

NARRATIVE REVOLUTIONS: CONSIDERATION OF CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE IN THE SUBJECT AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: This article addressed the narrative modifications that occurred in the realm of civilized sexual morality and its intersections with race and colonial history, as well as their impacts on the production of subjectivities. We refer to “narratives” as the ways in which some readings and interpretations of the subject’s relationships with their own body and with the Other are made present - often unconsciously - in the social bond. Viewing psychoanalysis as a practice, a theory, and an investigative method of psychic subjectivity, the goal was to investigate the place and function of such narratives, their fictional structure, and their real effects on the subject’s relationship with themselves and their social world.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, narratives, discourse, social bond, contemporaneity.

RESUMO: Revoluções narrativas: consideração de atualidade no sujeito e na psicanálise. Este artigo aborda as modificações narrativas que têm operado no âmbito da moral sexual civilizada e suas interseccionalidades, de raça e história colonial, bem como seus impactos na produção de subjetividades. Denominamos “narrativas” os modos como se presentificam no laço social – geralmente de forma inconsciente – certas leituras e interpretações sobre as relações do sujeito com o corpo próprio e com o Outro. Concebendo a psicanálise como uma prática, uma teoria e um método investigativo, trata-se de investigar o lugar e função de tais narrativas, sua estrutura ficcional e seus efeitos reais na relação do sujeito consigo mesmo e com seu mundo social.

Palavras-chave: psicanálise; narrativas; discurso; laço social; contemporaneidade.

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“The world doesn’t spin, it capsizes”. This witty remark has been evoked quite often in recent years, humorously expressing the vivid and lived impression of the impact of changes our social environment and discursive world have undergone. With it, we can refer to various aspects of life, but we typically recognize our surprise at new ways of conceiving our existence in the world today. These are the effects of the political-ideological earthquakes to which we are exposed. Just yesterday, for example, we openly laughed at the racist and homophobic jokes made by the comedy group “Os Trapalhões” in the 1980s. Today, fortunately, we are ashamed of that and recognize the exclusionary and segregative effects of such slurs.

The way in which we exist in the world and conceive our place as subjects in our context and history is always changing. However, at some moments, we perceive more clearly the extent of these changes, which are moral, social, cultural, and discursive. These changes impact and are impacted by the narratives that are legitimized in our social bond and gain the status of “commonplace” in the subtext, the unconscious, which writes our subjective existence.

The various subjects that make up the field of humanities deal differently with these alterations, considering from their own methodologies the discursive effects imprinted by the qualified passage of time. In psychoanalysis, we believe we can affirm that we are experiencing one of the greatest crises in its history. Nearly a century and a half separated us from Freud’s early discoveries and formulations, a very short time for a field of practice, research, and theory that revolutionized our knowledge of humans and our thinking about culture. Its specific discursive and methodological characteristics certainly still have much to contribute to the analysis of culture, social bonds, and the subject, as well as to the production of experiences implicated in an ethics of desire. However, while dissonance, gaps, and contradictions are part of the internal constitution of psychoanalytic epistemology, some impasses deserve attention and rectification.

We refer here to the extent to which the significant changes mentioned above make our world and our subjectivity significantly different from those of Freud’s time, and even from Lacan’s. These historical and cultural modifications are not easy to grasp, even though their evidence is everywhere and can be easily enumerated. For example, if we think about civilized sexual morality, we must consider the impacts resulting from the legitimization of same-sex marriages and changes in gender identities. These are not only legal aspects but also social and discursive ones that directly affect how the subject conceives their place in the world, which differs significantly from what was common in the subject’s relationship with sex and sexuality just a little over two decades ago. This is without even mentioning the significant changes in the way women’s roles in Western culture have been perceived, changes that have been ongoing for about 50 years.

