

Responsibility of psychoanalytic practice in a world in transition

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In this presentation I would like to focus on the nature of the present and the responsibility/place of psychoanalytic practice in this unprecedented time of transition. How can a practice that engages radical singular subjective positions participate in the collective tasks we face today.

As illustrated in the Black Mirror presentations, it has become impossible to ignore the unparalleled challenges our species and because of us most other species, are facing at this moment. The extraordinary question that we are facing now is: 'Are we going to make it as a species at all?'

Civilizations have a tendency to collapse. That seems to be the norm; the Roman Empire, the demise of the Incas, the Aztecs etc. What is different today is that we have a globally interdependent civilization with unmatched technological advances in artificial intelligence and bio technology while we are also debasing the substrate on which we depend. What we are dealing with is exponential rivalry in the middle of exponential population growth, exponential depletion of our resources, exponential pollution while factoring in technologies that enable us self-terminate on a global scale taking most of the other species with us.

We are operating with the same rivalling consciousness that have led to the collapse of civilizations in the past but now we are factoring in technology that enables us to radically speed up our demise.

What could be a narrative for the 21st century that could lead to a different social bond that is not based on the potentially catastrophic depletion and pollution of our habitat? And how can or does psychoanalytic practice contribute to that?

Since the turn of the 19th century, we have been operating under the capitalistic discourse which has produced unprecedented wealth for most people in the West. The premise of capitalism and liberalism is that if we just continue to liberalize and globalize our political and economic systems, we will produce peace and prosperity for all. The discourse of the 20th century, after the 2nd WORLD WAR combined democracy and human rights with state sponsored education and health care. And still we ended up with Brexit and Trump?

The choices we make depend on how we make sense. But right now our sense-making capacity seems to be incapable of dealing with the world we have created. How do we make sense of the fact that big data algorithms make it possible to create digital dictatorships in which all power is concentrated in the hands of a tiny elite, potentially pushing billions of people out of the job market, where they no longer suffer from exploitation but from irrelevance. These challenges not only threaten our democracies and our welfare state; these challenges will also impact on our subjectivity, our symbolic coordinates and morality. Is 21st century Homo Sapiens irrevocably reduced to an object?

Through psychoanalytic practice, we come to understand that our conscious intent has very little effect on what we actually do. The unconscious is precisely the distance that exists between our actions and our understanding of their meaning. We know that something rules the roost and it is not I. We find ourselves doing what we do not want to do even though we think of

ourselves as autonomic beings. We act as owners of our body over which we believe we have authority. It is at the core of our deep-seated feeling of self as the person in charge of our destiny. However this “everydayness” illusion is now deeply challenged. The disturbance of the Earth’s systems and how we contributed to this disturbance will have ramifications that might well be beyond our capacity to manage because the change will not be linear nor gradual. The tipping point is likely to remain more or less invisible until we have passed it. We could see changes of state so abrupt and profound that no continuity can be safely assumed.

Will we continue to be able to make sense of the world we have created? Symbolic/imaginary coordinates matter. Politics is often not so much a fight for the efficient execution of a chosen policy but a fight about the ideals that underpin these goals. For instance, right now the UN pact dealing with immigration is on the brink of producing a political crisis within the Belgian Federal government, with one coalition partner with major reservations about signing even though it is not legally binding.

We need to urgently revisit our fundamental questions.

Who am I?

What am I doing here?

Can I control my destiny?

What to do if the principles of open markets, accountable governance of democracy and human rights no longer hold firm as the foundation for human progress in this century.

What could be the new discourse?

We need a new basis for identity.

The answer to the question of “Who am I?” will have to include myself as an emergent property of an ecosystem, the accidental support for actions which are greater than I. It does not work to optimize my quality of life over your quality of life particularly if my quality of life endangers most species on this planet.

Our search for knowledge will have to exceed reason and logic to include the drive because what we are facing now exceeds logic and reason. The answer to the question ‘Can I control my destiny?’ will have to include the knowledge that the power of man is both infinitely greater and smaller than his destiny.

How do we promote social change in an ethical and effective manner in a large number of people to have results at the level of the real? As psychoanalysts, we might urgently need to revisit Lacan’s four discourses and revisit our modes of educating, governing, desiring and analysing.

The paradoxical, dangerous fix humanity finds itself in at this time, is that the subject is the instrument or the incidental support for an action which is greater than itself while there is at the same time no master who can direct his action. This condemns the subject to a radical subjective responsibility for his response to something for which the reigns are not in his hands.