of affect provisionally, as ‘*extra-discursive*’ not as ‘pre-symbolic’ or ‘extra-symbolic’, that is, as not existing beyond the range and influence of symbolic forms, even though it may of course escape explicit symbolic registration, or, more specifically, the codification of acceptable discursive forms.

This is a vital distinction if we are to appreciate the political complexity of various intersections of discourse, affect and emotion. An example: I may express myself in a discourse of non-racist, multi-cultural tolerance, I may well feel genuinely emotionally committed to such values – identifying with such ideal-ego values at a imaginary level – yet I might, nevertheless, experience a set of anxious, affective, bodily reactions in relation to the physical proximity of certain others. Such affective responses remain conditioned by a symbolic horizon, by a (pre-reflexive) backdrop of historical values, meanings, roles and similar symbolic designations. Affective force as such is never a ‘pure outside’. Although it exceeds the ‘gentrification’ of prevailing discursive norms and eludes *full* symbolic mediation, it remains nonetheless within an imaginary and symbolic frame, within the ambit of ongoing (if unsuccessful) attempts to domesticate its excessive, potentially traumatic quality with meaning, ‘identity’, with symbolic place and value. These distinctions are, I hope, of some assistance when it comes to breaking down the traditional dichotomies (reason/emotion, identity/affect) Baldacchino does so well to highlight and problematize.

The confluence of private and public passions

How then are we to understand the relation of the symbolic to *jouissance*? This is a question that links to the consideration of contagion models of affect which, contrary to Baldacchino’s apparent scepticism as regards metaphors of infection, maintain something of value from a psychoanalytic perspective. We are presented here with the challenge of accounting for how an entire nation might become enthralled

by a type of parasitic mass irrationality, to quote Coetzee's (1991) evocative terms, transfixed by a similar affective object (for Žižek (1993) the sublime national Thing), or a shared 'passionate attachment', to adapt Butler's (1997) celebrated phrase. It is necessary, albeit in overly brief fashion, to introduce an additional analytical tool here, namely the notion of fantasy. Fantasy may be understood as providing an 'indivisible mediator' between the symbolic and subjective domains, as the crucial link between the collective and 'private' channelling of affect with which Baldacchino's paper battles. Fantasy arises in response to the '*Che Vuoi?*' question of what I am in the terms of the socio-symbolic constellation of my location, and, more importantly yet, what I imagine that this symbolic nexus (or big Other) of values *wants from me* (Lacan, 1979; Žižek, 1997).

A recurring existential dilemma is thus posed. This impossible requirement of definitively locating one's self within an anonymous social structure generates an ongoing series of hypotheses. This is the means by which the subject attempts to locate themselves, to provide an answer to what the Other of the trans-subjective social network wants of them (Dolar, 1998). Unconscious fantasy emerges then with the overlap of a series of such postulates, as a means of co-ordinating the subject's proposed answers to what the Other of society desires and lacks, and what they as a subject lack (and indeed *desire*) by way of response (Verhaeghe, 1999). Such a synchronization of lacks, which amounts to a fantasmatic transaction of desires, is testimony to the trans-individual nature of the unconscious in Lacan. This means that, while there is something irreducibly singular about an individual's fantasy, this fantasy is always generated in response to the enigma of the Other of a given symbolic order, cut from the social fabric of given ideological and cultural location. Fantasy is thus both in one sense autonomous – it is the *invention of the subject*, their unconscious response to the enigma of the Other's desire – and yet it is nevertheless contingent on the Other inasmuch as it is a working hypothesis, a fantasmatic solution based on the materials provided by this Other. Hence the paradox of many fantasy objects which are intensely 'private' and yet nonetheless also clearly 'public', even stereotypical, in their basic parameters.

Such fantasy objects are subject to a libidinal economy, which is to say that they are objects of passion (indeed, of affect) and that they involve attributions of libidinal enjoyment, (who possesses it, the (ill)legitimacies of such possession, considerations of how one may retrieve aspects thereof, and so on). This is clearly a very condensed outline of the functioning of fantasy – as much as I have space for here (for more see Hook, 2008) – but it does provide a tentative basis for thinking the relation between symbolic context and objects of *jouissance* (Lacan's (2007) *plus-de-jour*), a means, also, for apprehending the surprising confluence of 'private' and 'public' in the "contagious" spread of shared affective commitments that can bond whole communities and nations.

