Psychoanalysis in the Age of Totalitarianism

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Chapter 17

Post-psychoanalysis and post-totalitarianism

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Before even considering how we might theorize or historicize the relationship between psychoanalysis and totalitarianism, I want to suggest that we are living today in a post-psychoanalytic and post-totalitarian age. By this I mean, first, that wherever we look we see either that psychoanalysis has been widely rejected — especially in the United States where it flourishes, if at all, only at the margins of mainstream psychiatry and psychotherapy — or that it's being retooled in biological-materialist terms that involve the marginalization or abandonment of its central insights. And second, although I think it's fair to claim that the ravages of economic inequality have nothing to do with totalitarianism but are the result of neo-liberalism and global capitalism, there is a tendency in sections of both the political left and the political right today to regard totalitarianism as the greatest threat confronting the world. If both of these developments are true, what is their significance? Put slightly differently, what has gone missing when psychoanalysis is so widely discarded and totalitarianism is (still) cast as the central challenge of our times? Briefly, I suggest that what has gone missing in an age that is post-psychoanalytic is a concern with issues of intentionality and meaning. And I propose that what has gone missing in what I am calling post-totalitarianism is a concern with issues of class and economic inequality. My question then becomes: what, if anything, links these two developments together?

Post-psychoanalysis

As regards post-psychoanalysis, it would not be difficult to show that scholars and theorists of many kinds in the human and social sciences, as well as theorists of psychology and emotion, are bent on throwing off what they view as the straitjacket of psychoanalysis. Their reactions are motivated in part by the idea that the body in its lived materiality has been occluded or neglected by Freudian approaches to subjectivity. The result has been a widespread post-psychoanalytic embrace of biology and the neurosciences. This development is obvious in many domains, especially in the recent 'turn to affect'. For example, in the field of literary criticism and theory, the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a pioneer of
postmodernist and queer theory, has been especially influential in her decision to discard psychoanalysis in her later work, and to emphasize instead the value of a biological approach to the effects for understanding the role of embodiment in (queer) identity formation and change. Borrowing from the (to my mind theoretically and empirically mistaken) ideas of the American psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins (1911–91), she proposed that the affects are to be understood in non-intentionalist, materialist terms as a set of universal, discrete, quasi-reflex 'affect programmes' or 'basic emotions' located subcortically in the brain and defined by signature bodily responses, especially by characteristic facial expressions. For Freud, emotions are intentional states; they are directed toward objects and depend on our desires and beliefs about the world. But according to Sedgwick, who follows Tomkins in this regard, emotions are bodily states that can be triggered by what might be called their objects — but it turns out that the objects are nothing but stimuli or tripwires for built-in, reflex-like corporeal responses (Sedgwick, 2003). Tomkins' Darwinian-inspired ideas have been embraced by Sedgwick's followers and many others, while the related non-intentionalist theory of the emotions proposed by Tomkins' follower and successor, the psychologist Paul Ekman, dominates mainstream affective neuroscience, as in the writings of the influential emotion theorist Antonio Damasio. Likewise recent affect theorists in political science and related fields, such as Brian Massumi and William E. Connolly, who claim to be influenced by the writings of Gilles Deleuze and other philosophers, are committed to the same non-intentionalism when they assert that affect is independent of cognition, signification and meaning, and when they draw on the same or similar problematic neuroscientific views to support their opinions.

It is of course possible to deny that affects are rightly understood in non-intentionalist, materialist terms. It could be argued (in fact, I have made the argument elsewhere) that the affects are embodied, intentional states in which the question of the meaning to the organism or subject of the objects in its world is a central issue and concern (Leys, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2012a). Nor am I alone in thinking that the anti-intentionalist view of the affects is erroneous. But for a host of reasons the idea of non-intentionality has a powerful grip on contemporary culture and thought and is not easily dislodged.

