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# SOCIAL SUBJECTIVITY: PSYCHOTHERAPY AS CENTRAL INSTITUTION<sup>1</sup>

*Jeffrey C. Alexander*

The nonmaterial has always been central to Alain Touraine's work. In this most practically oriented and political of our major social theorists, there has always been a barely hidden antagonism to the objective, the external, the material, and sometimes even the collective. Describing industrialism as based on materialist values, whether those of the proletariat or the bourgeoisie, Touraine prefers to call to mind the post-industrial values of a new class: quality not quantity, participation not obedience, self not society. He makes social movements central to postindustrial society, seeing them as acts of creation over and against regulation and institution.

Only in the more recent Touraine has there emerged an overt discussion of subjectivity and the self. In the new writings of the 1990s, post-industrial gives way to post-social, social movements wither, communal identities rise, nation-states are submerged. Against these currents stands an increasingly powerful and demanding individual subject. The new subjectivity is politically articulated by the new woman. Feminism is Touraine's last social movement, the social anchor for his new subjectivity. It is feminism, he suggests, that has inserted a new sensibility into the social world.

I would like to push further Touraine's new understanding of subjectivity and self. In order to do so, I would like to separate the emergence of social subjectivity, a process that has transformed a wide range of practices and ideas, from contemporary feminism, which draws as much from the enlargement of rational, rights-bearing citizenship as from transformations of the emotions and self.

Touraine is right to suggest that subjectivity and the self have emerged as pivotal references in contemporary life, displacing or at least challenging the material and objectifying emphases of earlier modernity. But the social

container of this subjectivity cannot be found in the usual movements and carrier groups. To find the origins of this new emotionality and selfhood we need to look beyond politics to processes and institutions that have directly cultivated the self. Indeed, it has been from this newly cultivated self that the new politics often springs.

I wish to consider the possibility that psychotherapy, as emotional practice and as intellectual frame, has become a central feature of modern life. The subjective self has become a pivotal reference to our time because psychotherapy has been a major institution. Psychotherapy is as central to modernity as the school, the hospital, the confessional, the bureaucrat, the market, and the jail. Therapeutic practice focuses on a single self in a private space, but this does not mean it is not social. It means, rather, that being social has come to be thought about and practiced in a different way. That this has gone without mention in social theory and social science suggests that we have until now ignored some of the most central currents in modern life.

Subjectivity and self have been central to the ideas and practices of modernity in both their rationalist and romantic lines. From the contract theories of Locke and Rawls, to the Enlightenment ideas of Kant and Habermas, rationalist philosophers have not ignored the self, but have stressed its capacity for self-consciousness, lucidity, calculation, balance, control and objectivity. It is for this reason justifiable to understand such rationalist approaches as homologous with the empiricism of natural scientific thought. As the growing prestige of such disciplines as physics, molecular biology and neuroscience suggests, confidence in the inner rationality of the self has had the effect of shifting the focus of modern society to the outward rather than the inner world, to things rather than to consciousness. According to the twin preoccupations of rationalism and materialism, the science of nature can unlock the doors not only to health but to happiness, overcoming death and disease and economic want. A new science of the brain can explain emotions and produce medications to control them. The materialist culture of capitalist society has undoubtedly contributed much to this. In a world surfeited by ever changing, ever more clever and attractive things, it seems natural to look outward rather than inward, to emphasize quantity over quality, the conquest of space and time rather than inner meaning and consciousness.

Yet this objective line of modernity has never been hegemonic. If it were, how could we understand its illustrious lineage of critics, from Blake to Huxley, from Fukuyama to Hollebecque? Objective modernity has been doubled by subjective modernity. The development and unfolding of an inner life, in all its irrationality, has from the beginning constituted a parallel modern universe. Those who have developed the poetry and theory of inner life, and developed its counter-practices, have despised rationalism and its objectifying results.

The countermovement begins with romanticism, with Blake's ferocious attacks on 'dark satanic mills' and with Wordsworth's turning inward to light 'the lamp of experience', with the violent rejection of classicism in the music of Beethoven, the philosophy of John Ruskin, and the painting of Turner and Friedrich. There emerged a romantic religion, the pietistic and evangelical movements that offered anti-ascetic practices and theories of salvation from the middle of the 18th century. In social thought, the counter-movement begins with Hegel, on the one side, and Emerson and the American transcendentalists on the other. Later we can trace the rebellion of John Stuart Mills against his father's utilitarianism and his search for an emotional life in romantic love. We can trace the movement against Kantianism in Nietzsche's insistence on rituals in life and art, in the philosophies of Dilthey and Bergson, which emphasized identity, inner meaning, and emotional particularity, and Durkheim's and Tarde's sociologies of irrational symbolic communication and effervescent emotional energy.

