

Psychoanalysis, a psychology of the masses for these digital times

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Abstract

As today, it is more and more the digital that groups and amasses us, this paper turns to Sigmund Freud's Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the 'I' to address a range of questions: what is the social (the group); what is its relation to the herd (or the mass); what is an individual; what is the latter's relation to the social and/or to the mass; and what, if anything, changes on all these levels in digital times? To answer these questions, the following claims are made: psychoanalysis is not an individual psychology, psychoanalysis is not a social psychology—psychoanalysis is a mass psychology. The paper first scrutinises how Freud's subversion of the traditional question 'how does a mass become a group?' eventually positions the figure of the Leader at the junction of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. From here we move to Jacques Lacan and two of his early writings in which he tries to conceive of leaderless groups and of subjectivation beyond the reference of the Father ('Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism' and 'British Psychiatry and the War'). On the one hand, this allows to assess the current digital massification processes. On the other hand, the fact that we conclude that psychoanalysis itself cannot offer an algorithmisable model of the becoming on (inter) subjectivity, should be our prompt to take a political stance.

KEYWORDS

capitalism, digitalisation, Freud, groups, intersubjectivity, Lacan, mass psychology

1 | INTRODUCTION

The restrictive measures with which the Coronavirus pandemic was met had us lock-downed, separated, and isolated. The key signifier in a large part of the world was 'social distance': we were not to come together; we were not to aggregate. Governments and experts urged us to stay safe at home and use social media whilst awaiting better times. Ostensibly, it was digital technology that brought us back together, that allowed us to unite safely. The digital, hence, facilitating the individual to partake in the social and the collective? We were apparently supposed to forget the manifold critiques of digital social media, such as philosopher Bernard Stiegler's radical verdict that technology risks leading to the 'herd-becoming of behaviour and of the generalised loss of individuation' (Stiegler, 2011, p. 54). Technology, hence, as a threat to both the social and the individual? At the very least, the pandemic, speeding up the digitalisation of (inter)subjectivity, opens up a whole range of questions: what is the social (the group); what is its relation to the herd (or the mass); what is an individual; what is the latter's relation to the social and/or to the mass; and what, if anything, changes on all these levels in digital times?

Regarding the question of the relation of the subject to the collectivity, Sigmund Freud's *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the 'I'* offers a decisive directive as Freud (2004) argued that 'the antithesis between individual and social or mass psychology (...) loses a great deal of its sharpness on close examination' (p. 9). Note, in this respect, that Freud's title is not 'Individual Psychology and the Analysis of the Mass', nor is it 'Mass Psychology and Individual Psychology'. One could thus argue that from a psychoanalytic perspective there is no such thing as individual psychology; psychology is mass psychology. This is where Nestor Braunstein (2020) perspicuously argued that in times of pandemic we need to first study mass psychology before we proceed to the analysis of the Ego. In contrast, today the mainstream approach is the other way around; that is, the argument that, as the pandemic affects our mental health (our individual psychology), we need to connect to the social by all means available, with the digital means, as said, being widely promoted.

As in the digital we are more and more connected and aggregated via algorithms, a first paradox cannot escape us: digital technologies isolate us in order to connect us; and, through connecting us, they isolate us. That is, Big Data turns us into individual nodes which are aggregated into a mass or, should I write here, into a herd. As such, clearly, although we do not become the anonymous parts (that what we think to be the foundational element of mass formations), as we are traced and tracked and are thus fully identifiable, the digital aggregation of people is far removed from what we consider to be the social. That is, as Braunstein (2020) put it, the digital masses are constituted according to profiles which reduce subjects to metadata. Or, the digital amasses us whilst suffocating the social, and this is where eventually we end up as isolated individuals. In this respect Hui Kyong Chun (2020) spoke of a perverse effect of the logic of data-networks: 'it spreads the word neighbor everywhere, in order to impoverish it conceptually':

Machine learning is filled with 'neighborhood' methods used for pattern recognition and collaborative filtering, which create segregated clusters of agitated sameness. Networks presume and prescribe homophily—that birds of a feather flock together, that similarity breeds connection. (Chun, 2020)

Could we understand this as a kind of perversion of Freud's scheme of mass psychology? Digitality creates horizontal bonds of identification and sameness (allowing for commodification and consumerism) whilst, contra Freud's scheme, bypassing the figure of the leader which Freud situated at the place of the common Ego Ideal libidinally binding each group member to the leader. The digital mass seems to be both without subjects (as these are reduced to metadata), and leaders.

However, perhaps, when one as a sorcerer's apprentice wants to produce the alchemic gold of the multitude (to be exploited), one should expect the backlash of unchecked mass effects and especially of the call for the leader. To begin with, arguably, our era definitively has not seen the advent of the leaderless or fatherless society: just consider the authoritarian state reclaiming jurisdiction worldwide, signalling that paternalism still structures the social. As Balibar (2020) wrote in relation to the pandemic, COVID is not an example testifying of a return to the state;

rather, it shows that the reverse of neoliberal capitalism has always been 'interventionist, paternalistic, potentially authoritarian, possibly discriminatory'. Perhaps a more clear instance of how the masses, becoming more and more digitally and horizontally structured, crave for leaders is the appearance of what Žižek (2020) terms the New Obscene Masters such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Johnson, Putin and others. Are these little father figures, as one might call them, the cursed offspring of a capitalism that did away with hierarchical structures culminating in digital surveillance capitalism where digital technology allows for, allegedly direct and horizontal social linking?

