

SOCIOLOGY OF DREAMING

by

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Psychoanalytic thought and scientific interest in dreaming have close, if not identical historical roots. Within the past decade and a half we have witnessed the discovery of a vast amount of new biological data concerning dreaming. There is coming into being a "new psychology" of dreaming as a consequence of this, with the need for theoretical accommodation noted by even the most conservative writers.

There is much going on about us on the sociopolitical scene. Old values are challenged. Confrontations occur wherever opportunity presents itself. A sense of transition, change and flux has replaced a feeling of complacency and a sense of stability. Sociologists, taking note of this, are raising sharp questions concerning our institutions and the quality of life they evoke and foster. If the question of institutional change is on the agenda, as some of us hope it will be, then perhaps it is timely to consider whether or not a study of dream consciousness can contribute to our understanding of the reciprocal relationship between society and the individual. This is, in effect, to raise the question: can there be a sociology of dreaming?

Roger Bastide, a French social anthropologist, critical of our failure to come to grips with the dream in its social setting, does in fact raise this question. He notes:

"In our Western civilization, ^{...} ~~however~~, the bridges between the diurnal and nocturnal halves of man have been cut."^{*}

* The Sociology of the Dream. Chapt. 11 in: The Dream and Human Societies, (Eds. G.E. Von Grunebaum and R. Caillois), L.A.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1966. P. 200

"The question I have asked myself is whether the sociologist is right to ignore the other half of our life, to envisage man standing and sitting, but never asleep and adream."*

"How well founded is this radical division between the psychic and the social, which is like a reflection, at the scientific level, of the division in man between work and dream? Is it not about time to re-establish channels of communication between these two worlds? To see how the twilight states of our life, how the dark and obscure half of man, extends the social half exactly as the social half feeds on our dreams? In short, is it not time to attempt a sociology of the dream?"**

He then suggests the pertinent subject matter for a sociology of dreaming:

"Hence the sociology of the dream must contain two parts: the first to study the function of the dream in society; the second, the social framework of oneiric thought. Two problems, tightly tied together, for it may be that society provides a framework for oneiric thought to make it socially usable."***

* The Sociology of the Dream, Chapt. 11 in: The Dream and Human Societies, (Eds. G.E. Von Grunebaum and R. Caillois), L.A.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1966. P. 199.

** Ibid. P. 200.

*** Ibid. P. 200

With regard to the first point he notes:

"...the refusal of contemporary civilization to accept any institutionalization whatever of the dream's social function, considering such an institution a 'waste product' not within the competence of a sociology worthy of its name - a kind of social sewer service." *

"...the fact that society today refuses to allow oneiric images the passport and visa necessary for entry into every social activity." **

With regard to the second and based on a study of Africans caught up in the transition from their traditional culture to a capitalist culture, he notes a reflection of the change in their dreams:

"Dreams, then, show themselves to be part of the characteristic structure of our capitalistic and competitive society, which is the exact opposite of the pre-capitalist and community-like society of traditional Africa. Dreams of this kind obsess only people of color who are now caught up not in closed but open classes. Culturally they have assimilated Occidental values; individualism, struggle for social status, and money as the symbol of social position. Oneiric thought has detached itself completely from the mythical structures only to express the problem posed by skin color in Occidental social structure." ***

†Bastide, R.: The Sociology of the Dream. Chapt. 11 in The Dream and Human Societies. L.A.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1966. P.201

** Ibid. P. 201.

*** Ibid. P. 206.

In contrast to our own situation where "...Passage is limited to a one-way street going from the outside to the inside,"* in primitive society:

"A dream is taken in by the nets of social organization, and a real unity results between man's halves just as it does between the world of myth or the sacred, with which the dream is associated, and the social world in which the individual lives in a waking state. The sociological structure of the dream is then, not as with us, a reflection, or the obverse of social structure; it is an integral part of it."**

Bastide, then, as a sociologist, is concerned with the institutionalization of the dream, the legitimation of its passage into the waking world and, conversely, the intrusion of social structure into the dream world. As he points out, dreams inevitably and of necessity have social referents. As therapists our concern has been mainly with their idiosyncratic and highly personal meaning. Will it add any to our understanding to take into account their social meaning as a reflection of a reality common to both patient and therapist? The aim of this presentation will be to further explore this question, more in its general relevance to dreaming than in its specific reference to therapy and to attempt to identify some of the conceptual tools that might be useful in building a sociology of dreaming.

