

On Transindividuation

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Introduction

There have been numerous attempts within the 'psych world' to heal the seemingly unrestorable fracture between the 'individual' and 'society' – with mixed, often unconvincing results. In the 1930s and the 1960s, the attempt was to bridge the public and the private, the sphere of politics and economy with the realm of desire and libidinal economy. It often meant, and for some of us still does, bringing together Marx and Freud, a discourse of social emancipation with one of individual freedom. This mode of inquiry has been largely abandoned, not only because of the onslaught of neoliberal ideology in the world of psychology, but also because it failed to understand two fundamental mistakes: (a) the error of psychologism, which only sees the individual and the inter-individual; (b) the error of sociologism, which only sees the inter-social. We have overlooked that the reality of the individual is vaster than the individual; that it includes important pre-individual facets. What would it mean to leave behind the false division of individual and society and recognize the systematic unity of psychic *and* collective individuation? What would it mean to give birth to a real collective? This chapter will explore these questions drawing on the work of Spinoza, Simondon, and Freud, expounding on one innovative proposition as yet unexplored in psychotherapy: *transindividuation*.

Of the advantages and disadvantages of phenomenology

It is not controversial to suggest that, given psychotherapy's historical allegiance with individualistic narratives, a finer attunement to social context and progressive socio-political praxis and ideas would bolster its efficacy and help ground its practice. At least this is what I had thought until a few years back when I published an article in a counselling and psychotherapy monthly. The piece articulated a critique of Donald Trump's politics and its nefarious consequences on notions of identity, masculinity, and mental health. A few letters from therapists expressed dismay at my assumptions that there would be no Trump supporter

in their midst.¹ It was a wake-up call. It upset the patent simplicity of my assumptions and alerted me to the likely emergence of an insidious cultural shift within the psych world, an area arguably wedded from its inception to an emancipatory ethos. The letters may have of course voiced the views of a minority, yet a seemingly unshakeable belief persists even within the more 'progressive' quarters of psychotherapy and counselling, namely the conviction that there is a factual division between the individual and society. Even when a particular theoretical frame and ensuing practice aim at bridging the divide, the belief persists unscathed. After all, one can only bridge two entities which are thought of as distinctly separate. Even when the divide is summarily bypassed, the belief is still there. Deep-rooted in the (philosophical, psychological, religious, secular) tradition; entwined to our flesh, bones, and thoughts, the notion of an atomized subjectivity, of a self and/or a separate soul is not easily resolved. "The thought of subjectivity – Merleau-Ponty memorably noted – is one of these solids that philosophy will have to digest". He went on: "let us say that once 'infected' by certain ways of thinking, philosophy can no longer annul them but must cure itself of them by inventing better ones".² His own answer was to invent the notion of the body-subject, and through the bodily notion of the subject access the *flesh* of the world. This is not the place to delve into the exquisite intricacies of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, something I have attempted elsewhere.³ It may be enough to note how marginal and embryonic the latter has remained within both existential and psychoanalytic traditions, despite avowed acknowledgment of its significance in therapy training handouts and ceremonial citations in doctoral dissertations. The importance of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology consists in remaining anchored to subjectivity and providing an interesting solution to this ancient dilemma. The anchoring is admirable: it does not stoop to the ontological bypass choreographed by the Heideggerian *Dasein*, seen at times by Merleau-Ponty as an attempt to retrieve "our relationship with Being such as [it was] prior to self-consciousness", an idea which relies on "primordial ontology",⁴ to a nostalgic return to the lost Arcadia of a pre-Socratic existence preceding the birth of subjectivity-as-we-know-it. At the same time, remaining anchored to Cartesian/Husserlian subjectivity arguably limits Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. This is relevant to our current investigation, as it appear to substantiate the

artificial divide between individual subjectivity and society. One way out of this impasse is posed by the notion of *transindividuation* as formulated by Gilbert Simondon,⁵ a pupil of Canguilhem and Merleau-Ponty, whose work provides invaluable insights – especially in relation to the themes of individuation⁶ and technology⁷.