The sophisticated and systematic thinking about subjectivity and consciousness that marked the early years of the 20th century represented less a breakthrough, or a new 'maturity', than a series of further developments along these lines. Husserl revealed the hidden irrationality of objective cognition, and promoted phenomenological reduction as a method for shutting out of external reality and material inputs in the study of perception. Heidegger fled from issues of epistemology to ontology, from rational existence to the being that underlay it, full of hatred for every technology of modernity. Language philosophy turned from objective reference to subjective representation, rooting language not in practicality but in subjective conventions and mental systems. Wittgenstein, too, was an incurable romantic. He hated modernity and his life was marked by futile and sometimes tragic efforts to escape it. For the most sophisticated 20th-century Marxism, the enemy was not poverty or exploitation but materialism and reification – a principal manifestation of which was modern scientific rationality.

The dramatic transformations in 20th-century literature and painting followed similar lines. From post-impressionism to cubism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, color field painting and minimalism, we observe the movement away from objective representation and towards the blurred and symbolic representation of inner life. Henry James turned away from action and events to explore the non-linear and associational pathways of inner consciousness. Proust withdrew from the world and reconstructed icons of memory. Virginia Woolf developed a new way of writing to represent the tone and structure of inner thought and feeling.

The social and cultural forces that created such artistic and intellectual developments gave birth to a new science of mental and emotional life. Psychoanalysis made its public appearance on the first day of the 20th century, when Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Insisting on the subjective origins of action and institutions, Freud suggested that

moderns should stop asking, 'why do bad things happen to me?' and ask instead, 'what have I done to create these bad things?'. Internal psychical process creates the sense of exterior compulsion. It is the movement from subject to object – the 'projection' of attitudes on to others that are in reality one's own – which creates the seeming externality and other-orientation of the world. So the psychotherapeutic parallels the phenomenological reduction. Patient and the therapist must assume, for the sake of argument as well as for the purposes of self-change, that the self alone is responsible for the actor's social world.

This presupposition triggers the basic questions of psychotherapy. The first question is, 'Who am I?' The answer to this question has led millions of persons away from the rational and outward looking tenets of the objective line in modern life. To find out who I am is to leap into the inner and invisible world of illogic, subjectivity and fragmented experience. By practicing therapy and reading Freud, modern persons have discovered they are guided less by discipline and common sense than by desires and deceptions, by fears and infantile illusions. They have not fully grown up, but remain childlike in an adult world, hoping for dependence not autonomy.

The second question is, 'How did I become this way?' The answer is that people become themselves because of their object relations. But these are not the external objects of the material world, the objects encountered by modern and rational human beings. They are, rather, the human objects encountered by vulnerable and half-formed children, when they are not able to distinguish truth from reality, as Sartre suggested so eloquently in the opening to *Les Mots*. Such objects are not understood rationally and dealt with effectively, in a modern and pragmatic way. Rather, they are 'cathected', connected to emotionally, and brought, in distorted versions, from outside to inside one's self. After early childhood, the actor is formed by these internalized objects; their actual relations become dynamics inside the self.

For adults, the most important object relations are not outside but inside, and it is to the reconstruction of these objects that psychotherapy is directed. The idea is to develop a more real and independent self, to lift the repressive force attached to internalized early objects and the irrational anxiety they inspire, and thus to prevent the compulsive repetition of self-destructive behavior. Prolonged therapy can allow the modern actor to rearrange these internal objects. Only after this inner transformation can more fulfilling relationships be formed with the external world. The practice of psychotherapy is not about action and the alteration of time and space. Such modern operations are suspended. Objects are explored not through distant and neutral study but through free associations and inner experience. Nothing happens in psychotherapy. There is only insight.

No educated or sophisticated Western person in the 20th century could not know and make some use of some Freudian truths. They deeply affected the cultural and social sciences, and every form of aesthetic creativity from

painting to poetry, from novels to film. Of what other among the new subjective philosophies that emerged in the 20th century can this be said?

An austere ideational system that so powerfully permeates social thinking and representation has already become a practical philosophy. But psychoanalysis became even more 'social' than this. Its new understanding of the self gave birth to a new form of social practice, a thing called 'psycho-therapy', which has been undertaken by tens of millions of people. Psychotherapy defined a new and invisible kind of sickness – internal diseases of mental illness and neurosis. What had earlier been a sickness of the soul, diagnosed by priests and addressed by dogma and ritual ablution, became an emotional disease, treated in a dialogical practice, the goal of which was to teach the self how to be free.

