

The important point is that, for McDougall, the very unity of the group is grounded in a common object of identification which establishes equivalentially the unity of the group members. We had already found something similar in Tarde's assertion that a homogenizing 'communion of ideas and passions' – the equivalence that this communion brings about – operates not only in the case of crowds, but also in that of publics. This notion of equivalence – developed, of course, far beyond McDougall's and Tarde's theorization – is crucial to the concept of populism that I shall propose in Part II of this book. Before that, however, we have to consider the decisive intervention of Freud.

The Freudian breakthrough

Freud's *Group Psychology* (1921) was, no doubt, the most radical breakthrough which had so far been accomplished in mass psychology – despite, as we must recognize from the start, several deadlocks which prevented its insights from developing their full potential. Freud begins his work by asserting that the contrast between individual and social psychology loses, on careful consideration, most of its sharpness because the individual, from the beginning of his or her life, is invariably linked to somebody else 'as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent, and so from the very first individual psychology ... is at the same time social psychology as well'.⁴⁵ Freud relativizes the constitutive character of this social link, however, when he argues, in the following paragraph, that these social links with parents, siblings, the object of love and the physician 'may be contrasted with certain other processes, described by us as "narcissistic", in which the satisfaction of the instincts is partially or totally withdrawn from the influence of other people'.⁴⁶ It is on the difference between social and narcissistic drives that Freud establishes the distinction between social and individual psychology. This, as we shall see, has important consequences, for he concludes that the two psychologies have evolved in a parallel way, and apply to different aspects of the social bond: while regular members of the group would fall, as far as their mutual link is concerned, under the label of social psychology,

narcissism (as the terrain of individual psychology) would fully apply only to the leader of the group.⁴⁷ One could, however, wonder, even at this early stage of the argument, whether, if the satisfaction of the drives is *withdrawn*, in narcissism, from the influence of other people, this 'withdrawing' does not retain, in its very rejection, the traces of a reference to the other, and in that sense remains part of a social process.

We will come back to this point. First, however, we have to reconstruct the main steps of Freud's argument. Freud asserts that the social psychology of his predecessors had been concerned more with describing the changes the individual experiences in becoming part of a crowd than with the nature of the social tie. 'Suggestion' had been the limit of all efforts to determine the nature of this tie. Freud proposes to put aside 'suggestion' as a term which itself requires explanation, and to appeal to *libido* as the key category explaining the nature of the social bond. The social bond would be a libidinal bond; as such, it relates to everything that concerns 'love'. Its nucleus consists, of course, of sexual love, but psychoanalysis has shown that we should not separate sexual love from 'on the one hand self-love, and on the other, love for parents and children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and abstract ideas'. Although the drives tend, in relations between the sexes, towards sexual union, 'in other circumstances they are diverted from this aim or are prevented from reaching it, though always preserving enough of their original nature to keep their identity recognizable'.⁴⁸ A description ensues of the libidinal ties operating in the Church and in the Army, which, on the one hand, link the members of these institutions to one another and, on the other, link all of them to their leaders, Christ or the commander in chief; as well as a description of the disintegrative processes which follow from a sudden disappearance of those leading figures.

Freud goes on to discuss the feeling of aversion or hostility which inhabits all close ties with other people, and is kept out of perception only through repression. In cases where this hostility is directed towards people with whom we are in close association, we talk about ambivalent feelings; but when it is directed at strangers, we can clearly recognize in

it an expression of self-love – of narcissism. Self-love is, however, limited or suspended in the case of group formation, in which, in Freud's words: 'Individuals in the group behave as though they were uniform, tolerate the peculiarities of its other members, equate themselves with them, and have no feeling of aversion towards them. Such a limitation of narcissism can, according to our theoretical views, only be produced by one factor, a libidinal tie with other people. Love for oneself knows only one barrier – love for others, love for objects'.⁴⁹ This requires that we study the kind of emotional bond which is established between members of a group, and this in turn involves looking more closely at the phenomena of being in love. These emotional ties which pull the group together are obviously love drives which have been diverted from their original aim and which follow, according to Freud, a very precise pattern: that of *identification*.