Moreover, many psychoanalysts have also recently begun arguing the need to redefine Freudian ideas in terms amenable to the neurosciences. This has led to, among other consequences, the uncritical acceptance of non-intentionalist theories of emotion of the kind found in the work of Ekman and Damasio. The result has been a repudiation of the role of intention and belief in emotion in terms that are alien to Freud's own meaning-centred approach to affect. To take just one example, the neuro-psychoanalyst Mark Solms writes that 'emotion is the aspect of consciousness that is left if you remove all externally derived contents' — a statement I can't imagine Freud making (or indeed Wittgenstein), and one that is striking for its hostility to the idea that emotions are intentional states that are directed at objects (Solms and Turnbull, 2002: 166).

For quite a few years now many theorists have also been committed to a non-intentionalist approach to trauma. They have turned away from the Freudian emphasis on Nachträglichkeit (deferred action), or the retroactive conferral of meaning in trauma, in favour of a post-psychoanalytic emphasis on the traumatic collapse of all meaning and representation. The deconstructive account of trauma put forward by literary critic Cathy Caruth is exemplary in this regard (Caruth, 1996). At the heart of Caruth's approach to trauma is a 'performative' theory of language based on the work of the Belgian-born literary critic and theoreticians of deconstruction Paul de Man, according to which a 'death-like' break or resistance to meaning inflects language itself. For Caruth, analogous 'death-like break' lies at the heart of trauma: the victim of trauma who cannot symbolize or represent the traumatic event or scene nevertheless obsessively 'performs' or re-experiences it in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, and related neurobiological symptoms. Although aspects of Caruth's theory are linked to Freud's discussions of examples of traumatic repetition seen in shell-shocked soldiers in the First World War and in clinical settings, her account of trauma has been fortified by appeals to the findings of neurobiologists who, viewing trauma in literalist-causal terms, reinterpret the traumatic dream as a veridical memory of the traumatic event, a memory that is said to be 'engraved' in the brain with uncanny accuracy.

Although to my mind Caruth's ideas are mistaken (see Leys, 2000, ch. 8), they continue to attract attention and support. In fact, it is worth emphasizing that the new affect theorists are simply offering a reworking of the basic themes of trauma theory as put forward by Caruth. Both share the same commitment to anti-intentionalism, according to which affect and trauma are held to be characterized by the absence of intentionality or meaning; both share the same commitment to materialism, with the result that affect and trauma are literalized or corporealized in the body; and both share the same commitment to neuroscientific interpretations of affect and trauma (Leys, 2012b). They also share a commitment to the importance of (a certain notion of) ontology, a topic on which I have more to say below.

A striking manifestation of these trends can be found in the work of the French philosopher Catherine Malabou, who, in a recent book, The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain-Damage, first published in 2007, combines affect and trauma theory to suggest that we are living in an age in which a wide range of people can be defined as 'wounded' and hence as post-traumatic subjects (Malabou, 2012a). Malabou includes in one single category the effects of traumas resulting from actual head wounds or cerebral lesions, traumas due to natural catastrophes, and traumas resulting from political violence or social conflict, in order to propose that none of these traumas can be interpreted in psychoanalytic terms. Instead, inspired by the work of Damasio and others, as well as by the literature on the war neuroses, she proposes that trauma must be understood in corporeal-materialist terms as the consequence of damage to the (so-called) 'emotional brain'. She therefore paints a portrait of the 'new wounded' as persons who,
through the impact of a cerebral accident of some kind, are so altered, so absolutely cut off from their previous identities, so emptied of memory, interiority, and subjectivity, and so indifferent to others and to the world, as to be altogether deprived of feeling of any kind. Alzheimer patients, schizophrenics, autistic, epileptics, survivors of the concentation camps, patients with war neuroses or post-traumatic stress disorder, and the victims of natural and political disasters — all emerge in her account as emblematic of the zero-degree of subjectivity that supposedly characterizes the global form of life in the twenty-first century. So expansive is Malabou’s account of the new wounded that she claims, with considerable hyperbole, that the post-traumatic condition is one that “reigns everywhere today” (Malabou, 2012a: 17).