Perhaps we should not be too quickly carried away in a social psychological use of psychoanalysis, claiming to be able to reveal the dynamics and the logic of how technology plays out in the social field. It can be argued that digital technology is not some 'independent variable' whose impact on the fields of (inter)subjectivity is to be laid bare by psy-experts. Here an old wisdom might be valid: when your house is on fire you should be very suspicious of those people who are the first and the most prominent in offering to fight the fire, as precisely they might be the arsonists. That is, we should not miss that digital control, the algorithmic steering of the masses is actually based on (socio-) psychological theories and models. We are profiled precisely along the categories and pigeonholes of mainstream (social) psychology and this is how we are both isolated and aggregated. Think of the Cambridge Analytica scandal: it was psychologists who provided the working base for the algorithms to construct the profiles of Facebook users, psy-profiles which were then sold to advertising companies (for a more extensive discussion, see De Vos, 2020). Given this central role of psychological theories and models in structuring and designing digital platforms, social media, and the like, it is not unproblematic to claim that psychoanalysis can analyse and chart the unintended outcomes of data technologies, the inadvertent effects which the psy-theories underpinning the data-economy themselves would be incapable of seeing and understanding. For the question is, if psychoanalysis is the theory capable of showing and revealing the problematic implication of psychological models in the digital, would psychoanalysis then be usable (in digital technologies, in algorithms) to mitigate the negative aspects of psychological profiling and data-aggregation? You will understand what I am hinting at: could then psychoanalysis be potentially abused, to even heighten digital control by; for example, bringing the re-entry of the little obscene leaders itself under algorithmic command? This would be the dark side of the idea that bringing in psychoanalysis might allow the digital to aggregate subjects into more just and emancipatory forms of the social.

Perhaps we should adhere here to the adage that psychoanalysis is not a psychology, that it is not a generalisable Science, but a science of the singular. This would mean that psychoanalysis cannot lead to a formula or a blueprint allowing a modelling of the virtual world and hence the steering of the virtual masses. Hence, a useless psychoanalysis when it comes to design algorithms, but still a useful psychoanalysis when it comes to formulating a critique of the digitalisation of (inter)subjectivity? Psychoanalysis, thus, as a theory allowing us to show how the 'fake psychologies' underpinning the algorithmic amassing of people, unwittingly and unknowingly get caught up in a different logic (unfathomable in their own models), a logic which psychoanalysis could lay bare, albeit a logic which itself could not be digitalised and virtualised. Is that what we should aim at?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I propose that we are led by the following argument: psychoanalysis is not an individual psychology, psychoanalysis is not a social psychology—psychoanalysis is a mass psychology. In the remainder of this essay I will first turn to Freud's psychology of the mass after which I will bring in Jacques Lacan's attempt to go beyond the Freudian leader and his project to conceive of a leaderless group.

2 | FREUD'S PSYCHOLOGY OF THE MASSES

In some areas of so-called critical psychology one takes issue with the individualisation reigning within mainstream psychology (e.g., experimental psychology or behaviourist and cognitive psychology) which is opposed by putting forward the social as the first and basic level of both the analysis and the practices. But what is the social they are talking about? Which social and, perhaps also, whose social? In this respect, one could point at British Prime Minister Boris Johnson who at the end of March 2020, in the full blossoming of the pandemic, said that 'one thing (...) the

coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society' (PA Media, 2020). Does this not beg the question which society Johnson would have in mind? Johnson was, of course, hinting at Margaret Thatcher's infamous dictum 'there is no such thing as society', to which she added '[t]here are individual men and women and there are families'. Of course, for psychoanalysis both categories, the social and the individual, are problematic. They are barred, to use the Lacanian terminology: they are never fully equal to itself, they never can reach closure. What is more, as both categories are problematic, they must be thought together, and this is where, for psychoanalysis, the mass comes in.

To elaborate on the foregoing point, let us start from the observation that in our times, notwithstanding Johnson's nodding approvingly to society, there is less and less interest in dealing or working with the social or with groups. For example, in social care institutions for children and youngsters, one works less and less with groups, the idea being to instead work one-to-one, to individualise, to offer personal care and assistance tailor made for the so-called client. One seems not to know anymore what a group is; or, at least, today the group is avoided. The same can be seen in education and schooling: despite the manifold group assignments and team work methodologies, arguably, teachers no longer address a class as a group, they address them as individuals who at the most should do teamwork. And are 'teams' not that what 'families' were for Thatcher, to begin with the opposite of the social; and, secondly, the unit which is imagined to be a natural category but which is arguably an ideological construction in the service of capitalism? Similarly, in education, teams are the opposite of the class group, they are not the social and they are modelled on the production units of contemporary capitalism. In this respect, new possibilities are precisely offered by the digitalisation of education: so-called 'Learning Management Systems', digital learning platforms, allow teachers—or better the system as such—to address each student separately, offering them a purported tailor-made learning path; here, the group dimension, once central in schooling, can be bypassed even more effectively.