In addition to notable changes in sexual morality, we must also include more recent changes related to racial struggles and the recognition of the extent of anti-Black, anti-Brown, and anti-Indigenous racism. The contemporary reading of colonial processes, an indelible mark of the beginning of modernity, is directly implicated in this, producing unprecedented interpretations and narrative suspensions. Take, for example, Dussel’s thesis (1993), which has found resonance in psychoanalysis itself (e.g., GUERRA, 2021), suggesting that the foundational force of Cartesian Cogito is partly due to the European conqueror’s conviction that they were the bearers of reason and truth to be taken to the New World. Instead of “ego cogito,” it was “ego conquiro.” In the author’s words: “‘Ego-conqueror’ is the proto-history of the constitution of ego cogito; a decisive moment was reached in its constitution as subjectivity, as ‘will to power.’” (DUSSEL, 1993, p. 49).

The contemporary novelty in considering these processes is quite surprising. For many years, feminists, LGBTQ+ individuals, and racialized people have organized and denounced their subalternized condition. Scholars of these issues and decolonial themes have been producing elaborate theoretical, political, and literary narratives for decades, and in some cases, centuries, addressing various issues related to these topics.

However, the novelty, it seems, lies in how these narratives have been more prominently embraced in the social bond, with institutional, legal, educational, and moral effects, and, in particular, what concerns us here, in their being heard by the community of psychoanalysts. This is where we identify the contemporary crisis at the heart of the psychoanalytic movement we mentioned above. The responses have been diverse, divergent, and often aligned with conservative reactions, particularly regarding issues related to sexuality. The psychopathologization of cultural changes, and especially of those who embrace them, is one of the most harmful aspects of this type of response, reproducing within psychoanalytic discourse a strategy typical of normative disciplines and reactionary ideologies.

Therefore, it is essential to be able to listen and consider these cultural changes and their impacts on the production of subjectivities in the practice of psychoanalysis and in its transmission. This clearly involves being open to a renewal of psychoanalytic theory itself in order to make it operational in the contemporary political-ideological context and its subjective effects.

One of the most immediate consequences of these changes is related to how narratives are produced. By narratives, we mean the means - discourses, texts, and subtexts - through which some readings and interpretations of the subject’s relationships with their own body and the Other are shared in the social bond. This is particularly about considering the various versions of what we refer to in psychoanalysis as “infantile sexual theories,” “family romances,” “fundamental fantasies,” or, in a more generic sense, the peculiar way of constituting forms of “self-narration” (COSTA, 1998). These forms of self-narration are based on the discursive conditions from which our “identity fictions” are constructed.

We know, for example, how important it is in psychoanalysis to work with literary productions that we recognize as a mode of expression that goes far beyond the psychology of its author. What a writer can transform into text is primarily

a discursive and unconscious architecture, a structure of fantasy - as demonstrated by Freud in the reading of Gradiva and by Lacan in the seminar on "The Purloined Letter," to name just two noble examples.

What is not simple to determine, in our view, is the ideological influence of a given historical period on the composition of these scenarios and structures (JAMESON, 1992). Furthermore, the interest that psychoanalysis would have in reading the presence of these elements related to some historical contingency that bears the mark of the power games of its time is even more challenging. Nevertheless, we believe that the contemporaneity of the changes mentioned above, in the legitimacy of diversity in the sexual field and biopolitical plots in general, and their potential effective impact on individuals demand a differentiated listening to the fictions constituting us.

Contemporary Narratives

Starting from these preliminary concerns, we would indicate the study of the impact of contemporary changes on the mentioned narratives, especially those at the heart of the contemporary political debate, which blurs the modern boundaries delimiting places of legitimacy and alterity and/or subalterity. By "impact," we mean the subjective effects produced by such changes.

For example, if the narrative about origins is no longer (or at least not exclusively) supported by the model of the bourgeois nuclear family, which has predefined roles for mother, father, and children based on anatomical and generational differences, how does the subject today construct their story and what effects does this have on themselves and their relationship with the other/Other? Children of same-sex, transgender, or non-binary couples, as well as pregnancies resulting from artificial insemination processes, as indicated by Perelson (2010), affect the ways in which one constructs a narrative of self, origins, and fantasy.