Malabou denies that she has created a false amalgam by fusing together such apparently disparate conditions. She claims rather that the phenomenon of the amalgam is precisely what needs to be discussed today: the heterogeneous mixture, as she sees it, of politics and nature at work in all types of violence, a mixture where “politics is annull'd as such that it assumes the face of nature and where nature disappears beneath the mask of politics” (Malabou, 2012a: 156). According to her, what unites the new wounded as a group is that, no matter their different clinical forms, they all suffer from the same pathology and the same emotional abnormalities. For Malabou, trauma produces a cerebral pathology that is identical in all cases and contexts, a pathology that she argues results in any interpretation or assignment of meaning. She introduces the concept of “cerebrality” to capture her sense of what she calls the “cerebral value” of the damage done by traumatic events to the emotional brain, regardless of whether those events are accompanied by demonstrable cerebral impairments (Malabou 2012a: 2). She writes: “The “new wounded” . . . are not merely people with brain lesions. Cerebrality designates a regime of eventuality that recognizes the psychic weight of accidents stripped of any significance” (Malabou, 2012a: 10). Trauma thus reveals the “ability of the subject to survive the senselessness of its own accidents” (Malabou, 2012a: 5). In Malabou’s approach, political and social conflicts become as anonymous and meaningless as natural catastrophes and the victims of trauma are emptied of all interiority and subjectivity. In her words:

The distinction between organic traumas and political traumas becomes blurred precisely because of the type of event that gives rise to them — a brutal event, without signification, that affects its intentionality in order to appear as a blow inflicted on any possible hermeneutics in general.

(Malabou, 2012a: 214)

Malabou’s definition of trauma as a pure ‘accident’ — as a completely unanticipated, ungraspable, unmediated external event that bears no relation to the past and destroys meaning — is not new. Rather, her proposal needs to be seen for what it is — as a reworking, that is, as yet another expression of the recent, I am tempted to say standard, postmodernist and post-Holocaust emphasis on the unspeakable and unrepresentable in trauma. Indeed, as I have indicated, the same emphasis on trauma, defined as an accident that nauseates semantic expectations and meanings, is basic to the work of Caruth, whose work in this regard Malabou cites favourably (Malabou, 2012a: 201). But Malabou takes these by now familiar ideas a step further. Her argument is not just that trauma is an experience that has no significance for the victim. She suggests that even the perpetrator’s deliberate acts of violence lack meaning and intention. According to her, traumatic events are incidents that tend to ‘mask their intentionality’, with the consequence that, as she puts it, “politics itself is defined by the renunciation of any hope of enacting violence with a political sense” (Malabou, 2012a: 155). Traumatic events thus appear either as perfectly unmotivated accidents or as the necessary blindness of natural laws (Malabou, 2012a: 11). In both cases, the intentional orientation of the event is “disguised” (Malabou, 2012a: 11). As she puts it:

The meaning of armed conflicts . . . is masked behind the impersonal and sign-free character of their attacks. Between a bomb and an accidental detonation of a gas tank there is both an enormous difference and no difference. The sinister lesson of terrorism lies in its refusal to formulate a lesson. Responsibility for attacks is claimed less and less. The situation in Iraq, for example, remains illegible. Who perpetrates terrorist attacks today, and why? The incommensurability of the reason for the event is the new form of the event. The increasingly radical effectuation of the distinction between accident and crime, between disastrous events and war, the multifaceted presence of the absence of any responsible instances or author, makes the natural catastrophe of contemporary politics into a daily occurrence.

(Malabou, 2012a: 155)

Malabou thus treats terrorist acts as unmotivated by any political reasons the terrorists themselves might give for them (Malabou, 2012: 155) and places the emphasis instead on the terrorists’ emotional emptiness — as if terrorists are merely helplessly carriers of an impersonal, destructive-neuronal death drive. But it is one thing to say that certain acts of terrorism are illegible to those of us who do not know who the terrorists are, do not know their culture, and do not understand their motives; it is another thing to suggest, as Malabou does, that the refusal of terrorists to publicly take responsibility for their acts is not a political strategy for which they have their reasons but points rather to the absence of any reasons, intentions, or meanings. The obliteration of the distinction between perpetrators and victims — already seen in the work of both Caruth and Giorgio Agamben — could hardly be taken further. In short, Malabou treats terrorists not as intentional agents but as new forms of identity — the identity of those whose cold indifference marks them as members of the class of the “new wounded”. For Malabou, what matters is not the terrorists’ intentions and beliefs but simply who they are. What is novel is that rather than proposing that terrorists have an
identity different from that of their victims, she now asks us to imagine that they have exactly the same identity — the identity of the new wounded.