What is transindividuation?

Transindividuation is a new theory of individuation. The conventional notion of individuation only takes into account the individual, that is, only “an aspect, a phase of a process”⁸, whereas transindividuation inscribes the individual within a much wider process. It goes beyond the individuated ‘I’, conventionally understood as an already formed entity. It understands the individual as “contemporaneous with its individuation, and individuation contemporaneous with the principle”. The principle of individuation, that is, “must be truly genetic, and not simply a principle of reflection”.⁹

Within this perspective, individuation must be at all times associated with the pre-individual, which is for Simondon a source of metastable states. Another way of saying this is that there is no actualization worth of its name without a close link to a virtual field of potentialities.

Transindividuation also goes beyond the equally conventional notion of the interindividuated ‘We’. It is a process of “co-individuation within a pre-individuated milieu and in which both the “I” and the “We” are transformed through one another”.¹⁰ In that sense, transindividuation constitutes the foundation for all social change. Bernard Stiegler explains:

We ourselves, as humans, are a type of individuation that is very specific, as our individuation is not only ... an individuation of the living organism, of life, but an individuation of the psyche as well, so it is operating as both conscious and unconscious processes. And Simondon says that the individuation of the psyche is always already an individuation of a group of psyches, because a psyche is never alone. It always operates in relation to another psyche. At the limit itself, himself, or herself, a psyche in this situation is a very specific doubling of oneself in narcissism and a type of dialectical relationship to oneself.¹¹

Crucially in relation to psychotherapy, transindividuation takes on board the dimension of the *emergent*, which Simondon calls the pre-individual, a “differentiate field ... a bundle of potential functions localized, as a differentiated region, within a larger field of potential”.¹² This is not as abstract as it may sound but is related to how each separate area is involved in solving problems that cannot be addressed without further individuations. One concrete example of this is anxiety, a topic of direct concern for psychotherapists, discussed by Simondon in a chapter on psychic individuation.¹³ In anxiety, the human organism feels weighed down by its existence “as if it had to carry itself – a burden of the earth, *áktos aroúres* as Homer says, but also a burden to itself”¹⁴. In anxiety, we feel as if existing as a problem posed to ourselves, and this division is felt “into pre-individual nature and individuated being”.¹⁵ In anxiety, the subject attempts to “resolve itself without going through the collective”.¹⁶ It wants to come to the level of its unity “by way of a resolution without mediation or delay”. In this sense, anxiety is “an emotion without action, a feeling without perception”. It is “pure reverberation of the being within itself”.¹⁷ If anxiety could be sufficiently shored up, it would bring about a new individuation, a true transformation. But this process – which implies the disbandment of prior structures to the point of annihilation of the seemingly solid and unitary individuated being – would require *resorting to other domains of individuation*, unthinkable without a conceptual frame such as transindividuation. In Simondon’s words:

The individual being flees itself, deserts itself. And yet in this desertion there is a sort of underlying drive to go recompose oneself elsewhere and otherwise by reincorporating the world such that everything can be lived.¹⁸

Self and Society

The widespread belief that politics deals with external reality while psychotherapy attends to the private domain is misleading. Or at the very least it constitutes too neat a demarcation between the outside and the inside. Still, the very real challenge for psychotherapists is summoning a convincing ontological perspective that may take us out of the impasse