Identification is, Freud says, 'the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person',⁵⁰ linked to the early history of the Oedipus complex. There are three main forms of identification. The first is identification with the father. The second is identification with the object-choice of love. The third arises, according to Freud, 'with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of the sexual instinct. The more important this common quality is, the more successful may this partial identification become, and it may thus represent the beginning of a new tie'.⁵¹ This third type of identification is the one to be found in the mutual tie between members of the group, and Freud adds – decisively, albeit problematically – that the common quality on which this identification is based 'lies in the nature of the tie with the leader'.⁵² How should the tie with the leader be conceived? Freud approaches this question in terms of the various forms of 'being in love'. The primary way of being in love is experiencing sexual satisfaction in an object. The cathexis invested in the object is, however, exhausted every time satisfaction is obtained. Thus, consciousness of the periodic renewal of the need leads to love as an 'affectionate' feeling, attached to the object even during the passionless intervals. The love of the child for his or her parents once the

repression of the original sexual drives has set in is of this 'affectionate' nature. The future life of the individual will be dominated by this sensual love/affection duality, which can either overdetermine the same object or have its two poles invested in different objects. Investment in the object of love means that the narcissistic libido overflows on to the object. This can take various forms or show various degrees, their common denominator being the *idealization* of the object, which thus becomes immune to criticism. So the situation arises 'in many forms of love choice, that the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego ideal of our own. We love it on account of the perfections which we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism'.⁵³

Once this point in the argument has been reached, Freud weighs, in three particularly dense paragraphs, the system of alternatives that his previous *démarche* has opened. When we are in love, 'the ego becomes more and more unassuming and modest, and the object more and more sublime and precious, until at last it gets possession of the entire self-love of the ego, whose self-sacrifice thus follows as a natural consequence. The object has, so to speak, consumed the ego... The whole situation can be completely summarised in a formula: *The object has been put in the place of the ego ideal*'.⁵⁴ So what about the relation between being in love and identification? Here Freud's argument becomes somewhat hesitant, but these hesitations are what make it particularly illuminating. He starts by saying that the difference between identification and the extreme forms of being in love – which he describes as 'fascination' and 'bondage' – are to be found in the fact that, in identification, the ego has introjected the object into itself, while in being in love 'it has surrendered itself to the object, it has substituted the object for its own most important constituent'.⁵⁵

Here, however, his hesitations start, for this description 'creates an illusion of distinctions which have no real existence. Economically there is no question of impoverishment or enrichment; it is even possible to describe an extreme case of being in love as a state in which the ego has

introjected the object into itself.⁵⁶ So he tries to displace this distinction into a different one: while in identification the object has been lost and introjected into the ego which makes an alteration into itself 'after the model of the lost object', in the case of being in love there would be a hypercathexis of the object by the ego at the ego's expense. This alternative, however, does not quite satisfy Freud who, at this point, asks himself the crucial question: 'Is it quite certain that object-cathexis has been given up? Can there not be identification while the object is retained?'⁵⁷ Here he glimpses the possibility of another alternative: 'namely, *whether the object is put in the place of the ego or of the ego ideal*'.⁵⁸

With this, we reach the climax of Freud's argument. He moves from there to a brief comparison between hypnosis and being in love, and to a characterization of group formation in terms of equivalential attachments forged between people as a result of their common love for a leader (a love which has, of course, been inhibited of its sexual impulses). The definition of the social bond follows from this analysis: 'A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego.'⁵⁹ We have to retain two conclusions implicit in this analysis for our further discussion. First, if we follow Freud's argument strictly at this point, identification takes place between those who are led, but not between them and the leader. So the possibility for the latter to be *primus inter pares* would be closed. Second, that the ground of any identification would exclusively be the common love for the leader. Freud's tortuous and somewhat hesitant elaboration of the distinction between identification and being in love is apparently resolved in a strict differentiation of functions in the constitution of the social bond: identification between brothers, love for the father. We can easily move from there to the myth of the horde as constitutive of society and to the distinction between individual and social psychology in terms of the differentiation between narcissistic and social mental acts.

What are we to think of this remarkable theoretical sequence? One possible conclusion is the one reached by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen.⁶⁰ In his view, Freud, far from approaching the political in a critical way, seeing

in it the alienation of the essence of the social bond, conceives of the social as moulded by the political, as depending for its constitution on the presence of a beloved chief. Society would be conceived as a homogeneous mass whose coherence would be exclusively assured by the presence of the leader. It is true that, for Freud, the political has a founding role as far as the instauration of the social bond is concerned. It is also true that Freud's view of the common love for the leader as being the feature shared by those who identify with each other somehow invites Borch-Jacobsen's reading. I think, however, that his conclusion is excessive, for the unilateral emphasis on the relationship with the leader simply ignores all the places in Freud's text where different social arrangements are suggested as actual possibilities. They do not necessarily question the role of the political in the institution of the social tie, but they do evoke different kinds of politics, not all of which have the authoritarian implications that Borch-Jacobsen detects. If we develop the full implications of these alternative possibilities, a far more complex picture of the social emerges, and the meaning of *Group Psychology's* theoretical intervention appears in a new light. Freud's attempt at limiting the social validity of his own model moves essentially in two directions.

