

Marxism and Psychoanalysis: Attempting a Brief Review of an Old Problem*

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Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands.

Marx and Engels (1845/46, pp. 26-27)

Abstract. *A brief attempt is made to locate Marxism and Psychoanalysis in the history of ideas. In both there is an evident and radical break with a magical, metaphysical and mystical idea of nature. Both postulate the coalescence of theory and practice, and both also share an eminently dialectical point of view. In Marx's work we can find elements that might appear as Freudian thought and vice versa. Very few authors throughout the history of ideas have been the objects of such passionate rejection as Marx and Freud. They also seem to be condemned, by their own quantitative characteristics and qualitative complexity, to a certain category of being quite unmanageable.*

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Introduction

There is an old joke that says if anyone wants to ridicule the ignorance of his opponent, the easiest way is to propose the topic of Marxism or Psychoanalysis. I am convinced that the works of Marx and of Freud are absolutely unmanageable for their extension as well as for their complexity. Here I admit that I have once mocked an important marxologist from a prestigious university myself: I sent him a paragraph written by Freud and maliciously asked him to pinpoint it in Marx's work. He was enthusiastic about the task, until I wrote to him later that the lines I had sent him were not of Marx's authorship, but of Freud's. There are many possibilities for further mockeries by just inverting the procedure, i.e., by presenting texts by Marx that might appear to have been written by Freud. The magnitude of these two important figures

of cultural history is an involuntary insult against us as it reveals our ignorance.

An Impossible Task: to Comprise Marx and Freud

The complete works of Marx/Engels known as MEGA 2, a project that was taken up in 1975, will not be finished until in approximately ten years from now. The Marx/Engels works edited and known as MEW consist of 42 volumes, were published in Berlin and, little by little, are being displaced by the MEGA 2. This new critical edition includes formerly unpublished material. Several international institutes and universities are collaborating in the project. By now there have appeared only 59 of 150 planned volumes.

In psychoanalysis nothing similar has been achieved regarding Freud's work, even though his

oeuvre is not as extensive as that of Marx/Engels in terms of quantity. There does not exist any publication that is comparable to the *HKWM (Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus)* by Fritz Haug. This project was initiated in 1994; 18 thick volumes are planned and nine have appeared so far.

Psychoanalysis and Marxism have been declared dead as many times as they have been resurrected. The criteria employed to consider them rejuvenated are ultimately epistemological ones, as both Psychoanalysis and Marxism have shown their capacity *to keep generating new insights* (see Sloterdijk, 2010). The original theoretical premises have resisted and survived many of the whims of their well-intentioned disciples, the nonexistence of translations, and the persistent nonobservance of those who do not want to read or investigate.

It seems paradoxical that we would find coincidences/divergences and theoretical complementarities between these two geniuses that remain stubbornly overlooked. Both are Jews and deeply rooted in the German language, which contains dialectical elements in its structure. On the other hand, the Jewish spirit is rebellious against any kind of domination except from God, but neither Marx nor Freud accepts submission to any god, just as they reject the dictatorship of capitalism (Marx) or of the unconscious (Freud). Both are – due to their condition as atheist Jews – twice exiled. Marx and Freud were revolutionaries, rebels in their theories.

In Marx's work we can find elements that might appear as Freudian thought and *vice versa*. This is thoroughly ignored even by serious biographers such as Edmundson (2009). Among us, who are their epigones, periods of mutual disregard, of misunderstandings, and also of attempted alignment went by. Neither for Marx nor for Freud ahistorical truths exist; they stand out for their capacity for self-criticism. Psychoanalysis is a cognitive method that aims at understanding unconscious, social, political and cultural phenomena. One of its most important contributions is based on its method and on its effort to fathom the pathogenic aspects that have arisen out of an oppressive civilization. Another core element consists in the investigation of childhood as the determining source of the adult's behavior. The real motives of an adult person are less rational than he might think. The human being only appears to be an entirely rational one. The motives that underlay his behavior are frequently irrational and inaccessible to his conscious self. It is a vulgar and common mistake to state that the whole spectrum of social dynamics can be reduced to the Oedipus complex; that was not Freud's opinion at all.

