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Mass Psychology and Psychosocial Assemblies

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Abstract

In the hundred years since Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* was published, much has changed and much has stayed the same. This article explores the resonance of Freud's book with contemporary issues around inclusion and exclusion, masses and assemblies, and the question of how a practice of ethical relationality can emerge across a shared social terrain. Drawing on concepts from psychosocial studies and leaning especially on Judith Butler's recent work on assemblies and on grievability, I argue that patterns of division and exclusion, notably along racialised lines, emerge from insistently violent responses to vulnerability. Understanding the intricate intersection between what are usually differentiated as 'personal' and 'social' domains in ways recognisable within group analysis, is an important move towards contesting this violence and towards a situation in which all lives become grievable.

Key words: assemblies; grievability; group psychology; psychosocial studies; racism.

Mass Psychology and Psychosocial Assemblies

The Psychosocial Subject

Freud's (1921) *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the 'I'*, known in the *Standard Edition* as *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, begins with a famous and unexpected paragraph.

The contrast between individual psychology and social or group psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely. It is true that individual psychology is concerned with the individual man and explores the paths by which he seeks to find satisfaction for his instinctual impulses; but only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others. In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well. (p.69)

We could be reading Winnicott here. Freud is usually cast as a 'closed system' thinker, his focus firmly on what he calls in this passage 'individual psychology', his account of human motivations firmly rooted in their internal world. Indeed, it could be argued that his system becomes more individualistic and biological as he ages. The Death Drive, newly invented or discovered in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* just a year or so earlier (Freud, 1920), imagines much of the source of life's energy as coming from universal drives embedded in each of us individually; and even his great social texts of later years, notably *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud, 1930), mark out the source of human struggle as repression of these drives by a society set against the individual. Yet here, in *Group Psychology*, he might be writing, 'there is no such thing as a baby' (Winnicott, 1975, p.99); there is no individual without 'someone else... as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent' and individual psychology is first and foremost, or at least at the same time, 'social psychology as well.'

This is surely enough to establish Freud as a psychosocial thinker, in this book of his at least, if we understand psychosocial studies to be concerned 'with the ways in which psychic and social processes demand to be understood as implicated in each other, as mutually constitutive and co-produced, and hence always to be read together' (Frosh, 2019, p.101). For Freud, this was perhaps a lightly held or precarious conviction, always likely to give way to his relentless interest in building up an understanding of the individual unconscious. However, we should note how from *Totem and Taboo* onwards (Freud, 1913), Freud was intrigued by the social or 'civilisational' origins of psychic life, including patterns of Darwinian and Lamarckian inheritance and a speculative notion of prehistorical primal hordes that is reiterated in the *Group Psychology* book and in his last major work, *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939). All this simply means, to coin a phrase, that 'psychosocial Freud' really existed; as he wrote in the continuation of the opening quotation, 'all the relations which have hitherto been the chief subject of psycho-analytic research – may claim to be considered as social phenomena' (Freud, 1921, p. 69).

A hundred years later, much has changed in the world, especially in relation to technology and globalisation, yet much remains the same. Wars continue; people are displaced in huge numbers; women are still attacked daily; sexual and gender pluralities still produce moral panics and deep hatred; inequality is pervasive; and racism is still the most tangible, most destructive and most widespread force running through societies everywhere. Even antisemitism, which was a defining feature of Freud's time and which one might have hoped had been eradicated along with the Third

Reich, has been fully resurrected and made respectable again; and antiblack racism in its various formations, the legacy of colonialism and slavery, is rife. Black Lives Matter and the distribution of suffering under Covid have demonstrated this clearly. For example, we have seen in the pandemic how some lives have been made to matter more than others, how some populations are disposable in the interests of economic and political concerns that derive from failures of care and in some countries – Brazil is the exemplar – a masculinist denialism that has the flavour of murderous psychopathy. Covid may be a biological entity, but its spread was caused by globalisation as well as social neglect, and its impact is mediated by social structures. This unequal distribution of suffering, intimately tied up with poverty and ‘race’, shows yet again how much health and illness are socially structured. What affects us as individuals is not so much what comes ‘from within’, but what bears on us from outside. Once again, however, the distinction between inside and out is a false one; the virus is part of a worldwide ecology that infiltrates each of us, affecting our dreams and nightmares, our inner anxieties and our relationships with others – who we care for and who we overlook. The ‘psychosocial subject’, as I would term all of us, is a nodal point at which these forces meet – the inner structures of prejudicial thought and the external structures of racism being amongst the most cogent examples.