Continuums of love and hate, 'inside' and 'outside'

Having provided a series of additional distinctions, and a number of theoretical resources useful for an analytics of affect, it is now time to *collapse* some unwarranted oppositions. When it comes to the categorical distinctions between love and hate, to stringent separations between external objects and the subject's ostensibly 'internal' emotions – both of which Baldacchino relies on – we need tread carefully. Such presumptions cannot hold in any permanent way in psychoanalysis, certainly not in view of Freud's notion of ambivalence and, somewhat later, Lacan's recourse to Möbius-strip topology as a means of demonstrating how apparent contraries might be located on a continuum. These concepts make the respective contributions of disabling any definite separation of love and hate (insisting, by contrast, that each is coterminous with the other, that love and hate are, as it were, co-constituents), and by demonstrating that a simplistic dualism of inner and outer is inadequate when it comes to understanding the processes of identification (where 'internal' and 'external' are intertwined rather than mutually-exclusive dimensions).

Although it is true that practices of identification can be approached via the dialectical relations apparent between an ego and its objects – the ego viewed thus as precisely the system of distortions and misrecognitions that attempts to uphold such failing separations – what should be emphasized is that *such subject/object, ego/object distinctions are never secured or fully realized*. I have in mind here particularly Baldacchino's emphasis on the boundary between an *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*, his

assertion that ‘in the grip of an intense anger one is likely to think of the anger in terms of statements involving an “I”, the idea that in “subtle emotions” one is

likely to localize emotional properties in external objects. Observing another person’s child making too much noise is likely to lead to the feeling that ‘*the child* is irritating’, while intense emotions focus on the ego-object, ‘*I* am angry’. (Baldacchino, 2010: t/c)

The dualism in question, the inner/outer distinction is here far too confidently asserted for psychoanalytic sensibilities. Practices of identification (and apparent counter-identification) should be approached rather within a context of failure, in which the apparent over-extension of ‘internal’ subjective contents into ‘external’ objects (and vice versa) is ongoing, and where the prospect of this separation is always, troubled, vexed, and ultimately, irresolvable. Intense affective rejections, the designation of a given object as *external* tend to exemplify what Lacan (1986) refers to as *extimacy*, that is, a relation of intimate exteriority in which that most foreign or objectionable element in the other is a function of the subject’s own excluded interior.

Conclusion

Rather than by starting from the assumption of (an imaginary) identity and then moving on to an investigation of how it is secured against its objects, we should prioritize – focussing here on unconscious processes – the discord, the inchoate and fragmentary state of, in Lacan’s figurative reference, ‘the body-in-pieces’, which desperately needs an image, an imaginary mirror-rival through whom it may come to assert itself as an (imaginary) identity. Not so much a case of a ‘plane of boundary formation’ entrenched via designations of an irritating external *object* versus the defensive consolidation of a separate, distinctive ‘I’ – what becomes evident here is that it is *the lack of boundary* which is the problem. Perhaps the best illustrative example that springs to mind – particularly pertinent to the discussion of issues of national/ethnic identity – is Freud’s (2004) famous discussion of ‘the

narcissism of minor differences'. This is the idea, in short, not that two fully separable communal identities are at war with one another over apparently negligible differences, but, to the contrary, that neither side is, in fact, properly distinct, neither has attained a separate (symbolic, imaginary) identity. It is for this reason – the problem of underlying lack of distinction – that the stakes are as high as they are when it comes to seemingly minor points of discriminating difference.

Flare-ups of anger then, like those of racism and national identity, can be read not as securing ego–object separation, but as evidence of their failure 'brought home', of the fact that the ego is forever trying to fashion its own separateness, distinctness, authenticity on the basis of those 'external' objects which, in fact, form its basis. From a Lacanian perspective – which in this respect owes much to Hegel's master–slave dialectics – 'aggressivity' is inevitable; it is the outcome of mechanisms of imaginary identification whereby ego and other disturbingly overlap one another, each occupying the same position such that other is more *I* than I am, and such that I am more *other* than the other. There is thus a structural reason for this recurring pattern of narcissistic rivalry that underlies other–ego relations. No doubt such a relation entails a potent affective force, but this is not its causative factor. Indeed, to reduce such a situation to the analysis of affects and their functions is to mistake symptom for cause. With this assertion we return to the point at which we began, namely the assertion that an over-prioritization of affect prevents us from adequately grasping the underlying structural (and socio-symbolic and historical) constituents of a scene of affect.

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