However, viewed from a different angle, is this 'one by one' not most similar to a central principle of psychoanalytic practice? On Freud's psychoanalytic divan, there is only room for one: the psychoanalyst traditionally does not do groups, receiving their analysands one after the other. However, here, one might recall the psychoanalytic pedagogy movement of the interbellum of the previous century. For example, Hans Zulliger, working in a school, and Bruno Bettelheim, working in a pedagogical institution, did not do individual psychoanalytic cures but were convinced that to apply psychoanalysis one had to proceed by working with groups. Zulliger (1936) most tellingly took Freud's writing *Mass Psychology* as his central inspiration, arguing that class problems should be treated as 'mass phenomena'. As he considered a class as a gang or a band of brothers in search of a leader, Zulliger contended that a teacher should refrain from occupying the place of the leader. Instead the teacher should be the mere representative of society, a mediator rather than the actual leader of the class (for a full discussion, see De Vos, 2020). From here, one could conclude that precisely where one fails to address a multitude as a mass that needs to become a group (e.g., in the contemporary choice for the 'one by one' approach), one will unleash mass effects and the wild and uncontrolled search for the Leader. And here, the typical Freudian imagery might be resuscitated, evoking figures such as Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini picturing them as reviving Freud's Ur-Father. In this reasoning, our social psychology has a dark, repressed past: the history of the herd dominated by the Primal Father; to which we regress under specific circumstances, and our day and age might be such an instance. But again, we might need to hold our horses in order not to be dragged along a sweeping social psychological analysis.

Looking at Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Erdogan, Putin ... can we really understand them as the return of the Great Leaders? For, as already hinted at, is there not an element of the caricature, of mockery, of fakeness added with a large dose of obscenity and cynicism which is difficult to match with the deadly seriousness and genuineness associated with the Ur-Father and his descendants? But above all, it should be noted that the typical understanding of Freud's *Mass Psychology* as an interpretation of the rise of fascism in the 1930s is not fully warranted: as Jonsson (2013) pointed out, rather than addressing the early signs of fascism or anticipating the Second World War, Freud's 1921 book on mass psychology was above all written in the aftermath of the First World War, aiming to get a grip on its consequences. One could refer here to the recent monumental novel 'M: Son of the Century' by Scurati (2021), in which he lets Mussolini describe his first followers as dead; they returned dead from the battlefield to a world which equally

had died as the old structures and authorities had disappeared. One might argue that when figures such as Mussolini started to steer the masses in the early 1920s, those masses were not a regression to the past, a regression to how things were before the formations of the social; rather, those masses showed us the future (i.e., what happens after the collapse of the social). In this interpretation, the Freudian herd and its leader are not our dark past, and it is our dark future, the future of the mass of the zombies seeing light after the dead of the social.

Of course, in Freud's book, there are several arguments to be found to understand mass phenomena as a regression to earlier stages of humankind. Freud (2004) wrote in his comments on Gustave Le Bon:

Certain other features of Le Bon's account further highlight the justification for identifying the mass mind with the mind of the primitive. In masses, the most antagonistic ideas may exist alongside one another and accommodate one another without their logical contradiction giving rise to conflict. (p. 74).

Freud is attempting here to align Le Bon with the psychoanalytic theory of dreams and the claim that mutually contradicting ideas persist side by side in the unconscious (Freud, 1953). Clearly, there are many contemporary examples that illustrate how right-wing populist leaders easily get away with the manifold and blatant contradictions in their public address. But to argue that this is something we once superseded (as a group and/or as an individual) foregoes that Freud, himself, at crucial times in his book subverts this linear way of thinking. For example, for Freud it is not that first there was the mass and individuality came afterwards; rather, it is the other way around.

Consider in this respect to Freud's (2004) comment on the writings of William McDougall:

It seems to us that the condition McDougall described as the 'organization' of the mass can with greater justification be described in different terms. The task consists in conferring upon the mass the very qualities that once characterized the individual and that, so far as the individual is concerned, formation of the mass effaced. Because the individual (outside the primitive mass) possessed continuity, self-awareness, traditions and habits, a special job to do and a special place to occupy, he kept himself apart from others with whom he was in contention. (p. 85)

Here, one of the main questions of Freud's *Mass Psychology* becomes visible: how does a mass become a group (in McDougall's terms: where does the mass get organised)? Freud starts by rejecting the idea that a crowd would be bringing forth new features with its members and that there would be 'a special drive not susceptible of being traced back further, the social drive (or herd instinct, or group mind)' (Freud, 2004, p. 66). Hence, I claim, for Freud, the organisation of a mass cannot but be traced back to the individuals constituting the mass. If I may reformulate the Freudian wager: to understand how a mass becomes a group, one first needs to understand how individuals gave up their identity to the mass, in order then, when the unordered, acephalous crowd becomes a group, to transfer their original individual features to the group. In this way, Freud reverses the typical social psychological perspective of first there is the mass, the mass becomes a group, and there the individual sees light. Freud decentres this by setting out from the becoming of the mass itself, the point where, according to Freud, individuals lose their individuality to the collectivity. Hence, prior to the question, how does a mass become a group (which one could rephrase as, how does the proletariat become a revolutionary force) is the question of the prior massification (or proletarianisation). In Freud's scheme, the mass subsequently acquires the features which were characteristic of the individual. Or, Freud's answer to how does the mass become a group is: the mass becomes an individual (i.e., it acquires those elements that were precisely lost when the individual entered the mass).