Assemblies

Almost a hundred years after *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, here is Judith Butler’s (2015) formulation of how the individual is constituted by and in the social. Picking up on the neoliberal antagonism towards interdependency, which we have seen both in the UK and in the USA as an attack on ‘welfare’, as if welfare is something to be despised, Butler wants to reassert the importance of ‘alliance’ between different people and groups within the context of mass movements that she calls ‘assemblies’. There is much that might be said about this terminology, but for the moment note how she links the idea of an assembly between bodies – for instance, a mass demonstration – and the kinds of assembly that make up our subjective existence.

What I am calling alliance is not only a future social form; sometimes it is latent, or sometimes it actually is the structure of our own subject-formation, as when alliance happens within a single subject, when it is possible to say, ‘I am myself an alliance, or I ally with myself or my various cultural vicissitudes.’ ...Such a view, which implicates social relationality in the first-person pronoun, challenges us to grasp the insufficiency of identitarian ontologies for thinking about the problem of alliance. For the point is not that I am a collection of identities, but that I am already an assembly, even a general assembly, or an assemblage. (Butler, 2015, p. 68).

There is a lot in this quotation and it is a difficult one, relying on a context that I have not been able to give in detail for its full sense. But the point to dwell on here is Butler’s assertion of the state of the subject as a collection of ‘internal’ alliances between different forms of precarity, by which she conveys the idea that each of us is constituted through vulnerabilities that are inherently social. We do not form ourselves out of a set of firm identities, she argues, but rather out of an alliance of minoritised statuses; this is of a piece with her earlier work (Butler, 2009) on the relationship between vulnerability and violence and the question of how we can form ourselves nonviolently out of the vulnerability in which we are all mired. It also has echoes at least of the idea that we are constituted by our objects, that our supposedly ‘inner lives’ are made up of patterns of internalisation and identification derived from, and feeding back into, our social relationships. We make alliances, Butler seems to be saying here, both internally between aspects of our subjecthood and externally in the ways in which we link across our different groupings – sexuality, gender, race and so on, and in the patterns of assembly that make up our groupishness and sometimes spill over onto the streets. From here, of course, it is easy to see how the supposedly inner world of our subjective life is linked – is part of – the political world that grounds and structures our precarious being. This happens in two directions, as the supposedly external social world forms and informs

psychic structures and processes (the organisation of our inner worlds) and as this inner assemblage also impacts upon the world as we encounter it.

Vulnerability and Violence

Groups, masses and assemblies: these continue to be central to social life and – with the imbrication of social and personal that I have been describing under the heading ‘psychosocial’ – to the constitution of the subject itself. Jacqueline Rose (2007, p. 62), referencing *Group (or Mass) Psychology*, glosses the situation like this:

We only exist through the others who make up the storehouse of the mind: models in our first tentative steps towards identity, objects of our desires, helpers and foes. The mind is a palimpsest in which the trace of these figures will jostle and rearrange themselves for ever more. From the very earliest moment of our lives – since without the rudiments of contact, the infant will not survive – we are ‘peopled’ by others. Our ‘psyche’ is a social space.

The power of this idea is to break down the social-individual divide, as I have already suggested; but it is also to make the mind a ‘mass’ phenomenon. This is not an *analogy* with groups, but a critique of any approach, whether psychoanalytic or otherwise, that separates each of us from others at any level of our consciousness. If we were to translate this into Levinasian terms (Levinas, 1969), for example, we might call it an assertion of the ‘pre-ontological’ nature of human relationality: the ‘demand’ of the other comes before any cognition, any experience or reasoning. But it seems that this is the ethical *implication* of primary relationality not its source, which in fact lies in the ubiquity of human vulnerability. As already noted, Butler (2012, p.56) makes a crucial link here between this vulnerability, which exudes from the fact of infantile dependence, and violence. She comments, ‘Thus, in the face of the other, one is aware of the vulnerability of that other, that the other’s life is precarious, exposed, and subject to death; but one is *also* aware of one’s own violence, one’s own capacity to cause the death of the other, to be the agent who could expose the Other to his dissolution.’ This is the violence drawn out in the subject by the precariousness of the other; why does it occur? In part because of the reciprocal vulnerability of each one of us when we actually look seriously at what and who it is that we need to help us to survive. Our vulnerability makes us subject to the violence of the other and also incites a response, which can be towards that other – the ethical response that fulfils the Levinasian injunction – or against it. Butler again:

It is crucial to distinguish between (a) that injured and rageful subject who gives moral legitimacy to rageful and injurious conduct, thus transmuting aggression into virtue, and (b) that injured and rageful subject who nevertheless seeks to limit the injury that she or he causes, and can do so only through an active struggle with and against aggression. The first involves a moralization of the subject that disavows the violence it inflicts, while the latter necessitates a moral struggle with the idea of non-violence in the midst of an encounter with social violence as well as with one’s own aggression. (Butler, 2009, p.172)

Our fragility can lead us to export violence onto the other, including the next generation as well as the supposed ‘enemy’. The challenge, which Butler (2020) codes under ‘nonviolence’, is to understand that personal vulnerability and even suffering can be a source of realisation of the precarity of all human subjects and (to use her more recent vocabulary), their potential grievability, which means to say, acknowledgement of their ‘mattering’ and their entitlement to continuing care. This of course occurs within awareness of the structures of inequality and oppression – hence why the slogan and movement is ‘Black Lives Matter’ and not ‘All Lives Matter’. It is also a key issue in thinking about groups, as it relates to what are usually thought of as boundary conditions but can also be considered a core dynamic question: that of inclusion and exclusion.

Managing the Mass

The centrality of questions of the mass and the group is hardly news. As Carla Penna (2022) describes, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards moral panics about the irrationality and bestiality of crowds fuelled anxious attempts to theorise and control them; leadership became both an exalted means of control and a feared channel for both fascism (both Mussolini and Hitler were dedicated readers and enthusiasts of Le Bon) and revolutionary insurrection; and later on, with the advent of critical theory and the attempt to understand Nazism as a mass phenomenon, issues surrounding the influence of ideology and propaganda on masses became central (Adorno, 1951). Penna summarises (m/s p.270): ‘today we are no longer involved in the threats of nineteenth-century crowd psychology or exclusively immersed in the classical model of twentieth-century mass psychology. We are dealing with new interdependencies in the sociocultural and political spheres, in which twentieth-century traumatic legacies and their psychosocial consequences for the social systems play an important role.’ We are also facing the delicate question of how revolutionary assemblies can be co-opted to reactionary ends; how right-wing populism can infiltrate groups who have forgotten the destructive force of fascism; and how despite this, something can happen to spark a mass into creativity and unleash the possibility of it being a medium for genuine change.

Here is an extended example given by Raluca Soreanu (2018, pp.207-8) in her powerful account of the Brazilian social uprising of 2013, before it all turned sour and the country ended up with a militaristic authoritarian as its president.

On June 20, 2013, more than one million people took to the streets in Rio de Janeiro. The crowd was in movement, it circulated in new and unpredictable ways, it flooded lateral streets, regrouped itself in the squares, only to return to the avenue. It constituted new flows, the flows of large gatherings: they were circular, oblique, spiralling.

At a certain point, while advancing on the Avenida Presidente Vargas, the protesters in the front lines encountered the first police barricade, heard the first explosions of the ‘bombas do efeito moral’ [‘bombs with moral effect’], as they are called in Brazil, and felt the tear gas in their nostrils. The density of the crowd at that time was immense. Encountering the barricade produced a massive agglomeration of bodies. In the moment when the first explosions were heard and the gas sensed, the tension rose, and instantly multiple threads of protesters started circulating in the same space, with body-to-body friction, as some decided to advance, while some wanted to return. This powerful new urban traffic of mass protests was accumulating in terms of seconds toward a general panic and toward a catastrophe, in which people start running and risk trampling each other.

In this moment of heightened tension, a rhythmic event occurs. One of the protesters stands up on a cement block, raises his long arms obliquely over the crowd, moving them slowly up and down, and utters in a strong deep voice, in attunement with his movements: ‘Sem correr! Sem correr! Sem correr!’ [‘No running! No running! No running’]. The repeated chants pause the collective body, which then lets itself be modulated by the containing voice-movement. The erratic threads of people who were prepared to run away in panic slow down and return to more orderly patterns. The collective does not collapse into a set of individuals, but maintains its synchronised modulations.