In the first place, we have those passages in which he opens up the possibility – as an alternative mode of social aggregation – that, through organization, society acquires the characteristics of the individual. The definition of the group – quoted above – as consisting of individuals putting an object in the place of the ego ideal, and mutually identifying through their egos, is preceded by this important limitation: 'We are quite in a position to give the formula for the libidinal constitution of groups or at least of such groups as we have hitherto considered – namely, those that have a leader and have not been able by means of too much "organisation" to acquire secondarily the characteristics of an individual.'⁶¹ Freud also takes issue with McDougall's view that the intellectual disadvantages of the group can be overcome 'by withdrawing the performance of intellectual tasks from the group and reserving them for individual members of it'. The alternative that Freud has in mind is far more radical: 'The problem consists in how to procure for the group

precisely those features which were characteristic of the individual and which are extinguished in him by the formation of the group.⁶² That Freud meant this literally, not in a merely analogical sense, is further proved by his straight rejection, in a footnote added to the 1923 edition, of a criticism by Hans Kelsen, who had adduced that providing the group mind with such an organization would be a hypostasis (attributing to society a mental function which belongs only to individuals).

So how are we to conceive of this opposition between two modes of social aggregation – one based in ‘organization’, by which society acquires the secondary characteristics of the individual; the other grounded in the libidinal tie with the leader? Do they apply to different kinds of group? Or, rather, are they social logics which, to various extents, enter into the constitution of all social groups? I think that this second hypothesis is the correct one. In my view, the fully organized group and the *purely* narcissistic leader are simply the *reductio ad absurdum* – that is, impossible – extremes of a continuum in which the two social logics are articulated in various ways. To prove, however, that ‘organization’ and the ‘narcissistic leader’ have such a status in the economy of Freud’s text, I should be able to show some textual instances of such a combination of both principles. This is my next task.

In fact it is not a difficult task, because Freud gives many examples of such a combination. In a chapter suggestively called ‘A Differentiating Degree in the Ego’, he discusses the prodigy of the disappearance of individual acquirements in the crowd, prodigy to be interpreted – we are told again – ‘as meaning that the individual gives up his ego ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader’. He has to add, however, immediately:

And we must add by way of correction that the prodigy is not equally great in every case. In many individuals the separation between the ego and the ego ideal is not very far advanced; the two still coincide readily; the ego has often preserved its earlier narcissistic self-complacency. The selection of the leader is very much facilitated by this circumstance. He need often only possess the typical qualities of the individuals concerned

in a particularly clearly marked and pure form, and need only give an impression of greater force and more freedom of libido; and in that case the need for a strong chief will often meet him half-way and invest him with a predominance to which he would otherwise perhaps have had no claim.⁶³

What exactly is Freud telling us with this new account? Simply that whenever the need for a strong leader meets the individual only halfway, the leader will be accepted only if he presents, in a particularly marked fashion, features that he shares with those he is supposed to lead. In other words: the led are, to a considerable extent, *in pari materia* with the leader – that is to say, the latter becomes *primus inter pares*. And three momentous consequences follow from this structural mutation. First, that ‘something in common’ which makes the identification between members of the group possible cannot consist exclusively in love for the leader, but in some positive feature that both leader and led share. Second, identification does not take place only between egos, because the separation between ego and ego ideal is far from complete. This means that a certain degree of identification with the leader becomes possible. In the ‘Postscript’ to *Group Psychology*, Freud hints at that possibility when he compares the Army and the Catholic Church. While in the Army the soldier would become ridiculous if he identified himself with the commander in chief, the Church requires from the believer more than identification with other Christians: ‘He has also to identify with Christ and love all other Christians as Christ loves them. At both points, therefore, the Church requires that the position of the libido which is given by group formation should be supplemented. Identification has to be added where object-choice has taken place, and object-love where there is identification.’⁶⁴ Third, if the leader leads because he presents, in a particularly marked way, features which are common to all members of the group, he can no longer be, in all its purity, the despotic, narcissistic ruler. On the one hand, as he participates in that very substance of the community which makes identification possible, his identity is split: he is the father, but also one of the brothers.

was even more the case when he later established the distinction between crowds and publics: although publics are more compatible than crowds with an orderly functioning of society, they are equally based in the homogenizing logic of similitude. As for McDougall if, on the one hand, he established a sharp distinction between crowd and organized group, on the other, through a notion of 'collective will' based on a common identification with an object, he introduced the equivalential principle as a condition of the constitution of the highly organized group. Differentiation and homogeneity, which had been antipodes for Taine, were no longer in opposition to each other. With this we are on the borders of Freud's theorization.