Of course, the central issue here is not to substantialise the individual prior to its proletarianisation. Just think that Freud's designations of the individual (its 'continuity, self-awareness, traditions and habits') are what psychoanalysis traditionally deconstructs. The Freudian subject of the Spaltung (the split), the subject of the unconsciousness, is anything but a coherent and self-consciousness well-positioned subject. Hence, when for Freud the point of departure is the destitution of the individual, one should understand this as the doing away with the illusory individual, the in-

dividual who never existed: an illusion that succumbs within massification. Perhaps the COVID crisis might illustrate this: the anxiety and depression (if we for a moment go along with the psychologisation of the crisis) allegedly caused by the lockdown and the confinement is not the mourning of something we have really lost (our well-positioned individuality); rather, it is the mourning of the loss of our fantasised individuality and freedoms. So when Lacan (2007) commented on Freud's *Mass Psychology* that 'the collective is nothing but the subject of the individual' (p. 175), this could be understood as: only via alienation through massification the subject appears, *nagträglich* (by deferred action) in Freudian parlance. Once again, for psychoanalysis, there is no such a thing as individual psychology, nor such a thing as social psychology, there is only mass psychology.

The crucial point here is that for Freud subjectivation as a mass phenomenon needs a leader. It is the latter who incorporates 'the very qualities that once characterized the individual and that, so far as the individual is concerned, formation of the mass effaced' (Freud, 2004, p. 85). And, as argued, these features, these ideals if you wish, do not come from the past but from the future. To go back to Lacan's formula: the group and its leader is not the subject of the individual as it was; rather, the group and its leader is the subject of the individual as it will be. Although perhaps in Lacanian it should be in the future anterior tense: the group is the subject of the individual as it will have been.

However, when for Freud the figure of the leader cannot be exceeded, this is precisely what Lacan will defy. But before engaging with Lacan's attempts to think subjectivation beyond the figure of the Leader, it should be noted that already Freud had tried to think about what happens in the absence of paternal/patriotic authority. Freud (2004), for example, explicitly refers to Paul Federn's book 'Die vaterlose Gesellschaft' (The fatherless society). In this respect, is not the whole paradox of Freud's introduction of the idea of the Oedipus complex into the modern imagery that it coincides with the decline of the paternal image and authority? This is what Federn, one of Freud's oldest and most faithful followers (van Ginneken, 1984), wrote in 1919 on 'Zur Psychologie der Revolution—Die vaterlose Gesellschaft' (On the Psychology of Revolution-The Fatherless Society)¹:

The father-son theme has suffered a major defeat. Yet it is deeply anchored in humanity as a hereditary feeling and by family upbringing. This will probably once again prevent a completely 'Fatherless Society' from realizing itself. (cited in van Ginneken, 1984, p. 405)

In the same spirit, Freud's *Mass Psychology*, written in times of empires collapsing, social disintegration, and the rise of the masses, took recourse to the myth of the primal Father to account for the future society as the expected 'return' of the Fathers/Leaders.

Let us now move to Jacques Lacan and two of his early writings in which he tries to conceive of leaderless groups and of subjectivation beyond the reference of the Father. Most notably, these two writings—'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism' and 'British Psychiatry and the War'—were written shortly after the Second World War, the first in 1945 and the second in 1947.

3 | LACAN: BEYOND THE LEADER, BEYOND THE FATHER?

'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism' (Lacan, 2007) is, arguably, about how to become a subject, how to become a human being without fathers, without leaders or better, beyond the Leader, beyond the Father. Lacan presented us the following situation: a prison warden puts three prisoners to a test to decide who will be the one he will release. The prisoners are shown two black and three white discs. Each prisoner has a disc put on his back without knowing which one. He who thinks he knows the colour of his disc should walk towards the exit and explain his reasoning (it cannot be mere divination). I am not going to represent the solution, but dwell on how Lacan's wager is to show that one subjectifies themselves *vis-à-vis* others, *vis-à-vis* a group, *vis-à-vis* a collectivity, in the sophism represented by the three prisoners:

Tres faciunt collegium, as the adage goes, and the collectivity is already integrally represented in the sophism, since the collectivity is defined as a group formed by the reciprocal relations of a definite number of individuals – unlike the generality defined as a class abstractly including an indefinite number of individuals. (Lacan, 2007, p. 174)

However, the first thing to note is that the collectivity is represented twice in the sophism. That is, is not the prison the primordial collectivity from which one needs to escape by means of another collectivity (*tres faciunt collegium*)? So while with Freud the individual paradoxically proceeds subjectivation (individuals lose their individuality to the group and eventually to the leader); with Lacan, the structured collectivity proceeds the structuring collectivity.

But we need to bring this reasoning still one step further. Above, Lacan contrasts the ‘collectivity’ as countable with a ‘generality’ as indefinite. He does this in order to claim that the solution of the sophism (the logical reasoning of which the number of steps depends on the number of the detainees) can be extended and applied to an unlimited number of subjects. However, it could be argued that the countable collectivity is precisely the first one; that is, the prison, where the members are numbered and counted, monitored and managed. In contrast, the second collectivity, that is, humankind or society defying the counting.