*Bastide, R.: The Sociology of the Dream. Chapt. 11 in: The Dream and Human Societies, L.A.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1966. P. 208.

** Ibid. P. 209.

In postulating a sociology of dreaming we have to move beyond the usual conscious-unconscious, manifest-latent dichotomy. These categories apply when our concern is limited to the personal meaning of the dream elements for the individual who has the dream. This is what the dream seems to be saying when looked at subjectively, i.e., from the point of view of the dreamer. Is there another way of looking at the dream and the elements that comprise it? Does it make sense to read into the dream a social commentary as well as a personal statement? Can the dream be viewed objectively from the perspective of an outside agency endowed with social consciousness? In a sense, patient and therapist form this objective outside agency when they search out the meaning of the patient's dream. Together they bring to bear on the problem a broader, a more social form of consciousness relative to what was available to the dreamer himself. The process of dream interpretation pools information known to the patient and unknown to the therapist and vice versa, as well as information unknown to both but capable of becoming known through the process of free association and the exchange of interpretive hypotheses. But there is still another possible dimension concerning information relevant to the dream, but not capable of being known to either the patient or the therapist stemming from shared distortions or simply from shared ignorance. It is conceivable that such information could be known to an outside source, in which case one could speak of a higher form of social consciousness. It is this latter ^{possibility} which would be of interest to us in connection with a sociology of dreaming as it would be capable of providing an insight into how the dreamer, and the therapist, too, for that matter, articulate with the latent as well as the manifest aspects of our social structure.

There is a certain range of potential information embedded in the dream that cannot be tapped if it happens to be within a joint or shared social unconsciousness of therapist and patient. We are now talking of an interference or

obstacle based on a social rather than a psychological dynamism. A psychological dynamism is potentially knowable by working through resistances at a psychological level. A social dynamism is rooted in latent aspects of a social structure and is also potentially knowable, but again only through work done against social resistance. The latter, as in the case of resistance at an individual level, is made necessary by the tendency of an existing state of affairs to perpetuate itself.

We may summarize what we have said about the attributes of a dream element so far:

1. All elements have social referents insofar as they have their source in the tools, symbols and events of social living.
2. For the purposes of the dream, the element is used to express highly personalized meaning.
3. The element, however, has a social or objective meaning which, through its congruence with the needs of the dreamer, makes itself available to the dreamer in his nocturnal rendezvous with himself.
4. Patient and therapist have tended to limit their focus to the meaning of the element after it has become incorporated into the dream only as a vehicle for the expression of personal feeling.
5. There is another side to the element, a social or objective side.
6. A dream element is a particular event or symbol borrowed from a social order which is itself in a state of dynamic equilibrium or, at times, dysequilibrium, and which can be characterized as having both manifest and latent features.
7. The element, to the extent that it incorporates latent features of society, will elude both therapist and patient if they, unaware of this latent reference, simply absorb it into their jointly held area of social unconsciousness.

8. If, however, one or the other or both are capable of moving beyond the psychological to the social then it becomes conceivable, in theory at least, that the social dimension can be made to articulate with the therapeutic process in the interest of both the patient and the therapist. It is this last point which is in need of further clarification and development.