A further point in this connection: by substituting an interest in personal identity for an interest in issues of meaning and intention, Malabou's work conforms to the general turn to a certain notion of ontology that marks the post-psychoanalytic. By stressing the fundamental importance of affect and subjectivity — or their complete disappearance under the traumatic conditions that produce the class of the 'new wounded' — Malabou replaces questions about ideology and what people believe and think with questions about sheer 'being' or what people are, since what matters to her are not beliefs and intentions but simply the identity of subjects as the 'new wounded'. The title of another of Malabou's recent books, Ontology of the Accident, signals her commitment to the idea that the post-traumatic subject is the new form of 'being' in the twenty-first century (Malabou, 2012b).

The trouble with this 'ontological' (but in fact merely identitarian) turn, however, is that it forecloses the possibility of disagreement and dispute. In particular, replacing an emphasis on what we believe with an emphasis on who we are changes the entire basis on which we can have arguments and debates. Indeed, it closes down the possibility of dispute altogether. For how can there be a debate over the meaning of terrorism, if all that matters is who the terrorists are, not the beliefs they hold? As the literary critic and theorist Walter Benn Michaels has argued in connection with Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's similar replacement of political beliefs and ideas with the 'biopolitical', defined by them as 'struggles over the forms of life':

[Struggles over the form of life are 'ontological' rather than ideological; they have nothing to do with the question of what is believed and everything to do with the question of what is. For Hardt and Negri, of course, Empire is what is, and in their efforts to imagine 'resistance' to it, they are as skeptical of political alternatives as to it as... George W. Bush. Just as the point of the war on terrorism is to insist that there is no alternative ethno-legal order (you either follow the law or break it), the point of Empire is that it, too, is 'total' and that resistance to it can only take the form of negation — 'the will to be against'. So if political conflict may be imagined as a conflict between two competing commitments to what's right, biopolitical conflict appears as conflict between what is and what isn't, or (in its more forward-looking mode) between what is and what will be.

(Michaels, 2004: 172)

Michaels goes on to cite Hardt and Negri as stating: 'Those who are against... must also continually attempt to construct a new body and a new life'. Just so, by emphasizing bodies over ideas, and who we are over meaning, Malabou offers a vision of the twenty-first century as a world inhabited by millions of empty or vacant post-traumatic subjects, the new wounded, rather than by persons with different and hence competing political ideas and beliefs.

Post-totalitarianism

To turn now to the topic of post-totalitarianism, I suggest that a similar concern with difference and identity as opposed to a concern with disagreement over beliefs characterizes recent developments in political theory. Here the question becomes: what does it mean to insist, as Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler and others on the left have done, that the West has normalized the state of exception that characterized the Nazi totalitarian state, with the result, so it is claimed, that the West has normalized totalitarianism itself? And what does it mean if the conservative, or neo-liberal, opponents of Agamben and Butler likewise treat totalitarianism as the most important threat confronting the world? These are precisely the questions raised by Michaels when he observes that for Agamben the threat of the Nazi camps remains central today. Indeed, arguing that the state of emergency declared in the United States after 9/11 has ceased to be the 'exception' and instead has become the 'rule', such that the normalization of the state of exception 'leads inevitably to the establishment of a totalitarian regime', Agamben identifies the Guantanamo Bay detention camp with Auschwitz (Michaels, 2011b). In other words, for Agamben the greatest threat confronting the world is totalitarianism itself. Michaels notes in this regard that people with theoretical positions very different from his and with very different politics characteristically share Agamben's fear of the return of the camps as well. In fact, as he argues, the threat of a new Hitler looms as large in some of the writings of the right as it does in those of the left, the only difference being that for the right it was Saddam Hussein who after 9/11 posed the biggest threat, whereas for the left it was Bush himself. (Today for the right it is probably Obama.)