Here, of course, the current digitalisation of our life-world returns to mind: where everything is counted, datafied, and algorithmically processed; a digital panopticon holding us prisoner. However, if as said, Freud situates at the base of the social a prior massification or proletarianisation and Lacan sets out from a de-individualisation and destitution (the prisoners not knowing who/what they are), perhaps this alienation is precisely banned, evaded, or deviated in the digital panopticon. That is, in the digital we are supposed to be individuals possessing continuity, self-awareness, traditions and habits (I am paraphrasing Freud here). This is where we have imposed on us ‘fake’ subjectivities: social and other digital media suggest what emotions to have, what things to do, to connect with whom ... in short, the digital designs the placeholders of individualities and, as hinted at earlier, this is where the models of mainstream (social) psychology are mobilised. It is our digital ‘individualised’ psychological profiles—which are not only extracted from us but also priorly assigned to us—through which we are made present and substantiated. This is where we become traceable in definable and countable terms and where, most centrally, negativity, alienation, and destitution is to be avoided. From there the digital constructs a social conglomerate of psychological/psychologised individuals, based on horizontal ties made possible by network and vicinity models. Hence, as Freud (2004) wrote:

We already suspect that the reciprocal attachment of the individuals making up a mass is in the nature of such an identification through their having a great deal in common emotionally, and we may assume that what they have in common consists in the manner of their attachment to the leader. (p. 108)

The digital, then, seems to skip the attachment to the leader and place all its bets on the common emotions; emotions it solicits, provokes, if not prefabricates. Think of Facebook’s emoticons or the like-button, the latter saying: I love what you love, and that thing we both love unites us. That thing, a commodity or potentially leading to a commodity, allows us to bypass the leader. In this algorithmic process, based on the psi-models and theories, individuals are shaped and moulded, if not into the stereotypes of leaders or heroes (the most common role in gaming), then into the cliché of beautiful people, the ideal normal and normative person of mainstream psychology. The latter is a caring and sharing person, having empathy, occasionally having to cope with some issues. Either way, having a given amount of followers, be it on Facebook, Instagram, or [Academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu), we are all little leaders. However, perhaps all this is destined to result in a repetitious metonymy, as everything is pre-shaped and prefabricated along dull and tedious models, and hence cannot but lead to the entry of the obscene fake and clown-like leaders.

Can we rely then on Lacan’s prison sophism to escape from this digital collectivity, this digital prison? As said, I am not going to elaborate here on the solution of the sophism but only point out that it is not about pure logic in the classic sense of a fully transparent and calculable procedure. On the contrary, Lacan’s logical time is based on doubt and hesitation leading up to haste and urgency, or as Lacan (2007) wrote, ‘the intersubjective time that structures

human action' (p. 238). At the very least this means that subjectivation, in Lacan's scenario, cannot be algorithmised; it is based on a leap in the dark, a Von Munchhausen act of subjectivation which is, even though it can be formalised and modelled in a sophism, not computational. Lacan, thus, offers us a psychoanalytic logic which cannot be of use to design algorithms; in contrast, it precisely offers a critique of the use of 'fake psychologies' to algorithmically amass the people.

However, is this enough? Although I endorse the idea that the step to enter humanity cannot but be done from a complete de-individuated, isolated, if not solipsistic point (the prisoner needs to take his step in complete solitude), there is a small voice inside my head that says: why do not the three detainees get together and tell the director to put his discs where the light does not shine? I know the answer could be that in this way they will be imprisoned forever; but the classic retort is that the outside of the prison might just be a part of the prison or perhaps even the true site of servitude and slavery. Should not the first step indeed be, as one of Žižek's mantras goes, to not accept the coordinates of what counts as possible or admissible in a given space? So when the director arrives with his discs we should unite in resistance and reject his obscene games.

Of course, maybe I am here psychologising Lacan's sophism; perhaps the step of rejecting the coordinates of the scene can only be thought after the subjectivation effected through the logic of the sophism. That is, the true destitution might be situated precisely when one is outside of the prison, isolated and alienated: for this is arguably where the enforced identity 'I am white' loses its value, because it is the signifier of an alien discourse (perhaps only imagined, constructed later), already overcome. Once outside, begins a new solitude, perhaps in the company of other people who have also made the leap.

Here, the argument could be that once out of prison, we enter a space and a time where psychoanalysis does not have to say anything; there, as if on a Moebius band, we find ourselves suddenly in the political field. That is, psychoanalysis is a psychology of the masses, it is a theory of the limit, of the becoming of (inter)subjectivity via the mass, but there it also reaches its own border. It allows for an 'analysis of the Ego' but not for a psychology of the Ego, because psychoanalysis has nothing to say about what the human is or should be (or will have been). In the same way, psychoanalysis, à la limite, allows for an analysis of the social, but not for a social psychology, a psychology of what society is or should be (or will have been). At the very least, psychoanalysis is not a political psychology. When psychoanalysis reaches its limits, politics proper comes in (or should come in)—see Pavón Cuéllar's (2021) argument that it is here that Marxism could have a place. However, although I have already made this argument in other places, I think it is important not to make this step too hastily. Perhaps the time for understanding needs to be prolonged in order to think, still from a psychoanalytic perspective, what happens or what could happen in the moment when one finds oneself out of the prison, that moment before one gets on the move again.