These questions are presented here in a preliminary manner and need to be developed based on specific cases. However, at this moment, our primary concern is to inquire more generally about the extent and ways in which there have indeed been modifications in narratives and how their effects can be measured, which are simultaneously subjective, social, and political. Furthermore, considering psychoanalysis as a practice, a theory, and a method of investigating psychic subjectivity, researching the effects produced by political-ideological changes also implies a rethinking of the very structure of psychoanalytic theory and its way of understanding the subject and its relationship with reality. We can ask, among other things, to what extent and in what ways such narratives, their fictional structure, and their real effects on the subject's relationship with themselves and their social world participate in the theorization proposed by psychoanalysis. Depending on the answer, there may be a pressing need for an update and revision of psychoanalytic theory to be in line with contemporary subjectivity, its expressions of suffering, and the symptomatic solutions found.

The initial gesture of psychoanalysis, as is well known, was the significance given by Freud to psychic reality. Regardless of somatic/organic determinants and factual events, psychic life is governed by a universe of plots and fantasies that, while not entirely separate from facts in their supposed objectivity, have a high degree of independence from them, with their own parameters. This is why Freud abandoned the assumption that his female hysterical patients had been sexually abused in childhood to focus on theories of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex. Rather than being the object-victim of a complaint, psychoanalysis grants the subject the role of the author of this narrative, complete with a range of conflicts inherent in the dynamics of instincts and desires.

Among the many criticisms directed at this initial psychoanalytic approach, some of which are easily refuted, we highlight two readings particularly relevant to the consideration of this foundation in the current context. The first was formulated in the 1970s by the feminist psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell (1975; 1988), who pointed out that Freud failed to critically analyze the sexist and misogynistic society in which these women lived. She argued that despite this - and perhaps even because of it - Freud managed to describe the conditions for the subjective production of a certain model of femininity and its impasses. In other words, what he attributed to a hysterical or neurotic psychic dynamic, one can now understand using his own instruments as stemming from a dialectic in which patriarchal social oppression played a fundamental role. This does not invalidate the fact that a complaint does indeed determine a hysterical position and should be listened to and analyzed from this position of subjective implication without ignoring the complexity of its political-ideological context.

Tania Rivera (2023) follows a similar interpretative thread, designating the seduction scene attributed by Freud to the Oedipal desires of young girls as a "rape scene," thus pointing out what Freud failed to hear. This second, more recent critical reading, highlights the case of Dora as an example of Freud's selective ignorance regarding the actual violence that his young patient had been subjected to in her relationship with her father's friend, Mr. K. Rather than Dora's supposed homosexual infatuation with Mrs. K, as proposed by Freud (1905/2016), one might suspect that it was the analyst's complicity with patriarchy and the sexism he thus perpetuated that led Dora to terminate her analysis (RIVERA, 2023).

The arguments of these two authors, Mitchell and Rivera, are of great interest when considering how, on the one hand, narratives produce subjective positions and, on the other hand, how we deal with them, understand, and interpret them. First, we consider, as Mitchell (1975; 1988) suggests, the need to locate the discursive scope in which these narratives - fantasies, plots, family stories, etc. - are situated. This involves placing them in perspective regarding the social and material conditions of their production. Second, it is important to situate the update of these conditions in the transference, following Rivera's arguments (2023), without which a given "feminine position," for example, would

tend to be naturalized.

The questions arising from these considerations are significant for both the present and psychoanalysis. The object under discussion in the debate, that is, Freud's selective ignorance of the misogyny and sexism prevalent in his time, alerts us to the mistakes analysts can continue to make by not taking into account the actual conditions of oppression in the complaints and demands of their patients. Additionally, it is crucial to consider how the very form of production of these narratives implies both 1) the conditions imposed by discourse, in which subjects are always objects or "victims" of a scene anticipated by the Other, and 2) the position of the subject as the author of the narrative, implying their desire in this production, as Freud indicated.