But Michaels rightly suggests in this regard that the relevant question for both left and right ought to be, not whether Saddam Hussein or Bush is more like Hitler, but about where the totalitarian threat is coming from. The relevant question ought to be: what does it mean for both the left and the right that totalitarianism is indeed the threat? The short answer to this question is that by treating totalitarianism specifically the Nazi form of totalitarianism as exemplified by the concentration camps — as the most fundamental threat to modernity, both the left and the right can ignore the very real contemporary problem of economic poverty resulting from global capitalism or neo-liberalism. And just as in the case of post-psychoanalysis, so here too, theorists on the left and the right refuse the 'inequality of differing ideologies (i.e. the different beliefs about what is true)' (Michaels, 2011a: 311), in favor of a pluralist emphasis on the importance of differences in identity. Indeed, as Michaels shows, the status of the poor emerges in the work of theorists of pluralism and diversity such as William E. Connolly as precisely a new form of cultural identity, one that desires 'respect' or 'recognition' rather than remediation through income redistribution. In short, the case can be made that by treating poverty as a form of economic identity, pluralists such as Connolly do the work of neo-liberalism rather than critiquing it (Michaels, 2011a, 2011b).
We can approach the same topic from the perspective of affect theory by noting that the commitment to diversity and difference of identity is accompanied in the work of Connolly and many other commentators by a related commitment to the view that ideology and belief have been overstated in political life. Thus Connolly denies that people have what he calls ‘abstract beliefs’ and insists instead that our beliefs are embodied in our daily practices and routines, conceived as aspects of our identity to the extent that it is bodies, and not beliefs, that drive personal and political behaviour. Hence the importance attached by Connolly and others to affect, defined in non-intentionalist terms as involving corporal changes occurring below the level of consciousness. Hence also his turn to the work of neuroscience, such as Damasio, LeDoux and others, to confirm his views about the non-cognitive nature of affect. The result is a commitment to notions of self-transformation by everyday ‘techniques’ of the self or ‘tactics’ of the body – e.g. listening to music, exercise, taking Prozac, mental concentration, meditation, and so on – that are said to alter or re-map body-brain connections and thereby change our identities. Stressing bodies over beliefs, affect over reason, Connolly claims that what is crucial is not our ideas and intentions but the non-cognitive affective processes that produce them, with the result that political change becomes a matter not of persuading others of the truth of our ideas but the ‘ontological’ challenge of producing new bodies, new ‘becomings’, and new lives (Connolly, 2002; see also: Leys, 2011a; Connolly, 2011; and Leys, 2011b).

Slavoj Žižek’s response to Malabou’s book is an interesting commentary on these several trends. On the one hand, Žižek rejects the non-Freudian, more specifically the non-Lacanian, terms in which Malabou describes the new wounded, accusing her of naivety in her discussion of psychoanalysis. According to Malabou, interpretations of trauma based on the existence of previous psychical conflicts or the history of the patient, are disqualified. This means that she rejects the Freudian idea that trauma has ‘always already’ occurred because of a prior, more originary trauma – say, the trauma of infantile psychosexuality. Instead, she argues that her newly coined concept of cerebrality:

allows for the possibility of a disastrous event that plays no role in an affective conflict supposed to precede it. Accordingly, it determines the survival of the psyche in terms of a perfectly and definitively aleatory affection... These patients, each in his or her own way, challenge us to think pure, senseless danger as an unexpected event – incompatible with being fantasized... Cerebrality is thus the causality of a neutral and destructive accident – without reason.

(Malabou, 2012a: 8-9)

Not surprisingly, as a staunch follower of Lacan, Žižek refuses the delusional account of subjectivity implied by Malabou’s move to the post-psychoanalytic. He insists rather that traumatic events always occur on the basis of a ‘more profound and originary trauma, understood as the Real or as the “transcendental” trauma’ (cited Malabou, 2012b: 226). As he observes:

When Malabou insists that the subject who emerges after a traumatic wound is not a transformation of the old one, but literally a new one, she is well aware that the identity of this new subject does not arise out of a tautology but: many traces of the old subject’s life-narrative survive, but they are totally restructured, torn out of their previous horizon of meaning and inscribed in a new context.