Ideas concerning an extended or social frame of reference in psychiatry are not new. They just have not been attended to. I would like to call your attention to three men of strikingly different backgrounds but whose work converge in this area. It is also a fact that ^{that despite} ~~despite~~, in the case of all three, ^{that despite} very tangible contributions to the literature they have, quite unfortunately in my opinion, remained outside the mainstream of psychiatric and psychoanalytic theory.

Trigant Burrow, in his time a leading psychoanalyst, published a book in 1927 entitled "The Social Basis of Consciousness" which came into being following a very dramatic confrontation with a patient in which the patient insisted on putting into practice for a limited period of time a role reversal. This resulted in something akin to a religious conversion in Burrow himself as it seemed to force upon him a sudden and overwhelming awareness of the extent to which the therapist, the patient, and in fact all people subject to our cultural indoctrination, operated on the basis of a consciousness that was, in his words, separatist, individualistic, self-centered and absolutist in character. He develops the argument that in becoming oriented to himself and others in this way he loses his connection with an organismic social consciousness which is at one and the same time supra-individual, but the only true source of genuine and creative individuality.

He talks of social consciousness and social unconsciousness and feels that the real neurosis is the warped and limited personality structure in both therapist

and patient that results when social unconsciousness is fostered as a consequence of the dominance of separatist trends. Pedantic, writing in an impossibly abstruse style and almost mystical in tone, he nevertheless manages to convey a basic truth, but one so uncomfortable in its implications that it, along with its author, has been written off. Burrow attempted to introduce into psychoanalytic thought what genuinely religious people, among others, knew intuitively. Our thoughts and feelings have a supra-personal dimension. There is a social consciousness which they influence and to which they are accountable. Health is an acceptance of this supra-individual or organismic state of affairs. ^{in effect} Illness is the pursuit of it in the interest of individualistic ends. He decried Freudian analysis as fostering the illusion of separatist, self-contained, individualistic forms of consciousness.

Andras Angyal, writing in the Forties, comes to similar formulations via field theory and early systems theory. His writings are clear, cogent and drained of the quasi-mystical allusions of Burrow. He, too, is critical of the one-sidedness of psychoanalytic theory. ^{In psychoanalytic thought} The complex systems that go to make up man and his environment are "psychologized," that is, reduced to psychological entities. Where Burrow talks of a societal consciousness Angyal talks of the biosphere as the arena encompassing the totality of relations between man and his environment. He emphasizes the demand characteristics of the environment as well as the organism and develops a notion of unconsciousness as including the former in their unknown aspects. His concern is with seeing to it that a theory of man reflects the actual interplay between heteronomous or environmental forces operating under laws of their own and autonomous or organismic forces influencing the individual organism.

Our third reference point is Fromm, whose writings span the last four decades. Fromm attempted to develop the concept of the Social Unconscious based on a Marxist analysis of capitalist society and the dehumanization resulting from economic exploitation and the overgrowth of bureaucracy. The social system creates the kind of people needed to perpetuate the system. Like Burrow, he calls attention to the enormous crippling effect this has had generally, aside from the question of neurosis, in simply cutting off and stunting man's capacity for creative self-fulfillment. Man limited rather than freed by the social structure cannot become truly humanized. Fromm treats of the environment in more explicit terms than either Burrow or Angyal and in doing so identifies some of the reason why latent social structure tends to remain latent. Fromm sees the hidden constraining influences in our society, including language itself, as the matrix of a social unconscious which is shared by all the individual members of the society. Fromm, like the other two authors cited, becomes more concerned with the general deficit state shared by both therapist and patient than with the individual neurosis or character disorder. These represent particular manifestations of the struggle against constraint and at the same time the way in which the individual attempts to make his peace with the constraint. Fromm's whole thesis is that the present social order has become too costly in human terms.