Soreanu understands this extraordinary moment as an instance of a kind of containment (‘someone is able to contain the movement of a crowd of tens of thousands, and their despair in re-living scenes of violence that transport them to the times of the military dictatorship’ – p.208), one in which the rhythmicity of the bodily action maintains and recreates a social body or indeed a new element of the social that resists destruction and promotes what she calls ‘a new complex of

subjectification': 'The oblique line drawn by the arms travels away from the individual body to contain and modulate the rhythm of the *socius*. In so doing, it creates a new *socius*, a new complex of subjectification. The collective has incorporated the obliqueness of care. A new semiotic conjunction becomes conceivable across arms-eyes-voice-moving crowd' (p.209). In this way, a certain act that is both in tune with the crowd and has an integrating enactment of symbolic leadership, offers protection and calmness and a way forward for a mode of progressive 'crowd control.' Quoting Ferenczi (1932, p.6), Soreanu comments, 'the organism begins to think.'

Soreanu herself is most interested in understanding this particular mass phenomenon as an instance of Ferenczian Orphic care and a way of thinking through psychic fragments and her account of this is imaginative and persuasive. But for the moment let us also think of it in terms of the way in which the boundaries of body and psyche dissolve; that is, a merging of the material, social, political and personal in one mass that has a life of its own. This is quite a precise carving out of a space that might be called 'psychosocial' in its adherence to a kind of unity that dispenses with these convenient and self-serving categories to explain that the division between individual and group is neither stable nor perspectival. The mass has a life of its own, its own rhythm; the binary of individual-social is a way perhaps of trying to deal with this, to ward it off; but something else is at stake, running through everything. This is not a matter of regression, the primary way of theorising it in the nineteenth century. It is rather a recognition that a group, a mass, a crowd – all those entities that might be differentiated and yet are usually run together – has a life and that this life is an embodied one ('the collective does not collapse into a collection of individuals, but maintains its synchronised modulations', as Soreanu writes). This also refers back to Butler's claim that assemblies constitute the subject, that 'I am already an assembly, even a general assembly, or an assemblage' (Butler, 2015, p. 68). The point here is that the distinction between individual and group falls away as *assemblage* becomes the pattern that runs through us all, 'rhizomatically' as the Deleuzians might say, making multiple the connections that we all have with elements of ourselves and others.

Primitivity and the Mass

Yet is this what groups offer and can be made to do? The idea of the group as irrational keeps returning, visible especially in the deep-rooted association between the mass and the 'primitive' or 'savage'. For example, Freud accepts to some extent the idea that groups promote regression and draws on a trope familiar from *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913) as he seeks to explain how people in the mass seem somehow to lose their minds:

Some of [the mass'] features – the weakness of intellectual ability, the lack of emotional restraint, the incapacity for moderation and delay, the inclination to exceed every limit in the expression of emotion and to work it off completely in the form of action – these and similar features, which we find so impressively described in Le Bon, show an unmistakable picture of a regression of mental activity to an earlier stage such as we are not surprised to find among savages or children. (Freud, 1921, p. 116)

I will not dwell on the associations of primitivity in psychoanalysis and the way Freud uses a standard racist model in which supposedly 'savage' peoples are conceptualised as children, a model that legitimises colonialism as a civilising mission and of course covers over the depredations of imperialism (Frosh, 2017). Greed and genuine savagery by the imperialists in the name of civilisation, was recognised as such by some even at the time, even as early as the sixteenth century, as George Makari (2021) shows in his recent history of xenophobia. Freud certainly uses this idea in *Group Psychology*, in particular when he returns to his 'just-so' hypothesis of the primal horde. We need to watch out for this, as when assumptions about group regression lead into a vision of collective societies as infantile and a developmentalist model of civilisation as marked by increasing individuation so that maturity is a matter of 'independence' and thence of celebration of the individualised consumer.