(Žižek, 2008–9: 23–4)

On the other hand, Žižek endorses Malabou’s ‘ontological’ approach to trauma. He accepts the idea that what is at stake in trauma is the production of a new ‘form’ of life, the form that he calls ‘post-traumatic’ or ‘autistic’ and Malabou calls ‘the new wounded’. Malabou is right to emphasize the philosophical dimension of the new autistic subject, he acknowledges:

In it, we are dealing with the zero-level of subjectivity, with the formal conversion of the pure externality of meaningless real (its brutal destructive intrusion) into the pure internality of the ‘autistic’ subject detached from external reality, disengaged, reduced to the persisting core deprived of its substance... If one wants to get an idea of the elementary, zero-level, form of subjectivity, one has to look at autistic monsters.

(Žižek, 2008–9: 26–7)

Žižek adds an economic dimension to his discussion by including the abstract violence of global capitalism among the forces that produce today’s ‘autistic monsters’. Indeed, he appears to want to resist the tendency of Malabou’s ideas to naturalize capitalism by depriving social conflicts of the ‘dialectics of political struggle proper’ (Žižek, 2008–9: 13), that is, by treating global capitalism as if it were an anonymous, natural force like any other, thereby collapsing the distinction between nature and culture (or the political). Nevertheless, Žižek risks obfuscating the role of economic exploitation in producing inequality precisely because he is committed to the same ‘ontological’ assumptions that govern Malabou’s analysis. Thus Žižek treats the post-traumatic, autistic subject as one of the figures of the proletariat of the ‘commons’, in the sense of Hardt and Negri (Žižek, 2008–9: 28–9), in effect turning an economic class into an identity – as if being poor were not a matter of being located in a structure or system defined by inequality but simply a matter of being a specific kind of subject. As Žižek observes:

Overdoing it a bit, perhaps, one is tempted to say that this subject deprived of its libidinal satisfactions is the ‘libidinal proletariat’. When Malabou develops her key notion of ‘destructive plasticity’, of the subject who continues to live after its psychic death... she touches the key point... In other words, when we are dealing with a victim of Alzheimer’s, it is not merely that his awareness is severely constrained, that the scope of the Self is diminished – we are
literally no longer dealing with the same Self. After the trauma, ANOTHER subject emerges, we are talking to a stranger.

(Zizek, 2008–9: 23)

Even more problematically, Zizek follows Malabou in equating the proletariat, defined as post-traumatic subjects or ‘autistic monsters’, with victims of the Nazi camps, thereby suggesting—in terms not unlike that of Agamben and others—that the post-traumatic subject must be viewed as in some sense a victim of totalitarianism. Early in her book, via a reference to Bruno Bettelheim’s well-known comparison between the ‘Muselman’ and the victim of autism, Malabou links today’s ‘new wounded’ with the ‘Muselmans’ or ‘Muslims’ of the extermination camps— those deformed, abject ‘non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer’, as Primo Levi described them (Malabou, 2012a: xvii–xviii; Levi, 1993: 90). Zizek picks up on Malabou’s suggestion, asking:

If the twentieth century was the Freudian century, the century of the libido, so that even the worst nightmares were read as (sadomasochistic) vicissitudes of the libido, will the twenty-first century be the century of such post-traumatic disengaged subjects whose first emblematic figure, that of the Muslim in concentration camps, is not [sic, now?] multiplying in the guise of refugees, terror victims, survivors of natural catastrophes, of family violence?