4 | LACAN'S LEADERLESS GROUP

Perhaps this is the question which haunts us since modernity: what after the de-individuation, the proletarianisation or the massification? Will mass psychology lead to an emancipatory process or will it serve the return to servitude? This is where Spinoza (2007) in his Theological-Political Treatise most famously asked: why do people fight for their servitude as if it were their salvation? Spinoza refused to answer this question at the level of consciousness, proposing instead that the 'sad passions' accompanying servitude (e.g., superstition, as people are ignorant of the material causes that determine their will and desires) diminish our power to act. For Spinoza, it is the material interests of the tyrant that have an interest in keeping us ignorant. He sees a way out of this as he envisions the multitude governing itself: the group can know the joy of acting, choosing for the ethical life according to reason, when entering into composition with other bodies, adding powers to each other. Or, as Deleuze (1990) puts it in his study of Spinoza:

A man who is to become reasonable, strong, and free, begins by doing all in his power to experience joyful passions. He then strives to extricate himself from chance encounters and the concatenation of sad passions, to organize good encounters, combine his relation with relations that combine directly with it, unite with what agrees in nature with him, and form a reasonable association between men; all this is such a way as to be affected with joy. (p. 262)

However, in our current timeframe, this might be precisely the way in which the digital and Big Data aggregate us: extricating us from chance encounters, organising good encounters, combining our relation with relations that combine directly with it. So if today this is hijacked by commercial interests, would a Spinozian and Deleuzian perspective then allow us to envision an ideal digital world where dataflows would steer the multitude away from tyranny and into the direction of reasonable associations affecting us all with joy? Or, does this mean a good digitalisation and algorithmisation of group formation and the becoming of (inter)subjectivity is possible? I would argue that this position would be based on the fact that in a Spinozian argument there is no place for the lack; as Dolar (1993) contended: for Spinozians being is continuous either in the Real or in the Imaginary. Only there does a multitude governing itself become something fully conceivable, as there is no place for loss, for the price paid for the becoming of (inter)subjectivity. Arguably, this is where (inter)subjectivity is considered modelable and where it could be algorithmised, in the service of either exploitation or emancipation.

To oppose this, let us return to Lacan, for, if anything, Lacan's major contribution to psychoanalysis has been to put central the lack, the lack of being, in both theory and practice. Let us scrutinise the attempt of the early Lacan to think the group without leaders in his text 'British Psychiatry and the War', written in 1947, 2 years after his Logical Time. To begin, it can be noted that Lacan taking the army as his point of departure repeats Freud, who in his Mass Psychology dealt with two 'artificial masses': the Catholic Church and the army. However, Freud's choice for the army has always puzzled me, for if the Catholic Church does have a central leader; the army, whilst having a hierarchy, has not a clear leader at the top. There might be a president or royal figure being the 'commander in chief' but, nonetheless, armies are in general led by more than one person who do not necessarily pose as the Leader(s). Hence, is the army not one step short of being a group without leaders? At the very least, regarding organised groups, one could argue that their central theme does not concern the killing of the Father—the Father has already left the building—it is about installing, or not, the leader. In this way, Freudian psychoanalysis is not a theory of the Father, rather a theory of the absence of the Father and the coming upon the scene of the leader. Even more, it is a theory of how the leader tends to follow the Father. Put differently, while Freud's theoretisation of the Oedipus complex signalled the decline of the paternal Imago, his theoretisation of the mass—insofar as that is structured by the love of a leader—already signals the disappearance of the leader, opening up the question of the group without a leader.

It is in this perspective that we can read Lacan's *British Psychiatry and the War* and confront some of its, in my opinion, problematic issues. The text is actually an account of a visit that Lacan made in 1945 to England in which he praises the wartime work of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts such as Wilfred Bion and John Rickman. Lacan appreciates their realism and pragmatism in the development of psychological selection protocols for recruits and in their 'use of psychology' in group processes with psychiatric patients in military mental hospitals, where they initiated the so-called 'leaderless groups'. Lacan (2000) wrote:

One needs to take full account of the fact that a still very young psychological science was called upon to effect what one may call the synthetic creation of an army when this science had barely brought to the light of rational thought the notion of such a body, understood as a social group with an original structure. (p. 11)

Being more familiar with Lacan's later condemnations of psychology as a science, this positive reading of psychology surprised me. Did the early Lacan really align psychoanalysis with psychology, as a science that could and should intervene in social reality? Is he attributing to psychoanalysis a positive knowledge of how the social works, a knowl-

edge that could be used to manage the social in a scientific, rational and synthetic way? Lacan (2000), depicting Bion as a psychoanalyst who lends his services to the good cause, wrote:

Here we find the principle of a group treatment grounded upon the testing and becoming aware of the factors required for there to be a good group spirit. (p. 19)

Is the psychoanalyst as a socio-engineer or socio-chemist, armed with the knowledge of the forces and the composition of a good group? Perhaps this could be opposed to the already mentioned Zulliger. At the risk of embellishing and idealising his position, one could argue that Zulliger remains a teacher who interprets what happens in his teaching in psychoanalytic terms in order to guide his teaching and handling of the class. Bion, in contrast—again, at the risk of schematising and simplifying—does not interpret. He acts from his knowledge, intervening directly in the social. At the least this is how Lacan depicts Bion: as someone who manipulates the factors in his laboratory of groups:

(...) that the condition of all rational treatment of mental disorders lies in the creation of a neo-society, in which the patient would maintain or restore a human exchange, the very disappearance of which alone redoubles the depreciating effects of the disorder. (Lacan, 2000, p. 19)