To be fairer to Freud, however, he is a critic both of Le Bon's easy assumption of the primitivity of the mass, and – ambiguously – of the primitive-civilised distinction that he also employs. In a powerful PhD thesis supervised by Jacqueline Rose, Akshi Singh argues persuasively that Freud's use of various terms that all get translated as 'primitive' or 'savage' reveal a far more nuanced understanding of the mental processes he is interested in than might appear from the English texts. Singh (2018, p.40) argues that 'Freud did indeed make a distinction between "primitive" and "civilised" but the distance between the two is never fixed in his writing. In the very texts where he collapses the two into each other, he also warns the reader against any such assimilation of the "savage" to the prehistoric.' The intricacies of this are not essential here, only to note that reading them tempers my own previous view that Freud bought in unabashedly to the colonial reduction (Frosh, 2017). However, what emerges even from a more preliminary examination of Freud's work on the primitive is how closely aligned this idea is to that of the unconscious and hence how weak can be the division between the savage and the civilised. The unconscious runs through all of us – this is indeed one of the ways in which the apparent boundaries between and within subjects dissolve, as is recognised in the group analytic idea of the 'social unconscious' (Hopper, 2002). Singh (p.52) comments on this that 'The "primitive" may occasionally be the fall guy in Freud's attempt to hold on to a progressivist view of civilisation, but he cannot be done away with so easily. Psychoanalysis, Freud writes, dealing as it does with the unconscious, with problems of death and mourning "has itself become uncanny to many people". In saying this, he suggests an intimacy between the primitive and psychoanalysis: it is as though the primitive is the double of psychoanalysis: they come to occupy the same uncanny place.' For Freud (1921, p.123), even when aligning the group with the primal horde, something else is at play:

in so far as men are habitually under the sway of group formation we recognize in it the survival of the primal horde. We must conclude that the psychology of groups is the oldest human psychology; what we have isolated as individual psychology, by neglecting all traces of the group, has only since come into prominence out of the old group psychology, by a gradual process which may still, perhaps, be described as incomplete.

Freud goes on immediately to qualify this by arguing that the leader of the primal horde was a genuine individual, not bound up in the libidinal ties and identifications that link each member of the group with one another in a 'horizontal' fashion but living outside the rule of the group. This means that individual and group psychology emerge at the same time. The leader is the individualised exception who makes the group possible: 'Even to-day the members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader; but the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident and independent' (*Ibid.*). But the point is a more general one: the unconscious runs through groups and individuals, patterning identifications and the combining of ego ideals in both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' relationships, making libidinal bonds the source of group alliances. It is not loss of boundaries that creates groups, but the structuring of relationships in certain ways – ways in which some bind together in love for each other and for a leader, and maximise these bonds through their exclusion of others. Freud summarises with a formulation that is echoed a century later in Butler's (2015, p.68) reference to the possibility of saying, 'I am myself an alliance, or I ally with myself or my various cultural vicissitudes':

Each individual is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions, and he has built up his ego ideal upon the most various models. Each individual therefore has a share in numerous group minds — those of his race, of his class, of his creed, of his nationality, etc. — and he can also raise himself above them to the extent of having a scrap of independence and originality. (Freud, 1921, p.129)

This is perhaps what is crucial for now: how it comes about that groups function in ways full of love and hate, and what can be done about this.

Exclusions

Jacqueline Rose (2007, p.63) describes Freud's trajectory like this:

From *Mass Psychology* to *Moses the Man*, his last major work, all Freud's writings on collective life share a question. What drives people to hatred?... As if Freud had made two utterly interdependent discoveries that also threaten to cancel or wipe each other out, taking the whole world with them. No man is an island: you are the others who you are. But the mind is also its own worst enemy; and there is no link between individuals, no collective identity, which does not lead to war.

The key issue here is how one can think of the ambivalence produced by the group or mass in relation to an ethic of nonviolence. Are we limited to containment, or is it possible to consider a new form of radical sociality through this kind of material? The negative side of the formation of groups is easy to see: how groups bind together through processes of identification but also of projection, in which, as Penna (2022) points out, the narcissism of small differences becomes a vital concept. Preserving the group through projecting its antagonistic elements into the supposed 'outsider' – one source, clearly of xenophobia – is a strategy for maintaining the group itself in its illusory belief in its members and in its leaders, as politicians have always known. Why the obviousness of this tactic does not lead to them being found out by the group members, the populace, is a moot point, presumably answerable in terms relating the avoidance of precarity to the defensive maintenance of illusions of safety; or maybe a simple paranoid-schizoid mechanism in which the appalled recognition of inner destructiveness is made a little more manageable by projecting it into the outside world, where a fantasy of dealing with it through the force of exclusion – or, indeed, literal force – can be entertained. This can happen at the level of the individual or of the group, if we can sustain that distinction; it is perhaps better thought of as a dynamic process, a mechanism of boundary-formation that runs through life and can be seen in various manifestations hovering around the skin of the person and of groups and masses – all human formations, in fact. Freud's (1920) *fort-da* template is instructive here: built out of observations of the play of his grandchild, this out-in formation is one that comes not only to define psychoanalysis as a process of repetition, but also to evoke the interminable practices of marginalising and assimilating that characterise groups, masses and nations – and in Freud's time specifically invoked the position of Jews like himself. Inside and out: seductively invited, then viciously excluded; at one moment a citizen, at another not human at all.

