

Shamanistic Marxism: Freud, Benjamin and the Colonial Unconscious

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Bjelić, Dušan I. *Intoxication, Modernity & Colonialism: Freud's Industrial Unconscious, Benjamin's Hashish Mimesis*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 307 pp.

In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1986 [1940]), his last published work, Freud characterised the psychoanalytic intervention as a form of colonial conquest:

The ego is weakened by [an] internal conflict and we must go to its help. The position is like that in a civil war which has to be decided by the assistance of an ally from outside. The analytic physician and the patient's weakened ego... have to band themselves together into a party against the enemies, the instinctual demands of the id and the conscientious demands of the super-ego. We form a pact with each other. The sick ego promises us the most complete candour...we assure the patient of the strictest discretion and place at his service our experience in interpreting material that has been influenced by the unconscious. Our knowledge is to make up for his ignorance and to give his ego back its mastery over lost provinces of his mental life. This pact is the analytic situation. (406)

The unconscious is rooted in metaphors of imperialist expansion, as the neurotic is cast in the role of colonial subject and rebel who needs to be subdued through superior knowledge and expertise. This motif had been present throughout the development of psychoanalysis and can be traced to Freud's early letters to Fliess and his experiences in the Balkans. In two letters written in 1898 and 1900 — just prior to and after the publication of the founding text of psychoanalysis *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) — Freud compared himself to a *conquistador*, an adventurer and discoverer. What he discovered and conquered, however, was not the physical terrain of the “new world” but the virgin territory of the inner world, the unconscious. Around this time Freud made his first and only trip to Slovenia, where he visited the Rudolf Cave on the Karst (Carso) plateau between Italy and Slovenia. On April 14, 1898, Freud wrote to Fliess of the visit, noting that their guide “was the discoverer of the cave” who constantly spoke of his “conquests.” Freud subsequently “realized he [the guide] was a neurotic and his conquistador exploits were an erotic equivalent,”

when he described the cave as “like a virgin; the further you get, the more beautiful it is” (qtd. in Bjelić 207). Colonial conquest, Balkan orientalism and erotic phantasy converge at the moment of Freud’s break-through and the scientific discovery of that “other scene,” the unconscious.

In *Intoxication, Modernity & Colonialism* Dušan Bjelić adds another element to this intricate web of associations: cocaine. Cocaine, he suggests, is there at the root of psychoanalysis, apparent in Freud’s analysis of dreams, and specifically the “Dream of the Botanical Monograph,” which immediately follows one of the most famous dreams in psychoanalysis, the “Dream of Irma’s Injection” (Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* 254). In Bjelić’s account, Freud’s cocaine episode is not merely an aberration, a misguided detour on the path to his true discovery of the unconscious and infantile sexuality, as Ernest Jones would characterise it; rather, it provided the “rotating wheel at the centre of this theoretical revolution” (Bjelić 141). Drawing on the work of Siegfried Bernfeld (1974) and Peter Swales (1989), Bjelić argues that cocaine intoxication provided Freud with both a toxicological model of neurosis and his later notion of dreams as wish-fulfilment. The use of cocaine also brought Freud face-to-face with what Bjelić refers to as “narcotic modernity,” an economy of pleasure in which intoxication is not simply a by-product of empire, but one in which it operates as an essential mediator. In this colonial economy of pleasure, intoxication is an essential component, without which the system cannot function; at the same time, it is a component that the system cannot acknowledge. Cocaine provided the “nodal point,” the link between neurosis and sexual fantasy, casting a phantasmagoric screen over colonial memory.

The introduction of coca into Europe brings Freud directly into contact with the realities of colonial conquest and appropriation, just as it brings him, even more intimately, into contact with the modern processes of industrial chemistry in the form of cocaine, an industrial derivative of the coca plant. The history of cocaine, notes Bjelić, thus represents the collision of two different regimes of power, the botanical and the industrial, that is to say, the coca plant as an organic substance without sovereign authority and the chemical industry emerging within the modern European nation-state. The history of illicit drugs and the industrial manufacture of legal, and highly profitable, chemical derivatives stages a confrontation between imperial power and its repressed other. This is a route that Freud would never explore in his cocaine papers or his subsequent theory of the unconscious, but the colonial and industrial substrate of psychoanalytic theory remains one of its most persistent “return(s) of the repressed.” Furthermore, Freud’s use of cocaine and his subsequent distancing of himself from the drug — he burned all his papers on cocaine after one of his patients became addicted to the substance — significantly inflected his pessimistic view of modernity; and this is where, for Bjelić, Walter Benjamin comes into the picture.

Benjamin's writing on hashish provide an alternative perspective on modernity, one that not only registers the colonial encounter — buying hashish on the streets of the metropolis one is directly confronted with the colonial other — but also sees in the hallucinatory experience of intoxication a critique of commodity fetishism, a critique that is absent from Freud's celebration of cocaine's erotic properties. When one is under the influence of hashish one experiences moments of inspiration or illumination, as Benjamin writes, one becomes "enraptured prose-beings in the highest order" ("Hashish" 220), and it is in describing these writings that Bjelić's own prose is at its most "intoxicated." Intoxication, for Benjamin, gestures towards an impossible transcendence of the phantasmagoria of the capitalist nightmare, just as, for Bjelić, it presents the possibility of opening up Freud's cocaine episode to an analysis of its colonial unconscious. Benjamin's conception of mimesis provides the key to understanding the link between Benjamin's and Freud's respective experiences of intoxication and their differing views of modernity. Indeed, *Intoxication, Modernity & Colonialism* pivots around Benjamin's doctrine of the similar and the mimetic, insofar as it establishes correspondences between the sensuous and the non-sensuous, between the natural and the human. Mimesis, then, is the crucial mediatory category between the differing regimes of power, the natural and the colonial, the imperial expansion of physical territory and the colonization of the inner world.