Nevertheless, the image of God as a father can hardly veil his dictatorial condition and Mary, incarnation of the incest taboo, is also an advocate before the almighty and irate Father. Mary is Christianity's favorite symbol of asexuality. There are different cultural versions of the Oedipus conflict, though. By all means, the prohibitions derived from the Oedipal family core, braced in biological conditions, are also engraved in the super-ego. The *Homo sapiens* is a historical being after all, and biologically modifiable.

Marxism rigorously analyzes the material relations of production: "In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society (...) It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1859, par. 6). Ideas are products of history, even though they also have an impact on its course.

Marx continues with a sentence that combines his own thoughts with that of Freud. Concerning the conflict between the real economic forces and their ideological deceptions it is convenient that "just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life" (Marx, 1859, par. 7).

The implication, namely the historically determined transformation of the human mind, is well taken into account in Marxism, as we can see in Trotsky's following statement: "There can really be no doubt about the fact that the humans of the future will be *communitarian citizens*, much more interesting and attractive beings with a very different *psyche* from ours" (Trotsky, 1923, p. 7). In a letter to Pavlov, dated 23 September 1923, Trotsky writes that he was sufficiently close to Freudians and that their way of handling psychological problems impressed him (Tögel, 1989a). This makes it clear that Trotsky represented the seed of a Freudian wing in Marxism. Evidently, social pathologies (e.g. the absence of real democracy) with particular structures are reflected in disease patterns with the same axis. Trotsky admits that psychoanalytic contributions were promising, especially concerning the incorporation of Freud's theory of the unconscious, in order to build up an ever less utopian socialism. Since 1934, Fenichel has

pointed out that whoever intended to connect the psychoanalytic and Marxist perspectives had to fight between two opposite forces. On one side would be a philosophical idealism that claims anything material to be radically opposed to and separated from the psychological, which, furthermore, clings to something vaguely superior and transcendent. On the other side would be the perspective of a vulgar Marxism, from where Psychoanalysis is considered as nothing more than a “neutral” psychotechnique (see Fenichel, 1934, p. 276).

Marx and Freud: Remarks about their Insertion in the History of Ideas and the History of Science

Here we make a brief attempt to locate Marxism and Psychoanalysis in the history of ideas. In both there is an evident and radical break with a magical, metaphysical and mystical idea of nature. Both postulate the coalescence of theory and practice, and both also share an eminently dialectical point of view. Freud substantiates his dialectical vision in the psyche and practices dialectics without any recourse to any *absolute spirit* (Hegel). Marx, when he studies Hegel's idealist and mystical dialectic, radically distances himself from it. There is another similarity: their doctrines proceed from Enlightenment assumptions; Marxism takes it to political action, whilst Psychoanalysis takes it to a mistrust of any reason that is only based on the conscious mind. Both theories seek to incorporate the irrational aspects of person and society, but warn us against the risk of turning rationality, or *logos*, into a new God.

It is well known that the Enlightenment has neutralized the power of religions by interpreting them as myths, literature or chapters of cultural anthropology. Marxism and Psychoanalysis both pursue emancipatory purposes. Let us point out one more fundamental confluence: *There is no nature without history*. Neither does there exist any tangible history without the inner subjectivity of the subject who is reciprocally interrelated with her environment. Historical reality is singular, irreversible and of limited constancy. We should not forget that anything that had occurred throughout history might have taken a different turn and have had a different outcome. There are clefts where coincidence leaks through, however difficult its definition may be. Coincidences obey explicable causes, but do not establish any normativities. Put in different words: it is *determined*, but not necessarily *determining*. We should remember here that Marxism came to be accepted in the working class movement due to its separation from utopian socialism, Proudhon's communitarianism, Bakunin's anarchism and,

obviously, from the mechanistic materialism and the economic reductionism proposed by the Second International, which was criticized by Engels himself in this aspect. Psychoanalysis is delimited from psychiatry and medicine and is located between natural and social science.