The terrors within the group are easy to find: rivalries, internecine conflict, ambition, wishes to displace leaders, fears of contamination. To link this back to group analysis, some time ago I was intrigued by thinking on the large group, which seemed to focus on anxiety produced in group members by the dissolution of boundaries – anxiety that could be productive as well as frightening. Some accounts, however, noted that it is not necessarily just this identity loss that is felt as so threatening, but also the simple proximity of the other – now cast as the neighbour in the group – who could call into question one's own sense of separate being and, in particular, could pose a threat by their 'too-closeness'. For instance, in a classic paper Pierre Turquet (1975) notes how the individual member of a group needs to feel a sense of security in relation to the 'skin of the neighbour', a sense of connection with an other who is close but also separate, a connection that can make the subject feel real as well as reassuringly in touch with others. The 'external boundary' offered by the skin defends the subject against an ever-present 'threat of becoming other than himself, of being in some way altered, pressurised, even diminished' (p.97). In the large group, however, there are many forces arrayed against the stability of this 'skin', which Turquet lists using a vocabulary full of the sense of something being awry with the other – with the neighbour on whom the subject actually depends.

In the large group, disruption of the skin-of-my-neighbour boundary is an ever-present threat from the action of the centrifugal forces...which both cause the I to withdraw, but also place him relationally in increasingly idiosyncratic and isolated positions. Continuity with this skin-of-

my-neighbour is also in jeopardy because the large group raises many more problems about these neighbours: ‘where, who, when, what are they?’ This experience of search and questioning is further aggravated by the almost daily changes in their spatial positioning, at first near, then far, now in front, now behind, now on the left, now on the right, and so on... These repeated and shifting changes of position in space give rise to additional questions: ‘Why these changes?'; ‘In what way has my neighbour changed?'; ‘Into what?'; ‘Where has he gone?; and so forth. (Turquet, 1975, p.101)

Dependence upon a neighbour who is in important ways unknowable, who slips out of one’s grasp and somehow through that becomes dangerous (Turquet lists *violence* as another major characteristic of the large group), suggests the preponderance of a sensation of persecution and anxiety, as regression occurs in the context of a lack of trust, and subjectivity comes to be premised on contact with someone who is not quite there. It emphasises the mysterious nature of this neighbour and the questions this raises; this produces an experience of interruption and disruption explicitly annotated with the term ‘threat’.

If this is a recognisable phenomenon in the large group, it is worth noting the very *embodied* description that Turquet offers, using the image of the ‘skin-of-my-neighbour’. ‘Continuity’ with the skin-of-my-neighbour is ached for but the disruption to the ‘boundary’ between one skin and another ‘is an ever-present threat.’ In a vision that seems redolent with ancient antisemitic tropes, the shape-shifting neighbour is not just next to one, but *inside* one, as a kind of invader. The neighbour is indeed someone too close, who gets under one’s skin; this verbal formula is itself an acknowledgement of the interpenetrability of bodies within a psychic frame; someone who invades our mind is imagined as within our skin. It is worth comparing this dystopian view of the bodily encounter with Butler’s (2015, pp.73-4) exploration of bodies coming together in the street as a mode of democratic insistence:

To rethink the space of appearance in order to understand the power and effect of public demonstrations for our time, we will need to consider more closely the bodily dimensions of action, what the body requires, and what the body can do, especially when we must think about bodies together in a historical space that undergoes a historical transformation by virtue of their collective action: What holds them together there, and what are their conditions of persistence and of power in relation to their precarity and exposure?

Bodies together – a return of the mass – present a demand for a kind of immediate, pre-ontological recognition. Butler links this with precarity, with making-vulnerable, a state of being that is resonant with Soreanu’s (2018) Brazilian illustration given earlier. Bodies coming together in vulnerability and out of precarity, needing to express their hopes and fears, are a powerful statement of being; not that everyone is the same, but rather that everyone is forged in the same *elemental*, and binding together as a mass, as an assembly, is a way of giving expression to this.