In our view, this is what the psychoanalytic perspective is about in terms of understanding the effects of discourses - and the narratives they support - on the subject. For many years, we have suggested a reading that involves these two aspects about the very production of the subject's division.

As we said at that time:

"A narrative of origins is neither individual nor social. It is situated at the intersection of social clinical and individual psychopathology. It is a forced choice, establishing the principle of the alienating conjunction in which the subject and the Other overlap. The construction of 'psychic reality' concerns how each subject accounts for the singularity of their place in the structure that precedes them and to which they ek-sist. It is, therefore, about the possibility of constructing a place and a name for the subject of enunciation, the fictional construction of an 'I' ('Je') narrator. It is at this point that we can recognize the impact of the separation operation." (POLI, 2003, p. 84)

At that time, we directed our work toward the clinical treatment of adolescents, focusing on the time of subjective constitution at the core of alienation-separation operations (LACAN, 1964/1988). To do so, we aimed to analyze the discursive conditions that allowed the young person to construct authorship in their own name for their own plots and fantasies.

Some of these concerns continue to shape our research, as presented in this brief article, albeit now directed at different factors. Socially marginalized or subalternized populations suffer a position similar to that of the "infans" (voiceless) at the root of the infantile, as objectified and silenced in the face of the Other. Moving out of this position requires these individuals to adopt a narrative in their own name. This is not possible without a movement of revolt and separation from the Other, enabling the subject's subversion (falling from the place of the object).

This movement changes the position of the subject both in terms of the singular "self" and the group to which they belong and with which they identify. It also modifies the discursive conditions established in the field of the Other. It seems that we are currently experiencing the successful consequences of the demands of minority groups, both in terms of sexual and racial, and decolonial issues.

It is urgent to investigate how these processes are occurring, what resistances they encounter – within and outside of psychoanalysis – and what their effects are on the psychopathology of the subject and the clinical aspect of social bonds.

Identity Fictions

The alienation/separation process developed by Lacan (1964/1988) in his seminar on the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis is indeed a key element in our inquiries regarding contemporaneity and its effects on subjectivity and, consequently, in the conceptual framework of psychoanalysis. Concerning the contemporary debate about the use of the term "identity," given the critique of its imaginary and thus illusory status, we align with Soler (2018), who believes that "it is necessary to grasp that beneath the issue of identifications, it is the theme of identity that runs through all of Lacan's teaching, from beginning to end." He continues by saying, "When Lacan says that analysis aims at absolute difference... what is this formula if not a formula of radical identity in its difference and stability?" (p. 15).

Soler goes on to make an important differentiation that guides our reflections: the difference between an identity of alienation - the identity of social attributes - and one of separation. The latter is the type of identity that analysis aims for, one that upholds the singularity of each subject. Both, however, we would add, are equally fictional productions that organize a discursive terrain. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that alienated identity positions the subject in a condition external to their own attributes. They are designated by the Other with such and such qualities and, as such, are reified within the proposed specular framework.

However, the designation made by the Other is a complex matter since it includes a narrative that forms a bond. Without this initial identity, without attribution of qualities that allow subjective positioning about the master signifiers of a culture, there is no starting point for a divided or subverted subject, one who can truly become the author of their own narrative. This is what we are aiming to apprehend and describe: the discursive texts in which these master signifiers are situated. Freud referred to them as phylogenetic schemas, including the primal fantasies (primary scene, seduction fantasy, and castration complex - Freud 1915/2010, 1915-17/2014, 1918/2010). In part, according to him, a subject's psychopathological and conflictual dynamics could be a result of the non-confirmation of these schemas by lived experience, as we explored in another work concerning the Wolf Man case (POLI, 2014, p. 243 and onwards).

In a more general reading, less influenced by organicist biology, which was still present in Freud's work, we can

recognize in these so-called “phylogenetic schemas” the symbolic, imaginary, and real foundations of a given culture. They are primarily expressed through shared narratives, often more or less consciously, within a social bond, touching upon Real points that cannot be constituted as a referenced knowledge. These are the texts - mythical, literary, or, in short, fictional - that maintain social bonds and provide some consistency to being in the world together with others.