The Vienna Circle (Carnap, Schlick, Neurath, Hahn, Mach), formed at the time when Psychoanalysis was also being developed in that city, explicitly acknowledged psychoanalytic inquiries about the unconscious as an important auxiliary to science in general. With his logical positivism and his affinity for the unity of all sciences, Neurath was the first to use the term “overall science”; Zilsel in turn proposed the concepts “total theory” and “unitary science” (see Dahms, 1999; Dvorak, 1981). All these authors represent the *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*; that is, the *scientific worldview*. We could talk here of a genuine situation of *communicating vessels* (Breton) between the different sciences. The Vienna Circle was expressly open to Psychoanalysis and it turned to an analysis of language that brought them really close to the Freudian method. Just one example: *We do not say that what you are saying is right or wrong, but we explore the meaning of what you are saying*. Contemporary to Freud and also in Vienna, the transcendental works of Fritz Mauthner and of Ludwig Wittgenstein evolve.

Very few authors throughout the history of ideas have been the objects of such passionate rejection as Marx and Freud. Occasionally this rejection is well described by the term *bashing*; the systematic reviling, aspersing and misinterpreting of an author. It is noteworthy that the cells from where this bashing has proceeded have been mostly France and the USA (see von Tippelskirch-Eissing et al., 2011). It is comparable to the famous book burning in May 1933 by the national socialists where Freud's and Marx's works were obviously included. These coarse distortions and extremely intense reactions would make an exquisite object for further studies in the field of the sociology of knowledge. The original, unfinished character of Marx's immense critical work has been subjected to the pressure of an allegedly “official doctrine” by some of his epigones, who inevitably produced several distinctive dialects. The same has happened with Psychoanalysis. Marx and Freud have created *open systems*, which is a nonfinite process subjected to constant self-criticism (see Musto, 2011).

Marx and Freud seem to be condemned, by their own quantitative characteristics and qualitative complexity, to a certain category of being quite *unmanageable*. Furthermore, the transcendence of their

ideas unleashes uncountable discussions and rivalry between their followers and interpreters. When speaking about Psychoanalysis, one should mention which school or which cultural-national formation one is talking about. Something similar occurs with Marxism. It seems to be forbidden to talk about the great scandal of our ignorance about both disciplines.

Together with Bernfeld (1926), Reich (1934; see also Peglau, 2013), Fromm (1962) and Reiche (1968), among others, Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) have become the unexpected guests to the never completely consummated wedding of Marxism and Psychoanalysis. They actually ask themselves, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Is it then so that the individual who lives in a sick society is not sick himself? Compare also Marx's attitude towards suicide as a symptom of a society gone awry. Critical theory has, since its beginnings, attempted the convergence of the two disciplines (see Lohmann 2006a, 2006b; Decker & Türcke, 2007). Helmuth Dahmer (2002; 2012), who is adept at both, assigns to Psychoanalysis a kind of bridging status: without completely abandoning natural science, Psychoanalysis approaches the so-called "humanities" (or "social sciences") and combines in its procedures the (causal) explanation of natural science (*erklären*) with the interpretive approach of the humanities (*verstehen*). In other words, it also applies a hermeneutical method. Freud challenged the mentioned categories of knowledge and firmly installed himself on the borderline. Freud's profound hermeneutics is about making new meanings visible. The right interpretation replaces or complements the anterior one (see Todorov, 1992, p. 12). By the way, this was also stated by Marx. Marx abandoned the Hegelian realm of the "absolute spirit" in order to turn to a materialist conception of history. Psychoanalysis aims to strengthen the functions of the ego by confronting the inner and outer world to achieve the best possible change. We must remember here that, for Marx, work is the metabolism between man and nature (see Marx, 1858/1973) and the capitalist's money-god is "the excrement, that is the final product of the work process" (*ibid.*, p. 214). The *metabolic disorder of work* – keeping up with Marx's metaphor – occurs when the remuneration is inadequate in relation to the quality and quantity of the job. This inadequacy – euphemism for injustice – goes both ways: there is poorly compensated work as well as there are stratospheric salaries. The absence of empathy and the exorbitant thirst for money are symptoms that favor capitalism and thereby somehow created it. Marx (1867) makes the following statement: "avarice, and desire to get rich, are the ruling passions. (...) More-

over, the capitalist gets rich, not like the miser, in proportion to his personal labour and restricted consumption, but at the same rate as he squeezes out the labour-power of others, and enforces on the labourer abstinence from all life's enjoyments" (par. 6). The instinct of accumulation encroaches on human relationships and sexual love.