generated by this deeply ingrained division. The objective then could be described as becoming better equipped in submitting universally accepted notions such as this to closer scrutiny. This could mean approaching psychotherapy and counselling as *axiological* practices, that is, practices of evaluation, making the most of utilizing Nietzsche's hammer – a method of inquiry by which one weighs at first the balance of active and reactive forces at play¹⁹ – be it within an organism, an entity, an institution and so forth and then, if necessary, attempts to resolve the balance in favour of *active* forces – of natural, psychical, spiritual forces that are not governed by the spirit of revenge against life-and-death. In order to do this, we may need at times to design new concepts or at least articulate novel interpretations to old ideas, in the hope of releasing the deadlock in a particular field of practice and inquiry. One of these concepts is *transindividuation*, a new idea in psychotherapy which aims to problematize and expand on the notion of individuation. Not only is the latter term disappearing fast from current psychotherapeutic discourse in favour of the politically compliant notion of integration. If and when it gets mentioned, individuation is restricted to the *necessary but insufficient* first step of finding an internal locus of evaluation,²⁰ of becoming more “authentic”²¹ (Grene, 1954), of aligning the ego with a capitalized *Self*.²² Transindividuation (and the closely-related notion of the *transindividual*) is new in psychotherapy and the psych world. Surfacing (partially, obliquely) in Spinoza, Marx, and Freud, it was consistently conveyed by Simondon,²³ whose ideas cross the borders of several fields of inquiry and is now more widely discussed in the area of the humanities and philosophy of science.²⁴ Partly drawing on Balibar,²⁵ I will outline some traits of transindividuation as they appear in Marx, Spinoza, and Freud, before focusing on Simondon.

Disassembling, reassembling

For Spinoza, social human nature is an uneven amalgam (what the historical Buddha called *skandhas* or aggregates) of different components – *not of body and mind*, as most of us still assume in obeisance to Spinoza's contemporary Descartes – but *of moods and deeds*, some

of which follow reason while others ensue from passion. As a result, and in a way that reminds one of Plato, the affective configuration of a particular individuality and its concurrence of rational and affective forces in the *polis* intersect, connect and reflect one another. In this sense, subjectivity is already transindividual. At its core, Spinoza's thought aims at explicating different "modes of communication" which at times organize themselves "at the level of affects, and sometimes at the level of rational ideas".²⁶ It remains to be seen whether rational ideas are themselves affects, but that belongs to a different exploration. What is relevant here is that for Spinoza the finite mode of subjectivity is relational *and* transindividual. His is a counter-traditional, aporetic ontology, to be sure: we come to be incessantly disassembled and reassembled, are traversed by affects and partake them with others within the ever-changing wider sphere of society. The ethical task in these circumstances – which is where psychotherapy becomes useful – is to be able to turn the inherent passivity of the 'passions' into action and more widely (following Nietzsche) to turn passive forces into active ones. Entertaining this view could mean doing more than merely critiquing the double bind of individualism and holism in the direction of creating a structure of feeling and expression, as well as developing a set of active interventions on an individual and societal level. We are affected, we affect, and this double movement changes us, changes others. Being involved in this process may alert us to the fact that viewing ourselves as separate individuals is an attractive illusion and a second-rate mode of being in the world, a *private* that is deprived existence depriving us of the rich transindividual nature of our individuality.

The society effect

In his sixth thesis on Feuerbach, Marx critiques Feuerbach's attempt to resolve the conundrum of human nature or human essence (*das menschliche Wesen*) by assimilating it into the essence of religion. He affirms human nature as constituted "in its effective reality" by the "ensemble of social relations"²⁷ rather than as the universally accepted abstraction of the single person. This may be considered as "a point of departure for an ontology or relations"²⁸: individuality understood neither as a separate, originary substance (be it the atomized soul of Christianity or its close Cartesian version of the *cogito*) nor is it "reducible to

the totality which encompasses it”²⁹ be it the abstract Heideggeresque ‘relatedness’ now *de rigueur* in conventional existential therapy³⁰ or in the more concrete sense of a society or community. For Marx, however, society and community under capitalism are akin to simulacra; they hide the reality of alienated relation, a realm where alienation is the main form of relating. Capitalism does not engender nor foster a *society* as such but merely, in the words of Louis Althusser, a *society effect*.³¹ In Marx’s own words:

“To the producers the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they *do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things*”.³²