In his short essay "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1997 [1933]), Benjamin wrote that nature creates similarities and so does "man" through the gift of seeing resemblances. Indeed, there are none of man's higher faculties in which this mimetic faculty does not play a central role. Crucially, for Bjelić's project, the mimetic faculty has a history that locates it centrally within modernity, wherein a fundamental question becomes whether or not the mimetic faculty's propensity to find "magical" correspondences has irretrievably declined, or has been transformed through technology. Hashish puts mimesis to work; as with children's play, hashish frees the associative capacity. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it:

What Benjamin found in the child's consciousness...was precisely the unsevered connection between perception and action that distinguished revolutionary consciousness in adults, ... an active, creative form of mimesis involving the ability to make correspondences by means of spontaneous fantasy. (263)

Benjamin, in short, serves as a corrective to the universalizing pretensions of psychoanalysis, rooting the unconscious in history and challenging Freud's complicity in colonial domination and power.

Bjelić presents a strikingly original reading of Freud and the origins of psychoanalysis, not least through his exploration of the influence of the "false prophet" Sabbatai

Zevi (1626-1676). Zevi was born in Smyrna in Asia Minor and moved to the port of Salonica, today Thessaloniki in Greece, where there was a large community of Sephardic Jews who had fled persecution in Spain and Portugal in 1492 to the safety of the Ottoman empire. The Kabbalist Zevi claimed to be the Jewish Messiah and channelled the “messianic fervour” of the times into a form of religious anarchism and doctrine of “salvation through sin.” Whilst there may be no direct references to Zevi or the Kabbalah in Freud’s work, Bjelić draws on the work of David Bakan (1975) to argue that Zevi’s influence can be found in the very structures of psychoanalytic method, such as free association and sexuality, as a force for individual liberation (Bjelić 199-200). This is a reading that deserves to be taken very seriously by Freud scholars, but Bjelić’s own methodology raises a few questions here.

The individual narratives of Freud’s and Benjamin’s discourses of intoxication are thorough and persuasive, but whether or not these finally cohere into a single coherent account of “our narcotic modernity” (3) is less certain. As it is not Bjelić’s intention to present a coherent narrative of narcotic modernity, this criticism might seem misplaced, but then what, one might ask, is the purpose of presenting these two differing perspectives? Bjelić writes:

While in the background of the industrial unconscious of the “Jewish-chemical complex” their overlapping demonologies, Messianic visions, science and “profound illumination,” psychology and Marxism, as well as their languages of intoxication, ran on phantasmagorical “counterphantoms” ... in order to neutralize the poisonous phantom of modernity. (4)

The list is overwhelming and each of these issues — demonology, Messianism, science and religious illumination, psychology and Marxism — deserves a book in its own right, but how all of these hang together is difficult to tell. Bjelić provides a scrupulously detailed account of the origins of psychoanalysis in terms of Freud’s cocaine episode, his interests in Jewish mysticism and his controversial affair with his sister-in-law, Minna Barnays (Swales); but how exactly this links back to Benjamin is frequently lost in the detail. For example, it is not clear, to me at least, exactly how Benjamin’s theory of mimesis is linked to Freud’s immersion in the phantasmagoria of *fin de siècle* Paris that found expression in his psycho-somatic illnesses, which he treated with cocaine. Freud would subsequently write to his fiancée Martha how he was under the influence of this magically attractive and repulsive city (Bjelić 91-2). But how far this “demonic coincidence” between the “architectural space” of cocaine’s molecules and the “architectural space” of the Parisian dreamscape is more than “coincidence” I cannot say. Indeed, there is frequent recourse to analogy in the text, but the suggestion that something is “much like” another equally points to the fact that one thing is *not* like another. It is here, for me, that *Intoxication, Modernity & Colo-*

nialism is at its weakest.

It seems to me that the answer to this problem is already present in Bjelić's text, insofar as the Benjaminian correspondences he seeks take place not at the level of content—in their shared language of intoxication—but through form, which is to say, the structure of commodity fetishism. There are frequent references to the commodity form and commodity fetishism throughout the text, but one never gets the detailed construction of a “labour theory of the unconscious” that one finds, for example, in Samo Tomšič's *The Capitalist Unconscious* (2015). Tomšič observes that Marx not only invented the symptom, as Lacan famously claimed, but that the subject implied in his critique of capital is nothing less than the subject of the unconscious (Tomšič 5). As both Marxism and psychoanalysis are grounded in the constitutive alienation of the subject within society, this suggests the possibility of a homology between Marx and Freud based on their respective “logics,” and their respective analyses of the insatiable demand for production, or production for production's sake. As Jacques Lacan has shown, the Marxian notion of surplus-value provides the model of surplus *jouissance* in psychoanalysis and therefore grounds Bjelić's economy of pleasure in a concrete historical context. I suspect that an antipathy to Lacan lies behind Bjelić's apparent resistance to make this final move. All of this notwithstanding, *Intoxication, Modernity & Colonialism* challenges us to rethink the origins of psychoanalysis in terms of its intoxicated and mystical past, but above all in the light of its colonial complicity.

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