The human being can act, work (in a broad sense) and fight against death; that is, assume all possible distance from the tendency towards the inorganic, towards death as the triumph of entropy that equals everything on a level of inferior organization. Marxism tries to rectify the course of history by dismantling class conflict and reconciling the person with her intrinsic social nature that debates itself between aggression and solidarity. The conciliation of man with nature, with his physical environment called planet Earth, is of vital importance. It is all about achieving "the social anarchy of production [that] gives place to a social regulation of production upon a definite plan, according to the needs of the community and of each individual" (Engels, 1882, par. 37). This is a basic statement paving the way to a socialist society. In Freud's work, the goal is to turn the unconscious finally conscious, so that "where there was id, there shall be ego". This conceptual system has its analogy in Marxism in Ernst Bloch's *utopian function*: "the possible has to become real" (Bloch, 1959, p. 167). History is ultimately the work of people modifying the given situation. Bloch draws a model based upon the classless society, sustained by a culture that exponentially transforms the human potential into concrete realities with the ingredient of realistic hope (see Bloch, 1968, p. 242).

The *utopian function* and the *principle of hope* have their Freudian correlative in the constitutive desire of dreaming itself and of daydream fantasies that revolt against the given situation. Evidently, the aim of Psychoanalysis is to increase the *sense of reality* without any kind of illusions. This is, ultimately, the origin of any revolution. Our condition of greediness is always present in our psychical structure, and the aim is to fight against what is intolerable about what exists: *exploitation* from a Marxist viewpoint; the *repressive defiance of sexuality* for Freud, and plain *evil* in Christian discourse.

The Unity of Sciences as an Epistemological Postulate against the Fragmentation of Knowledge

Marxism and Psychoanalysis are complementary, but not by decree. This complementarity is postulated not only as wishful thinking, but as a path of investigation

that still lies ahead of us. Our basic postulate is sustained by Humboldt's ideas exposed in his work *Cosmos*: the entire society stands in tight dependency with natural order (Humboldt, 1845/2011). Marx said the world's true unity consists in its condition of "materiality". From a dialectical viewpoint, if he had been forced to "define" what *truth* is, he would have answered to that with the following Feuerbachian formulation: Truth would be equivalent to *totality*, which is something unreachable and unmanageable. One could also say that dialectical processes attest to a new order derived from the disorder that was caused by the contraries that preceded it.

In quantum physics, the *principle of complementarity* of contraries was studied by Niels Bohr (1926), and there have been important advances in the field since that time. One such later development is research into so-called resonance (see Cramer, 1998), which reminds us think of what happens in psychoanalysis between two peoples' unconscious, such as the transference-countertransference relation. The phenomenon of *resonance* depicts a mode of "energy" transmission that requires a constitutive coupler for the resonant. A vivid example is that of what happens between chlorophyll and solar energy. The same thing can be said about our eyes and sunlight. The constitutive coupler can also be called a *complementary system*. Let us recall the metaphor of the telephone in Freud, where there takes place a communication, a transmission between two unconscious. In the same way there exists a resonant system between the individual and society. According to Feuerbach, even thinking itself cannot be the act of an individual, but an evident and intrinsic social expression. Up to now, reality has shown us an architecture that has the structure of an intimately interconnected *totality*. This is implicitly self-evident in Marxism as well as in Psychoanalysis. Niels Bohr observed this phenomenon in relation to corpuscular theory and physical optics in the constitution of light, but he gave it a bold epistemological, universal value. The unitary vision connects everything that exists in external and internal reality (see *Russell-Einstein Manifesto*, 1955), which makes the frontiers between body and soul, object and subject, matter and spirit, observant and the observed permeable. In the area of Psychoanalysis, this includes transference and countertransference and, finally, time and space. Reductionism and the alleged predictability of the so-called exact sciences are called into question here. Since quantum physics we rather speak of *probabilities* or accidental *possibilities* than of absolute *predictabilities* and allegedly fixed laws. Reality is inconceivable without taking into account its relational aspect; that is, *its relation*

with..., *its relation to...* Thereby, quantum physics extenuates any possible theoretic incompatibility with the so-called social science or humanities like Marxism or Psychoanalysis. Subjectivity does not admit its reduction to being only physical. Extreme positivism has received a forceful blow from Planck and Einstein. Just as the solar mass generates the gravitation from which not even light is able to escape, nothing escapes the "gravitational force" of the economical basis or the function of work in general (Marx), or nor the "gravity" of the unconscious (Freud) and its energetic basis, which I call the *libidinal economy*.