The implication is that in our societies there are no direct social relations between individuals; all social relations go through money and the commodity form (this applies to therapy as well). They are assembled “*at a distance*, in the element of commodity exchange and of the value-form”; they are “relations of equivalence between commodities themselves”.³³ The advent of capitalism in the history of our species is unprecedented in that sense: “a religion which offers no reform of existence but its complete destruction” in the words of Walter Benjamin.³⁴

It is hard to resist the humanistic temptation of indulging in noble lamentations and bungled biddings to restore the notional Eden of pre-capitalist ‘authentic’ human relations sullied by alienated structures. It is equally hard to distance oneself from the orthodox Marxist views which tend to regard capital as an eternal structure and fail to take into account its various permutations: first neoliberalism, with its cunning embracing of the Stoics, its contradictory appeal to the alleged freedom of the market while acquiescing to its impersonal sovereignty.³⁵ Lastly, through global ownership and control of information, capital has arguably morphed into something else, something worse – a mutation which calls for communal responses and acts of resistance, given that “the production of counter-hegemonic knowledge can really only be comradely and collaborative”.³⁶ Could counselling and

psychotherapy ever be part of this counterhegemonic knowledge and practice? For this to happen, a different notion of individuality is needed alongside changed ways of understanding its link to society.

Alienated social relations – the product of capitalism, neoliberalism and the vectorialism of global information of our day – create agents who never meet as simple human beings. Our personhood depends on economic exchange as well as on our juridical existence: “the economic *informs* the juridical and the juridical activates the economic”³⁷, and it is from this double structure that we find in Marx something akin to transindividuation. The double structure denies the two dominant ontologies: (a) the *individualistic* notion of atomized subjectivity; (b) the *holistic* notion that sees relatedness as a given and individuality incontestably a part of it. What is common to Simondonian transindividuation here is that paradoxically, the alienated double structure described by Marx alerts us to the fact that subjectivity is more complex and variegated than it is normally believed. By clarifying the phantasmagorical, even hallucinatory nature of social relations, it also opens the door to another way of conceiving subjectivity outside the obligatory routes of individualism and holism.

The group of one

In his 1921 book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud focuses on the emergence of the ‘I’ in relation to society, examining this correlation in ways that remain irreducible to the tenets of both psychology and sociology.³⁸ By placing the unconscious at the centre, the conventional understanding of individual and social domains within which we often find ourselves entrapped is significantly altered. Rather than existing separately, they are reversible functions belonging to a single formation – a thesis that culminates in the *Postscript* where individualization is presented as a particular aspect of group formation. The ‘group of many’ is the institutional group; the ‘group of two’ is constituted either by the love relationship or the ‘hypnotic relationship’ where the person delegates to the other (a teacher, a worldview, perhaps a therapist) their own examination of experience. Then – in a manner that anticipates the theories of multiplicity that followed – we are presented with the group of one (*Masse zu eins, Einsamkeit*), “the isolated individual as an intrinsically fragile, aleatory

effect of a certain negative modality”³⁹, a modality hinting at a traumatic rupture between the individual and the group, a rupture which is *constitutive* of individuality. The ‘transindividual’ aspect of this equation is that individual psychology is negated as a self-existing structure, but this negation does not translate into a primacy of the social/sociological component. The individual is then understood in transindividual terms, as the amalgam (aggregate, *ensemble*) of four group formations: 1) the institutional; 2) the atomized self; 3) the transferential version of amorous relations; 4) the transferential version of hypnotic relations. This representation escapes the trappings of both individualism and holism in ways that are tangentially similar to other visions of transindividuality, particularly Spinoza’s; it presents a view of society not as a structure made up of individuals but of *relations*.