Let us pause for a moment to review the implications of the foregoing for a sociology of dreaming. Up to now our major concern with dreams was a subjective one. Regardless of the influence and importance of society's contribution to the creation of the dream elements, what mattered was only the personal meaning they held for the dreamer and the way in which they were used by him. The therapist served as a guide in bringing the necessary pieces to light using his theoretical

knowledge to probe, explore and expose. Based on the work of the three authors, I am suggesting that perhaps this is a somewhat simplified view of the matter. An objective or social stance can be taken in connection with the dream and each element explored for the meaning given to it by society. Just as each element viewed subjectively has manifest and latent references, so each element viewed objectively may relate to manifest or latent aspects of the social structure.

An object appearing in the manifest content is linked to its latent content in a variety of ways. The link may take place through any of its superficial or intrinsic qualities or through its connection with a particular event in the life of the dreamer. It comes into being in the dream as a visual metaphor and expresses a feeling tone or an expression of feeling tones that are in some way tied in with problematic aspects of the dreamer's life. Is there more to it than this? Is there an objective or social side, complementary to the subjective or personal side? If an object selected as the vehicle for expressing a felt response is a commodity, an object produced socially and endowed with exchange value, does this fact add anything to our understanding of the situation? Might the commodity-feeling identity not only tell us something about the feeling and its place along the pleasure-pain spectrum but might it not also be revealing of some insight of the dreamer's into an existing bit of social reality? We are continuously in a struggle that has a dual aspect. We are trying to understand ourselves while at the same time trying to understand the world about us. In therapy we separate out of the dream the personal truth and discard the rest. I am suggesting that there may be some powerful social truths in the discard. In fact, there may be dreams in which the exposure of social truth is the only relevant personal truth conveyed by the dream. The following is offered as an example:

Before describing the dream I would like to mention three antecedent events which appeared to me as relevant waking residues. The first occurred on Thursday,

November 21st, 1963 in connection with a talk given by a Polish psychiatrist who was a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and one of the leaders of the heroic resistance that took place at the time. He was talking about the attitudes of all segments of the German people, not only the SS, as they witnessed the humiliation, degradation and ultimate slaughter of the Jews. He described the following scene in one of the twelve concentration camps in which he was incarcerated. There were a number of small children in the camp ranging in age from three to five. All but one had learned how to be quiet. That one, a boy of five, cried out and touched the Commandant of the camp. The response was immediate. The Commandant drew his pistol and killed the child with one shot. The entire scene took place in full view of a group of German mothers escorting their children to school. Later that day, as these same mothers and children were again passing the camp, the Commandant was observed outside the camp talking with them, playing with the children and at one point picking up one of the children, embracing and kissing him with the obvious approbation of the adults in the group.

The second and third day residues occurred 24 and 72 hours respectively following this talk although in point of time they occurred twenty years after the events I have described. I am referring to the assassination of President Kennedy and the murder of his alleged assassin.

Following these three events I had a dream in which I became aware of a certain kind of blindness affecting myself as well as others. I say a kind of blindness because peripheral vision was intact enough to create, at times, the doubt that the blindness existed. There was a certain distressful wavering between doubt and certainty. I became aware in the dream that the blindness could be compensated for by a very simple expedient. It involved shifting the angle at

which steps were arranged so that they could be mounted vertically rather than at the usual incline thus enabling the person ascending them to guide himself by what he could feel with his hands rather than what he could see with his eyes. In this way the illusion of normality was maintained.

The dream took place in the context of exposure to these three forms of social violence. The first, namely, the concentration camp experiences, was orderly, socially structured, purposive, even sanctioned and obligatory in relation to prevailing codes of duty and obedience. It was acceptable not only to the crude psychopath but to the representatives of German citizenry. The second was the wanton, ruthless, insane act of a single individual. The third, the murder of the assassin, was somewhere in between. In its appearance, it was the act of a single individual. In its essence, it was the outcome of a drama occurring in a social milieu in which the cult of violence was tolerated just short of open acceptance.