Our history and development are included in the unpredictable march of the whole of reality, which obviously is not "independent" from matter. This is also true on a biological and social level. High technology and low civilization are a very dangerous combination (remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki) that we are also observing in climate change. The relation between the capitalist way of production and the irrational exploitation of the planet is evident. A low level of consciousness and a big material power is synonymous with a global catastrophe. Marxism, from Engels' quill, takes a stand against the vulgar interpretation of "historical laws": "Our knowledge of the history of economy is still in diapers" (Engels, 1890). He pronounces himself against laws, too, when he leaves the door open for coincidence. He does not confuse the accidental with the allegedly ahistorical, though, but shows how processes in history evolve in a webbing of chaotic elements, accidents, conscious and unconscious human interventions and, last but not least, the economic factors studied by himself.

In *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1858/1973) takes his distance from the misunderstood concept of laws of history, sustained amongst others by the bourgeois historian Leopold von Ranke. It is a basic Marxist postulate that it is not the state which conditions and regulates civil society, but the other way round. Or at least, it is all about relations of reciprocal conditioning.

For Marx, the construction of a classless society is not something which just falls from the sky. It is necessary to thoroughly study the social and economic causal relations. The *market laws* are not an unquestionable fate, but result from human actions aimed at radical modifications of the system as a total. Interrogating and disarticulating the alleged destiny of the progressive impoverishment of the proletariat and Third World nations is a condition *sine qua non* of any social revolution.

For Freud, complementarity is about ambivalence and, obviously, Eros and Thanatos. But as Heisenberg has once said: Dialectic is unbearable for the majority anyway. In other words, dialectic is the core of tragedy and, at the same time, complies with the Nietzschean definition of tragedy, namely *facing the unsolvable and unintelligible conflict of our existence without turning to a unworthy refuge such as religious [or nonreligious] illusions*. According to Nietzsche, the original tragedy consists in assimilating the fact that whatever emerges must necessarily perish. This is nothing else than the struggle between the contraries: being and perishing, life and death. Life tends to unite and death tends to take apart. In his *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels (1886) tells us about nature as something that expands by means of incessant connections and that advance or decay through contradictions. He speaks of dialectic as a science of connections between opposites. In the social sciences and humanities, the investigation of *dialectical complementarity* has to consider nature as an ongoing process with no completely predetermined or secure branches, not even in Newton's classical physics. In all disciplines that have the human as their object of research it is well known that predictability is only limited, with any statement restricted to the condition of mere possibility or probability, or of a potential still to be explored. On the other hand, there is also Heisenberg's *uncertainty principle*, which states that *through the act of observing, the observer modifies the observed and therefore there cannot be any observation that is absolutely exact*. This has been related to the concept of countertransference in psychoanalysis. Later, in Marxism, it has been related to a notion of accident or coincidence that goes beyond the simple ignorance of causes (see Hawking, 1994). Lenin (1922) recommended studying the theory of relativity for its relation to *historical materialism*, or rather with the *materialist conception of historical processes*. Back to Heisenberg: the limitations of human knowledge are greater than what we generally suspect or can bear without building ideologies, not even to mention the feebleness of human language. It was clear to Lenin that the implementation of communist ideals in the Soviet Union was condemned to failure if during the attempt to abolish capitalist order all the scientific and cultural achievements of the capitalist opponent were also abolished (see Tögel, 1988b).