Internalising the outer, externalising the inner

As his work is being translated into English and other languages, the timeliness of Gilbert Simondon’s work is slowly beginning to be recognized – notably within Deleuzian studies, including psychoanalytic studies⁴⁰, but also in the field technology studies.⁴¹ It influenced Marcuse, whose exploration of alienation and reification in capitalist societies took into account Simondon’s writings on technology – not solely in terms of the technocratic net within which we are inescapably entrapped but also in terms of technology’s potentially liberative function as an opening to other forms of rationality.⁴²

Transindividuation points at the intrinsic inherent unity of inner psychological individuation and collective individuation. Unlike the inter-individual, it does not bring into relation two or more individuals understood as distinct, separate units with clear-cut internal and external borders. Normally we either resort to the insights of psychology and psychotherapy which for the most part tend to understand and relate almost exclusively to interiority; or we rely on sociology which on the whole only understands the inter-individual. Transindividuality is a way out of this impasse. What is particular about transindividuality is that it carries a charge of pre-individual reality. Before the coming into being of individuality, there is a pre-individual process which is normally overlooked. These pre-individual elements then become simplified and summarily translated into what we call ‘me’. In the process, some of them become

dormant, some are activated, some are forgotten and some die out. Even those that die out constitute a reservoir which can contribute to further individuation and actualization -- if, that is, we consider individuation and actualization as *organismic* rather than ego-bound processes. Failing to take into account the pre-individual domain means forfeiting individuation and actualization. It means abandoning the possibility of partaking to the birth of a real collective dimension, and settling instead with a stale scenario of inter-relations between monads: the much-celebrated dyad of I and Thou agreeing, disagreeing, dialoguing from their respective well-protected fortresses, chronically deprived of the vibrancy, expansiveness and surprise of the transindividual dimension. By forgetting, as we routinely tend to do, that the subject is vaster than the individual, we remain forever stuck within a linear and often sluggish movement which knows little of the leaps and bounds possible when we are more attuned to the pre-individual domain. By forgetting the pre-individual and transindividual domain, we forego a vital link with a field of potentiality and virtuality. Only the recognition of the pre-individual dimension allows real collectivity rather than a clash, a merging, or a guarded dance of egos. The paradox at the heart of the transindividual is that it unfolds parallel to the elaboration of the individual person's psychology and that it does so unknowingly by touching upon, traversing, affecting/being affected by other layers and domains which together, whether or not actively recognized, constitute an 'I' that is more than 'I', a movement that internalises the outer and externalises the inner.

Concluding remarks

Transindividuation questions the separation between interior life and external life. Even before coming into being as an individual, there is a current of pre-individual elements. Incorporating this notion into our understanding of the relation between individual and society could mean becoming better equipped at imagining a community that does not step on individual needs and desires, and at imagining an individuality that does not neglect the importance of community.

Normally, we hold an individualistic notion of liberty – in our neoliberal world, the freedom to do what one pleases, the freedom not to pay taxes, to grab what we can while we can, the freedom of a lone monad deludedly disconnected from its inherent situatedness. Similarly, we hold a rather drab idea of equality – the equality of quantifiable social roles and personas,

the equality of uniformity. Could liberty and equality go together? Could we have individual freedom alongside equality? Equality and freedom are both denied precisely in the same conditions, because “there is no example of conditions that suppress or repress freedom that do not suppress or limit – that is, do not abolish – equality and vice versa”.⁴³ Moving beyond the habitual and arbitrary division between individual and society may prove effective in honouring both domains as sides of the same coin. Spinoza is again the main inspiration here. ‘I’ am a ‘we’, he would say.⁴⁴ Our intimate individual desires and the independence of our thought are already communal. In a similar vein, politics also has to do with the association of affects and learning – an aspect that is as important as its more established emphasis on the distribution of power.

In this sense, psychotherapy potentially plays a pivotal role here – if, that is, it succeeds in bypassing the politics of euphoric security, the ecstasy of the status quo, the perpetuation of a skewed notion of individual psyche.

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Notes

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3 Manu Bazzano, ‘The Poetry of the World: a tribute to the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty’ in Bazzano, M. (Ed) *Re-visioning Existential Therapy: Counter-traditional Perspectives*, Abingdon, OX: Routledge, 2020, pp 168-77.

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