Grievability

Of course, one problem with the mass, then and now, is to differentiate between the kind of massing that is progressive, enabling and democratic, and the kind that resembles more the ‘crowd’ of the nineteenth century and the fascist mass that for good reason dominated the imagination of the theorists of the mid-twentieth. When is a mass a force for good and when is it a reactionary phenomenon, and what might govern the transformation of a mass from one state to another, as happened to some extent in Brazil, where the democratic protests of 2013 were co-opted into neo-fascist rallies and the near-destruction of the democratic state? Here, I think, the question of exclusion comes back into play. For Butler, following Arendt, the question is one of rights-bearing; she writes (2015, p. 88), that for Arendt, ‘this is not a matter of finding the human dignity within each person, but rather of understanding the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality. Indeed, there is no human, in

her view, if there is no equality. No human can be human alone. And no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality.' The bodies that assemble on the street do so in a spirit of equality that extends further than that assembly or mass itself; it includes those others who would be excluded by the forces of reaction. Moreover, the notion of the 'other' has to disappear here, because it always presupposes a 'same' – here there is me, over there is you, the other to myself. The language of the other, which a while ago seemed to be a way of reaching out ('we must recognise the other and not try to assimilate all differences to the same'), now, in the light of Black Lives Matter and the decolonising movement, seems to be an exclusionary language, in which the other is looked at as different, always at risk of ceasing to be included in the 'us', and hence of no longer being quite human. Something must be invoked in the assembly that breaks into the dynamics and politics of exclusion so that the so-called other – perhaps now genuinely best theorised as the 'neighbour', which is the language used by Turquet – becomes part of the mass and not just a recipient of unwanted projections. The assembly becomes sustainable by its ethical bonds, not just by a set of identifications premised on the binary of 'different' and 'same'.

Butler (2020) gives us a language with which to think this ethical relationality, in her notion of 'grievability', which has become central to much of her thinking, especially on resistance and nonviolence. Grievability distinguishes between lives worth preserving and others that are discardable; those lives that would be grieved if they were lost, and those that do not seem to count. Grievability is not in itself a statement about grief, but rather about mattering, in the sense of 'Black Lives Matter': 'To be grievable,' writes Butler (p. 59), 'is to be interpellated in such a way that you know your life matters; that the loss of your life would matter; that your body is treated as one that should be able to live and thrive, whose precarity should be minimized, for which provisions for flourishing should be available.' Yet this is not the situation for all people, and the inequality in grievability – in the valuing of lives – is deeply racialised. Butler discusses this in detail in relation to the killing of black men in America, defined automatically within the racist phantasmagoria as posing a threat, even when running away; in the unreported and mislabelled deaths of black women; and in the contemporary European racism expressed in the willed deaths of 'thousands of migrants who have lost their lives in the Mediterranean,' lives which are 'precisely lives that are not deemed worthy of safeguarding' (2020, p. 120).

The perceptions here are not peculiarly psychoanalytic ones, but in *The Force of Non-Violence* Butler (2020) joins her account of grievability to psychoanalysis, giving Freud and Melanie Klein privileged positions. The latter is used in an evocative portrait of vulnerability to understand how grievability might be part of a process of reparation for the damage that one has done to others and for the damage done to oneself. What Butler points out about this is how reparation and guilt can be 'pre-emptive', how they can arise out of the wish *not to do* damage, or perhaps the knowledge that damage is very likely to be done, and then involve putting in place the conditions under which the life of the other – and hence one's own life – can be repaired, preserved and protected in the light of that future-and-past damage. The vulnerability one feels, the hurt that has been done to one – the conditions under which social violence usually thrives, as it looks to project these hurts and vulnerabilities into minoritised 'others' – can also be the basis for a philosophy of ethics that takes the grievability of others as foundational and so resists precisely that derogation, that disowning of precarity on which destructive social forces feed.

What is being attempted here is a statement of how lives are made to matter and not to matter, and how this construction of grievability is distributed on racialised and gendered grounds. Alongside this is the development of an argument for contestation of violence that is forged out of a psychoanalytic sensitivity to the conditions in which our vulnerabilities might become links with others rather than be translated into racist forms of repudiation. What Butler suggests is that these racialised and gendered forms of violence can be interpreted through the lens of vulnerability and in

this way can track the turning of the hurt received into the hurt inflicted. Our vulnerabilities make us sites for racist discarding of others and for the perpetuation of self-destructive inequalities and hatreds through this; the question is whether and how it might be possible to move from this reactive position to one in which the construction of others as grievable becomes a primary, shared political concern, and one that does indeed not distinguish between different populations in terms of their racialised worth and does not make the politics of exclusion the basis of social life.

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