Any science cut off from the social context it is inserted in is unthinkable (Marx), just as it cannot be independent from the subjective condition of the scientist (Freud). The invisible complementarities must

become visible as a result of rigorous research. Wilhelm Wundt and Wilhelm Dilthey (1931) stood out in this respect, just as Marx and Freud. Concerning the importance of social issues, Freud (1930/1961) asserts in a frankly Marxist tone: "I too think it quite certain that a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions would be of more help in this direction than any ethical commands" (p. 143). And in another place: "In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though certainly not the strongest" (p. 113). Freud also pointed out, though, that socialism did not contemplate sufficiently the innate aggressiveness of man. On the other hand, Marx seems to be a psychologist when he indicates some negative psychological repercussions of capitalism. He affirmed that the adjustments and crisis of the relations of production affect "all social relationships" and expressly mentions their negative repercussion on the human relations inside a family. In this context he also criticizes capitalism most severely when he says that it has resolved personal worth into exchange value. Here and there obvious hints to a relation of complementarity between Marxism and Psychoanalysis come through. The difference is just one of perspectives from different shores. From the psychoanalytic viewpoint there has been a consolidation of the knowledge of how the unconscious exerts a force that restricts and perturbs the free course of our thoughts, actions and imaginations. The tight connection of this force, which is the operative force of the economic structure that is unconscious, is only suffered in its fell effects and clashes with major resistance that impedes its uncurtaining (see Bruder, 2005, p. 634).

To Marx, the unitary science *par excellence* is history: "We know only a single science, the science of history" (1845, par. 8). History, like knowledge itself, is an ever ongoing process. Even so we have to point out here that history in Marx only exists as an abstraction. There is really only *concrete history* as the result of the action of man in the elaboration of what he has received from previous generations and the environment. For Horkheimer psychoanalysis is clearly an auxiliary science to Marxism. It studies the subject in its distinct social and historical aspects. Psychoanalysis was born on the limit between natural and social sciences (see Bastide et al., 1972). Dilthey (1931) is the living example of the organic tendency to the unity of sciences. He detects the basis of our cosmovision in the personal and social biography. Dilthey's perspective provides – unintentionally – a hinge between Marxism and Psychoanalysis. Facing the impossibility of capturing all the aspects of reality at the same time, our reason fragments the

unmanageable – just like a spectrometer – into different areas of knowledge (see Buchholz & Göddel, 2005). Freud (1926/1975) mentioned how scientific discoveries expire and need to evolve towards integration as “in itself, every science is one-sided, that is, restricted to certain subjects” (p. 230). The dialectical point of view has no room for metaphysics, dogmas or revelations. There is no safe harbor to shelter us from the open sea of uncertainties, but only small ports that allow us to take a short breath. The complementarity of sciences cries out for us not to become shipwrecked in our unilateralism. It is an attempt to turn necessity into an epistemological virtue.

In Marxism it is understood that the social reality of nature and the natural science of man are expressions that converge. History itself is a real part of nature as a process in which *nature* becomes human. *Psyche* as a totality is traversed by the unconscious and the socioeconomic structure that determine it. In general terms, we are talking about a “cultural unconscious” (*Erdheim*) to designate what each different culture represses.

In dialectical materialism, matter – even the apparently inert – “hides” the movement inside; in Freudian psychology consciousness is the cover of the unconscious. The unity of science is based on the unity of nature. Dialectical materialism is the theoretical core of Marxism, and it states that the pivot of the unity of science is matter and its properties. That is precisely what we might call the *base material* of any reality. And movement is the form in which matter exists.

We recall with Mühlmann (2011) that cultures as well as other social formations such as Marxism or Psychoanalysis are living organisms. Cultures evolve to favor or to restrain certain genetic changes (*evolutionary reinforcement learning* (ERL)). Mühlmann thus connects social issues with biology.

The Georgian philosopher Merab Konstantinowitsch Mamardashwili (1999) points out: “What we know as consciousness is only the final product of the metamorphosis of a vast and multi-dimensional unity. When we consider the psychical conscious we must always take into account the invisible components it is connected with and depends on; these are social mechanisms as well as unconscious ones, and the codified systems of each culture” (p. 224). As an analogy, the analyzed person says more than he thinks, and the analyst has to understand these expressions beyond their literal meaning.

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