Beyond the obvious critique that this amounts to the creation of a parallel society whilst leaving society as it is intact, one could argue that precisely here the attempt to go beyond the leader cannot but be illusory. Even if Bion and his colleagues restrict themselves to mounting a minimal framework for their leaderless group, it is precisely there, in their defining, setting up and managing the so-called minimal conditions of this neo-society, that they authoritatively (pre)structure the situation. This is Lacan's description of Bion's project:

Teams of about 10 subjects are constituted, none of them being invested with a pre-established authority, and given a task which they must solve in collaboration, the gradual difficulties of which call for constructive imagination, a capacity for improvisation, qualities of foresight, and a sense of productivity. For example, the group must cross a river using a certain material requiring a maximum of ingenuity in its use, without neglecting to arrange for its recuperation etc (Lacan, 2000). Lacan (2000) continued:

But what the observer will note is not so much what appears of each subject's capacities as a leader, but the extent to which he is willing to subordinate the concern of looking good to the common objective pursued by the team in which it is to find its unity. (p. 22)

At the very least, the 'leaderless group' is a group with an observer: the psy-expert who likes to believe that they do not play a part. What is observed is considered by the expert to be reality as such, whilst, arguably, it is a performance set up by the expert himself saying, we are in front of the river, here you have material, you have to collaborate to go to the other shore. I would argue that the idea of collaboration, constructive imagination, and improvisation does not engender a kind of spontaneous neo-society; rather, it stages the ideology of the psy-sciences on a pre-established scene.

In the meantime we all have been subjected to these kind of psychological games; I myself during job applications and team building activities. One should definitively resist the fake sociality these games aim at, not because these games would miss actual real life beyond playing a role, but precisely because those who run these games themselves believe that they can lay bare real life through their scientifically designed games. Real life, life as it is, cannot be but a construction, an ideological construction, life as it should be. And, invariably, here we, the supposed lay persons, are called upon to learn something about life and about ourselves; that is, we are called upon to share the psy-expert's gaze. Just consider how Bion (1959) professed that the group discussions provided the men with the opportunity to 'step out of their frame and view the group process with the detachment of the spectator' (p. 16). In other words, Bion interpellated the men to look upon themselves, the others and the world, from the perspective of the science of psy-

chology. Hence, they are called upon to identify with the observer—Bion—with the Leader-Scholar. Freud's scheme of how the identification with the leader allows for horizontal identification amongst the group members is reaffirmed, albeit that the scheme no longer is based on the discourse of the Master (to use the terminology of the later Lacan) but on the discourse of the University. The masses, the dangerous mobs, perhaps existing above all in the imagination of the bourgeoisie in their fear of the revolution, are turned into artificial groups hatched according to the scientific fantasies of the scholars and their psychologies.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Bion's idea to structure groups as work groups focusing on the work that needs to be done, inspired Lacan (1977, 1982) in conceiving of the so-called 'cartel' as the foundation of his psychoanalytical schools. This could be defended referring to Freud's (1955) argument in civilisation and its discontents that the communal life of the human being has 'a twofold foundation: the compulsion to work... and the power of love' (p. 101). Lacan wanted to redirect the inclination of a group to a loved ideal towards a transference to work. But, in the psychological games sketched out above, and which inspired Lacan, is not the risk that the particular work itself does not matter much? The crossing of a bridge, the building of a tower or whatever, is of little importance. After all, the psychological process is put central. Perhaps, what Bion and the early Lacan miss in their leaderless work groups is that the social and political struggle starts with deciding what job needs to be done.

Today, this might be, more than ever, important, as work in the digital era increasingly takes the form of what has been called prosumption, consumption labour or play labour. Via social media, users produce content and simply spend time online; thus producing data that are commodified and generate economic value (e.g., Fuchs, 2014). Here too, the actual (unpaid) work being done is of little importance; yet, another dance move on TikTok, a cat video, a Trotsky-meme, a paper on ResearchGate ... peu importe. What counts in the digital is the emotional, affective, and social labour to be expropriated by corporate social media. While of course a prior and more material exploitation underpins this; for example, digital technologies require rare minerals often extracted under slavery-like condition, and server farms consume massive amounts of electricity, the central step in the accumulation of capital occurs in the harvesting of user data and user profiles. As argued above, it is most centrally the psychological theories and models of the emotional, the affective, and the social that form the base for this commodification of (inter)subjectivity. They set the scene, assign the roles and aggregate and amass us.

In a certain way, one can argue that Lacan (2000) anticipated this use of psychology in his text of 1947

the development of means of action on psychism that will increase in this century, a concerted handling of images and passions which has already been used successfully against our judgement, our resolution, our moral unity, will be the occasion of new abuses of the power. (p. 28)

However, as Lacan in this text positioned psychoanalysis as a pragmatic tool to interfere in the social, he seems to imply here that the knowledge of psychoanalysis could be abused. In our digital era this would mean that the arguably more subtle and refined understandings of psychoanalysis could be employed to design even more profitable algorithms to commodify (inter)subjectivity. Let me reject this reasoning by opposing Lacan to Lacan. In 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty' Lacan tried to deal with the formalisation of subjectivation vis-à-vis the collectivity. However, most clearly, Lacan's subject of the conclusion is in the end not the full-blown individual, equal to itself in his utterance 'I am white' or 'I am human'. On the contrary, the statement itself indicates the lack of any foundation, which is the mark of any identity to be acquired. Or, as Lacan (2007) puts,

the affirmation to be human is based on the anxiety of the contrary being the case: I declare myself to be a man for fear of being convinced by men that I am not a man. This constitutes a movement which

provides the logical form of all “human” assimilation, precisely insofar as it posits itself as assimilative of a barbarism, but which nonetheless reserves the essential determination of the “I”. (p. 174)