(Zizek, 2008–9: 12; for other references to the ‘Muslims’ see also 21 and 28)

But why does Zizek link the fate of today’s poor with the Nazi genocide? Why does he think the status of the proletariat in our time has anything to do with the fate of the Jews under Nazi totalitarianism? Does he really mean us to think that the rising income inequalities between rich and poor today are best understood as involving the transformation of the poor into ‘autistic monsters’ who have been deprived of ‘engaged existence and reduced to indifferent vegetating’ (Zizek, 2008–9: 21)? Does he truly believe that the situation of the poor is best understood in quasi-medical or pathological terms as one in which, as a result of the forces of capitalism, they have been transformed into persons who, like the Muslim victims of the Nazis, lack emotion, affect, memory, and even the capacity for anything but the most kind of instrumental agency (Zizek, 2008–9: 21)? Is most of the world poverty today has nothing to do with totalitarianism. On the contrary, the problem of the poor is the problem of a growing economic inequality resulting from the operations of global capitalism. This is a problem (again, as Michaels has argued) whose solution demands beliefs and commitments, themselves liable to provoke disagreements, not ontological analyses that render our political and economic beliefs irrelevant. (For an interesting argument that, in spite of his commitment to a non-reductive materialism, Zizek emphasizes ‘experience’ at the expense of meaningful expression and hence eliminates belief altogether, see Bartulis, 2012.)

In other words, just as the transformation of Freud’s thought into neuro-pyschoanalysis distrusts from issues of intentionality, so worries about the alleged continual threat of totalitarianism distract from issues of economic class. Which suggests that what ensures that concerns about intentionality and about economic class go missing in psychoanalysis and post-totalitarianism is their shared ‘ontological’ commitment to the primacy of identity at the expense of issues of meaning.

Conclusion

Some final remarks. I regard Malabou’s detailed critique of psychoanalysis as the strongest feature of The New Wounded. Nevertheless, I question the limitations of her analysis. She regards Freud’s inability to separate the death drive from the pleasure principle in his discussion of traumatic repetition as a serious failing on his part. She argues instead that the death drive is unmixed with libido and hence is a force without relation to any other. She thus defines the traumatic event as that which comes to the passive subject as a strictly external act of violence, unaccompanied with libido or desire and hence as lying beyond the pleasure principle. But in arguing this position, Malabou not only fails to provide any serious discussion of the social bond, she actually suppresses issues of identification with the other that are so central to Freud’s analysis of group psychology and indeed to his analysis of the neuroses.

As I have tried to show in Trauma: A Genealogy, from the moment of its invention in the late nineteenth century the concept of trauma has been fundamentally unstable, balancing unceasingly, or rather veering uncontrollably, between two theories or paradigms. The first or ‘imprint theory’ holds that in the moment of trauma the subject is immersed in the scene of violence in a mode of hypnotic or ‘imprint’ identification, with the result that, like a post-hypnotic person, the victim cannot afterwards recall the original trauma but is falsely set to act out or imitate it in various ways. The idea is that the traumatic-imprint experience saturates the victim’s cognitive and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system. The second or ‘anti-imprint’ theory also tends to make imitation or identification basic to the traumatic experience, but it interprets imitation differently. In this model, even as she may imitatively yield to the scene of violence the victim remains essentially aloof from the event, in the sense that she remains a spectator of the traumatic scene, which she can therefore see and represent to herself and others. The anti-imprint theory is compatible with, and often gives way to, the idea that trauma is a purely external event that befalls a fully constituted subject; whatever the damage to the latter’s psychic autonomy and integrity, there is in principle no problem of eventually remembering or otherwise recovering the event, though this may involve a long and arduous therapeutic process. And in contrast to the imprint theory’s assumption of an identification with the aggressor, the anti-imprint theory depicts violence simply as an assault from without.
As I also attempted to demonstrate, from the turn of the nineteenth century to the present there has been a continual oscillation between these two paradigms; indeed, the interpenetration of one by the other or alternatively the collapse of one into the other has been recurrent and unstoppable. The antinomic model in particular lends itself to positivist interpretations of trauma, epitomized by the several neurobiological theories widely accepted today. Especially common are antinomic theories which shift the focus of research from the notion of trauma as a psychic phenomenon troubling the mind to the idea that trauma essentially concerns the body by modelling trauma on an animal’s response to inescapable shock and proposing that the traumatic event is encoded in the brain in a different way from ordinary memory. The goal of such research is to identify the neurobiological mechanisms thought to be at the basis of such traumatic memories.