On the other hand, the separation process, as conceived by Lacan, allows the emergence of an effective position of authorship and subjective authorization. This implies moving away from the object position occupied in the shared text, from being a character in a story not of one’s own making, while simultaneously being able to use it.

Fantasy and its Crossings

The elements mentioned lead our inquiries to the realm of fantasy and its fundamental narratives. As we mentioned earlier, Freud began with three fundamental fantasies - namely, the primal scene, the seduction fantasy, and the castration complex - as foundational texts that constitute the Other scene, the unconscious. Lacan made a well-known effort for those familiar with his work to “mathematize” (to “mathematize”) such subjective functions as fantasy, inscribing its formula on the graph of desire: $\$ \diamond a$ (LACAN, 1957-58/1999; 1960/1998).

This formula is intentionally devoid of narrative and can be differently occupied by discourse. However, the way this occupation or narrative body is formed is not trivial.

For example, we can introduce the exploration of these elements by asking about Freud’s formulation of the fantasy “Beating a child” (FREUD, 1919/2010). It does not form part of the triad of original fantasies indicated by Freud but serves a very specific function in the subject’s relationship with the Other concerning original masochism, which was only elaborated upon toward the end of Freud’s work. In addition to the evident economic and metapsychological issues in this formulation, it also has its connection to Freud’s reading of social bonds.

In “Civilization and Its Discontents,” he is quite direct when he states:

“The neighbor is not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also a temptation to satisfy his aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him.” (FREUD, 1930/2010, p. 123-124)

And, following that, he subscribes to the Hobbesian proposition: “homo homini lupus” (“man is a wolf to man”), calling for the experience of life and the knowledge of the history of peoples to justify such a statement. And yes, it seems true based on our experience and history. However, this should not prevent us from questioning its necessity and unequivocal determination, as it seems to have been adopted thoughtlessly by a significant part of the psychoanalytic community.

As mentioned above, if we can now follow Dussel’s reading, in which the foundation myth of modernity established by Cartesian rationalism needs to be reread and considered in its function of dominating and subordinating another, colonized Other (marked by biopolitical determinants such as sex and race), we need to ask whether the prior ignorance of such a relationship might be determinative of a presumed naturalization of a dominance drive and/or original masochism.

In the realm of philosophical fiction, the morality presented by Hobbes is just one version of the political nature of the social contract. Freud adopted it in the context of interwar Europe. Certainly, we are not in a better cultural situation now, but we believe it is possible and necessary to question what other narratives of social bonding construction could be possible, even considering the implicated instinctual dynamics. Our intention with these questions is to denaturalize a common argument among psychoanalysts that, since aggression is inherent to human nature, there are no alternatives other than starting from this premise and seeking sublimated cultural solutions, etc. The risk is the essentialization of a certain “principle of subordination,” as we have termed it, embedded in the exercise of aggressive or deadly instincts.

There is something, both at the foundation of this Freudian argument and in subsequent readings, that needs to be qualified and updated, and it resembles other naturalizations that assume a not always explicit narrative. We refer to those that propose femininity as a naturalized presupposition of a given subjective position. Both about the dominance instinct and the feminine - among others - there is a subtext, an unconscious discourse, of which Freudian psychoanalysis seems to be the author.

The extent to which these “cultural fantasies,” if we can call them that, are interpretations of culture made by Freud, and the extent to which they are, as “fantasy constructions,” inscriptions of a narrative that still needs to be examined, is the type of question we need to consider in a “psychoanalysis to come.” The same applies to their singular versions stated in clinical work, such as “beating a child,” which - as Rivera (2020, 2023) has proposed reconsidering Freud’s description of the castration complex - requires a broader perspective that allows for different angles and viewpoints.