If being in therapy became a common experience in everyday life, being a therapist has become a widely accepted career. There are schools and disciplines, examinations and licenses, salaries, insurance companies, conferences and professional hierarchies – all the trappings of modern professional life. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, depression, anxiety and eating disorders are considered major illnesses. At any one time, some 25 percent of elite American college students take SRI medication, even as the queues for publicly insured 'talking therapy' are extended and private practices fill up. On 30 November 2005, in a lead article of the *Guardian*, bold headlines announced: 'Therapy for all who need it on the NHS [National Health Service]. A network of the counselling centres for the depressed and anxious. Could the government be about to take mental health seriously?' The report's opening lines illustrates the institutional centrality of psychoanalytic theory and practice at the beginning of the new century:

Lying across the path of productive happiness, goes the theory, stands mental illness, the common afflictions of depression and anxiety. Our society may be more affluent than ever before, but never has it been less at ease with itself.

In the next few weeks, the government is expected to announce plans aimed at transforming the mental wellbeing of millions of people across Britain. The Department of Health is expected to back recommendations . . . advocating the widespread introduction of psychological treatments – the so-called 'talking therapies' – in the NHS for the estimated 5 million people in Britain with non-acute mental health conditions.

The *Guardian* describes reports about plans for recruiting 10,000 new NHS therapists and creating a network of 250 independent therapy treatment centers as 'a ringing endorsement of what some critics dismiss as a "therapy culture",' which it defines as 'the notion that individual and societal ills can be solved by talking things through with a counselor' (Mary O'Hara, 'Walking the Happy Talk', *Society* section, p. 1, 30 November 2005).

Therapy culture has, of course, become less strictly psychoanalytic as it has adapted itself to different institutional domains in modern life. In the

United States, there is now short-term 'employment counseling' provided for private concerns by major companies and public institutions. Churches supply 'pastoral care', and there is a movement called Christian therapy. Twelve-step programs, which began with Alcoholics Anonymous, have developed for every form of addiction from eating to sex to spending money. There are self-actualization movements and self-help books instructing readers how to get in touch with the inner self. There is therapy on call-in radio shows and therapy-like encounters organized by television talk show hosts about ruinous childhoods and inner pain.

In all these different manifestations, the philosophy is much the same. The instruction is to turn away from external things and authorities and to move toward the self, and to recognize and 'take on board' the irrational and regressive impulses and beliefs that threaten to engulf it. It is about providing an experience of private life, of protecting it from the intrusions of the public sphere, of nurturing the self so that it can experience fuller and more balanced emotions and become healthy enough, not only to participate in modern disciplines of objectivity and control, but to sustain love and friendship. None of this can be done by the community or the state, by money or social movement. Social subjectivity must be nurtured in private, in a space that allows individuals to experience themselves and others in a relationship of dialogue and respect.

It would be surprising if such a deeply institutionalized idea and practice did not inform the new social movements that emerged in the later 20th century. The New Left was characterized by a sharp shift away from materialism to more subjective concerns with happiness and authenticity, with ending repression and expressing real feelings; its most original theorist, Herbert Marcuse, strayed from traditional Marxism to radical Freudian theory. The American women's movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s developed from 'consciousness raising' sessions that often took on psycho-dramatic forms. Gay rights movements demanded the right to express 'who I really am'. It seems likely, indeed, that not only the practice but the very conception of 'identity politics' grew out of psychoanalytic thinking about how needs for recognition and selfhood created periodic developmental crises over identity.

There is no doubt that psychoanalysis represents a knowledge and practice that reflects Western liberal thought. It is about negative liberty, about voluntarism and privacy, not about what can and must be done through public life or the positive freedoms that can be provided only by states. Yet to describe this emotional theory and practice as liberal suggests that psychotherapy does not suggest that psychoanalysis can be relevant only to the West. When the dust cleared after the cultural revolution in China, Chinese physicians began to reach out to Western institutions for psychoanalytic training. When Europeans and Americans practiced in China they reported that their patients' symptoms were familiar. There were complaints about

anxiety and isolation, about feelings of guilt and remorse. As their society was changing and developing, Chinese patients, too, needed to get in touch with their subjective selves. Modernity cannot survive in a purely objective and rational form. It needs romance, a connection to the inner life. Modernity must be connected to subjectivity if the modern self is to survive.

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**Note**

1. First prepared for the celebration of Alain Touraine's 80th birthday in Paris, December 2008.