In my own life the dream occurred in the context of making preparations to give a talk entitled "Dreaming and the Social Scene." In the talk I attempted to deal with what I felt to be the limiting nature of the Freudian Unconscious in relation to dream interpretation. ^{It seemed to me} It made for a reductionistic approach to dream symbols and seemed to close ^{social} out any insights to be derived from dreams concerning the imprint of irrationality and violence that mark us as citizens of our age. The concept of the Unconscious ^{expresses} takes a static view of society, focusing only on the reflection in the individual of all the unknown influences he is subject to in the course of social living. Freud maintained his own blindness in this area by transcending the issue altogether by focusing on the more global issue of the civilizing process per se rather than on an existing social system. This was a master's masterful defense against his own fantastic visual powers.

I suppose the events leading up to the dream sharpened my concern with the possible role we as intellectuals and professionals might, through the theories we postulate, contribute to the general camouflaging of the destructive fallout from our own social structure. How do we as students of behavior unwittingly by virtue of the theories we develop and the explanations we offer allow for the continued generation of further social blindness? In short, how do we add to the problem? Are we engaged in theory-building that perpetuates the social scotoma of which we speak?

In the dream I am concerned with this question of functional blindness. How do we not see? How do we so realign external reality with our own distortions that, as in the dream, we settle for the illusion associated metaphorically in the dream with immediate contact through what we can touch with our hands rather than contact mediated through our potential for psychological vision, maturity and wisdom? Why do we persist in the illusion we are walking upright on the flight of stairs when from the point of view of an objective observer we are doing no more than crawling on our hands and feet? How do we sustain a social existence so close to violence on a potentially cosmic scale while going about our daily affairs as if this could never become a reality?

I seem to be saying to myself in the dream that two things are necessary to maintain the illusion of not being blind. One was that external reality, the stairs, had to be manipulated. Secondly, I had to effect a change within myself, shifting from one source of information about the external world to another. Subjectively I am saying something about myself and what I have to do to maintain my own emotional distance or blindness from certain unpleasant truths. Objectively I am saying something about the world and the way it lends itself to personal

manipulation. A paradoxical social truth seemed to come out of the dream, namely, the very process one relied on to cover up the blindness also enabled one to climb higher-up on the ladder of success presumably.

We have thus far been concerned with only one of the two directions in the waking life-dream dichotomy, namely, the appearance of social artifacts in the dream. We have suggested that this in itself has a dual aspect insofar as social truths as well as personal truths gain access to the dream.

There is, of course, a second direction from the dream back to society. As Bastide points out, Occidental societies have not institutionalized the dream. Such institutionalization is a fact of life of most primitive societies. The nearest we come to it is either in the form of residual superstitious interest or, at a more sophisticated level, the sanction it receives within the confines of the consulting room. It seems to me rather remarkable that, in an age where so many technical skills become incorporated into daily life, the technology of dream interpretation has remained in the hands of a few. There are many explanations offered in defense of this monopolistic stance, but I have never been convinced either of the danger (I think there is a danger to a reductionistic misinterpretation of dreams) or the degree of professional skill needed. People in many primitive societies achieve a high level of skill and sophistication in reading their own dreams. Not all psychiatrists, a few psychologists and only the rarest of social workers have the temerity to work with the dreams of patients.

The technical skills needed to deal with dreams meaningfully can be readily taught. One need only identify, refine and help conceptualize certain intuitive faculties. At a time when expanded self-awareness seems to be the order of the day, one wonders why the natural route of dream interpretation is not more popular. I would suggest that the socially reinforced privacy of the dream is not fortuitous and that our analysis of the objective and subjective sides of the dream

may have some relevance here. As long as nothing of importance is allowed to find its way back to society from the dream then the individual is left to his own devices and has no choice but to absorb its mysteries within his own personal consciousness or unconsciousness. No room is left for any challenge to the social order. There is room only for personal demons and the transformation of social demons into personal ones.

I wonder if dream consciousness doesn't pose a danger to any bureaucratic or technically supercharged society. This might be a sociological question worth looking into.

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