Malabou’s analysis of the new wounded needs to be situated in this lineage. Her is an antinomic approach to trauma in which, as I have put it, the passionate identifications said to underlie in the mimetic incorporation of violence are transformed into claims about identity, and the negativity and ambivalence that according to Freud necessarily underlie in identification are violently expelled into the external world, from where they return to the fully constituted, autonomous subject in the form of an absolute exteriority. The result is a rigid dichotomy between the internal and the external such that violence is imagined as coming to the subject entirely from the outside (Leys, 2000: 37-9). It is not surprising in this regard that Malabou cites favourably the work of contemporary psychiatric theorists, such as Bessel van der Kolk and Judith Herman, who likewise treat violence as a strictly exogenous event that comes to the passive but autonomous subject purely from the outside and who ignore the role of identification in the traumatic response.

The value of the view that violence is external to the subject is that it serves to forestall the possibility ofscapegoating victims of trauma by denying that they participate in or collude with the scene of objection or humility. But — as I also argued in my book — it is a view of the location of violence that also has its costs. For one thing, it makes unthinkable, or renders incoherent, the mimetic-suggestive dimension of the traumatic experience, a dimension that . . . calls into question any simple determination of the subject from within or without and that is present in the tendency to suggestibility that is still recognized as symptomatic of patients suffering from trauma.

(Leys, 2000: 38)

It is only by ignoring the issue of mimesis-identification that Malabou can describe the victims of the war neuroses as so cut off from the world as to be deprived of all emotion, even though the literature on the war neuroses is replete with descriptions of the victim’s painful emotional responses — including survivor guilt, shame, extreme fright, overwhelming anxiety, murderous hate, profound despair, and remorse — suggesting that such patients don’t suffer from the absolute affective ‘anesthesia’ or indifference to the world that Malabou attributes to them. By proposing a stark opposition between the subject and the world, I believe Malabou misreads the literature on the war neuroses on these points, a literature on which she otherwise leans heavily.

Just as problematic is the fact that the rigid dichotomy she proposes between the external and the internal inevitably reinforces a concept of the subject of trauma as a completely passive and helpless victim. Indeed, as Malabou herself admits at the end of her book, insisting on the brutal character of the catastrophic accident and on the external dimension of violence ‘could suggest that the victim counts for nothing in what comes to pass’ (Malabou, 2012: 214) — a worry about the complete loss of agency in the new wounded that is unable to resolve: In short, I am arguing that Malabou antinomically shifts attention from a notion of trauma as a psychic phenomenon to one that portrays trauma victims as devoid of all subjectivity and agency — an extreme claim, to say the least. Malabou’s commitment to the primacy of identity is compatible with her claim that the new wounded figure the death of the subject in its lack of all emotion and mental content. It is central to her claims to originality that she has distinguished for the first time the very form of the new identity of our violent times — the identity of the affectless post-traumatic subject.

From this perspective, Theodor Adorno’s much earlier discussion, in “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda” (1951 [1951]), of the relevance of Freud’s ‘doctrine of identification’ to totalitarian propaganda offers a striking contrast to, or commentary on, Malabou’s treatment of trauma. On the basis of his understanding of Freud’s ideas about mass psychology, specifically the role of identification — suggestion in group behaviour, Adorno warns against the loss of psychic interiority and autonomy that occurs when individuals, substituting an identified image for their own paternal ego ideal, identify with the Leader or Führer. By identifying the leader, Adorno suggests, individuals become the manipulable — suggestive crowd of mass movements. A detailed discussion of Adorno’s understanding of Freud’s views on identification and crowd mentality lies outside the scope of this chapter (but for perceptive analyses of these topics see especially Borch-Jacobsen, 1988, 1992). Yet it is worth emphasizing that Adorno viewed with alarm the very loss of subjectivity under conditions of totalitarianism that Malabou seeks to establish. He saw in Freud’s analysis of group psychology and fascist society, the emerging obsolescence of the intentional subject and anticipated with a sense of foreboding and dismay the appearance under fascism of a global norm of post-individuality that Malabou and even Žižek seem to embrace.


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