Does this not mean that to pose as a human in the aggregation and amassment of humanity, one necessarily and logically needs to do that from a point outside of humanity, from the fear or suspicion that one does not belong there? It is only from this external position, let us call it a zero-level of subjectivity—a point from where the babbling of the humans out there can only be ‘barbaric’ (in the epistemological sense of incomprehensible language)—that the leap can be made: to assume the barbarism and say: ‘I’, ‘I, human’. The passage by Lacan above is followed by a footnote featuring the phrase I have cited earlier: ‘the collective is nothing but the subject of the individual’ (Lacan, 2007, p. 175). The two put together might lead us to the following conclusion: to be a subject (or a human) one needs to use the alienating ‘I’ (alienating because you never can coincide with this I) which assimilates the ‘we’ of the mass. There is no individual psychology, there is only mass psychology.

As in this way the logic of (inter)subjectivity centres around an external point, the latter is non-subjective and non-psychological, defying hence any calculation and algorithmisation. Psychoanalysis, conceiving of a basic lack of being, does not deliver positive psychological or social-psychological models that can be used to steer and manage (inter)subjectivity. It is this stance, I claim, that is partly lost in Lacan’s ‘British Psychiatry and the War’, where his enthusiastic embracing of realism and pragmatism risks leading him to conceive of psychoanalysis as a practical and usable social psychology grounded in an individual psychology. The later Lacan argues that the Other is barred; the Other, standing for the symbolic, language, culture or humanity as such, is not fully equal to itself, it has a lack, and there a performative self-insertion of the subject is required. I argue this is not possible in the digital which, as we know it now, is a closed circuit: hence, subjectivity will not be digitalised, nor will the revolution.

I posit that this is not where we could relax and lay back: for, even when subjectivity cannot be fully controlled digitally, this is precisely where the digital simply could get rid of subjectivity. In his second seminar, Lacan (1988) already warned us about the ‘adding machine’:

Models are very important. Not that they mean anything - they mean nothing. But that's the way we are - that's our animal weakness - we need images. (...) In general, it is rather the symbolic deficiency which is worrisome. The image comes to us from an essentially symbolic creation, that is to say from a machine, that most modern of machines, far more dangerous for man than the atom bomb, the adding machine. (p. 88)

This is where we are added together algorithmically to form what Néstor Braunstein (2020) called ‘neo-masses’, homogeneous masses: groups that do not have a leader to unify the members, amorphous groups, nomadic and precarious. Braunstein added that if in this way we are not governed by totalitarian dictators, nonetheless there are the Trumps and the Bolsonaros who personify the dictators while they themselves respond to impersonal algorithms that design and configure our lives. Hence, if I have tried to show above that our apparent leaderlessness invites the clownesque and obscene leaders to come in, this should be understood against the background of that other, obscure and hidden figure, Big Data.

If Big Data is the true heir of the Primal Father, does this not mean that in both the Freudian and Lacanian models we cannot get rid of the both the Leader or the Primal Father? Let me take recourse to the argument of Pavón Cuéllar in a text where he juxtaposes Friedrich Engels’ envisioning of the ancestral past of humanity with Freud’s imagery. Even though Pavón Cuéllar contended that the primitive father reappears after every revolution because he is an essential part of our Oedipal constitution in Western modernity, he claimed that ‘[i]t is the patriarchal and capitalist modernity that closes the two horizons of the past and the future, turning them into mirrors that give us back our image’ (Pavón Cuéllar, 2020, my translation).

As our present is patriarchal and capitalist, we are stuck in our imagining both the past and our future being structured in the same way. As said above, already with Freud the Leader (the purported return of the Primal Father) should

be placed in the first instance in the future; it is not the forceful past to which we cannot but regress. Only when we refuse the future reflecting on the past, can the present can be reopened as the field of struggle, so that the present could be different from our cursed future. The future is then that what will not need to have been.

Could the same be true for the digital: is another digitality (and perhaps this would be a wrong term) possible? One that would not be modelled after the bourgeois patriarchal image of the human being offered by psychology? Surely we should refrain from looking at psychoanalysis for alternative models: psychoanalysis has no model of the human being to offer; the non-psychological zero-level of subjectivity defies any modelling. Hence, is a technology of the virtual possible that would not be a mere reproduction, a mere redoubling of the image of the world as it is enforced upon us by capitalist and patriarchal ideology? Would that be a technology not aiming to give form to (inter)subjectivity, one not bothering with turning the symbolic deficiency, our zero-level of (inter)subjectivity, into images endlessly repeating themselves? I do not know, nor do I know, if all these questions (and their implied imagery and models) are aptly formulated to counter the defiance of today's technology amassing us in hordes in search for a leader.

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ENDNOTE

¹ This is the original full title of Federn's book, as it has been noted by Houssier et al. (2016); the first part is often omitted when citing it, including Freud.

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