Similar work has been done in the field of philosophy. For example, Buck-Morss’s (2011) remarkable article indicates a selective ignorance regarding the influence of the Haitian revolution on Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit” and the composition of the famous figure of the Master and Slave, as she manages to demonstrate. This did not, of course, prevent the philosopher from maintaining a Eurocentric and fundamentally racist argument in many of his works. Nevertheless, considering this historical and, to some extent, circumstantial aspect allows for a reading that goes beyond the classical academicism that usually prevails in the interpretation of Hegelian philosophy. This has clear political-ideological effects on the interpretation and transmission of his texts and work.

In a homologous sense, we can ask what effect Dussel's attribution of "Ego conquiro" to Descartes' meditations would have on Lacan's work. A similar question was raised by Santer (1997) regarding Freud's interpretation of the Schreber case. According to the author's own words: "Freud's interpretation of the case revolved around a radical denial of his own implication in this cultural archive [misogynistic and anti-Semitic]" (p.130). As is well known, the Schreber case forms the basis of Freud's theory that paranoid delusion is structured by the repression of homoerotic impulses. This argument is repeated in other texts by the psychoanalyst (e.g., FREUD, 2015/2010), so it cannot be seen as an isolated mistake. Of course, there are many other important and fruitful theses developed by Freud in the Schreber text that still support a possible clinical approach to psychoses today. However, it should also be made explicit that certain arguments, like this one, are simply wrong and, above all, stem from an ideological bias that the psychoanalyst uncritically adopted.

What seems most important to us is not to provoke historical revisionism but to produce a methodological framework that can demonstrate the detrimental effects of some contextual omissions. Furthermore, it should not constantly rely on and assume a defensive position in anticipation of when a feminist, anthropologist, or philosopher will "call our attention" to our own ideological determinants. In the specific case of Freud's interpretation regarding the supposed homosexual fantasies of paranoid individuals, the "unwritten" history of excluding homosexual candidates from psychoanalytic training in the IPA (BULLAMAH, 2020) is just one of the cruelest and longest-lasting traces, a result of an ideological narrative that takes for granted the partnership between sexual orientation and psychopathology.

Methodological Inconclusions

In his important study on History and Psychoanalysis, Michel de Certeau (2011) presents a possible definition of fiction as "the text that declares its relationship with the singular place of its production" (p. 75). In the field of history, as in psychoanalysis, this means not conceiving fiction in opposition to reality, as falsehood opposes truth. This is the perspective of the scientific discourse that aims to erase the subject and assume an objective text, without any difference from the reality it seeks to construct.

Fiction, as grasped by Certeau, is the text that includes its author, not necessarily the "person" of an author, but the enunciative place from which that text, that narrative, is written.

This step would also need to be taken in the realm of psychoanalytic productions. Among us, especially in the Lacanian field, a study and transmission procedure that resembles an exegesis of foundational texts is still prevalent, rather than the due attention to what they themselves propose, which is to be a theory of clinical practice or of the subject. If "truth has the structure of fiction," as Lacan repeatedly stated (e.g., 1955/1998, p. 19), we must recognize our own position as participants in this structure and as characters and/or addressees in the plot that includes the letter/word we seek to find. This does not mean the impossibility of critically reflecting on these structures; on the contrary, it certainly implies recognizing the difficulty posed by them, as it is not about producing a metatheory, which can only be realized through deception.

To do this, it is necessary to revisit the complex relationship between the field of social materialities and the narrative production of subjective and cultural fictions. This aspect is much more complex and requires a theoretical and conceptual study to clarify, and perhaps correct, how psychoanalysis intervenes in this dialectic. We have influential authors, both within and outside the psychoanalytic field, such as Jameson (1992), Žižek (2017), Kehl (2008), and Mitchell (1975; 1988) - to name a few that we personally hold in high regard - who adopt a Marxist-based reading, asserting that social and material conditions form the basis for superstructural productions of language. In future studies, we would like to compare this proposal with Lacan's reading of discourses (Lacan, 1969-70/1992) to assess their differences and similarities. We believe that these methodological reflections are essential for the advancement of psychoanalysis and its relevance in the contemporary context.

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