With Freud, the last vestiges of dualism disappear. What he contributed was an intellectual framework within which everything that had so far been presented as a heterogeneous summation of incommensurable principles could now be thought out of a unified theoretical matrix. If my reading of his text is correct, everything turns around the key notion of identification, and the starting point for explaining a plurality of socio-political alternatives is to be found in the *degree* of distance between ego and ego ideal. If that distance increases (why? – this is a question we will have to ask ourselves), we will find the central situation described by Freud: identification between the peers as members of the group and transference of the role of ego ideal to the leader. In that case, the grounding principle of the communal order would be transcendent to the latter and, *vis-à-vis* that principle, the equivalential identification between members of the group would increase. If, on the contrary, the distance between ego and ego ideal is narrower, the process I described above will take place: the leader will be the object-choice of the members of the group, but he will also be part of the group, participating in the general process of mutual identification. In that case there would be a partial immanentization of the ground of the communitarian order. Finally, in the imaginary (*reductio ad absurdum*) case in which the breach between ego and ego ideal was entirely bridged, we would have a situation also contemplated by Freud's theory as a limit case: the total transference – through organization – of the functions of the individual

to the community. The various myths of the *totally* reconciled society – which invariably presuppose the absence of leadership, that is, the withering away of the political – share this last type of vision.

With this system of alternatives at hand, we can now come back to the question of populism. We started our reflection with an enumeration of the discursive strategies through which populism was either dismissed or downgraded as a political phenomenon, but in any case never really thought in its specificity as one legitimate way among others of constructing the political bond. And we can already entertain a strong suspicion that the reasons for the dismissal of populism are not entirely unrelated to those invoked in what I have called 'the denigration of the masses'. In both cases we see the same accusations of marginality, transitoriness, pure rhetoric, vagueness, manipulation, and so forth. There is also another suspicion creeping into our mind: that in both cases the dismissal is linked to an identical prejudice – that is, the repudiation of the undifferentiated milieu which is the 'crowd' or the 'people' in the name of social structuration and institutionalization. It is true that populist mobilizations do not have the utterly formless expression of the mass actions described by Taine, but when we move from him to the more organized phenomena described by Le Bon, Tarde or McDougall, the differences between populism and group behaviour reduce markedly. With Freud, however, we have reached a more complex and promising approach in which these variations can be seen as alternatives that can be explained within a unified theoretical matrix. This will be my starting point for elaborating a concept of 'populism' in Part II of this book.

Two remarks, however, before I engage on this task. The first is that Freud, as a result of the psychoanalytic framework within which he constructs his theory, has a predominantly genetic approach to the object of his study. Therefore his categories obviously require a structural reformulation if they are going to be useful as tools of socio-political analysis. We cannot fully engage, in the context of our discussion on populism, in this task, although some minimal steps in this direction will be taken at the beginning of Chapter 4. Secondly, although I take Freud as my point of departure, this book should not be conceived as a 'Freudian'

On the other hand, since his right to rule is based on the recognition by other group members of a feature of the leader which he shares, in a particularly pronounced way, with all of them, the leader is, to a considerable extent, accountable to the community. The need for leadership could still be there – for structural reasons that Freud does not really explore, but to which we shall return in a moment – but it is a far more democratic leadership than the one involved in the notion of the narcissistic despot. We are, in fact, not far away from that peculiar combination of consensus and coercion that Gramsci called hegemony.

Let us finish this discussion by stressing that Freud was so acutely aware of the impossibility of reducing the process of group formation to the central role of the authoritarian chief of the horde that at the beginning of Chapter 6 of *Group Psychology* he provides us with an inventory of other possible situations and social combinations – it is, in fact, a sort of programmatic description of a virgin terrain to be intellectually occupied. It is worthwhile quoting it *in extenso*:

Now much else remains to be examined and described in the morphology of groups. We should have to give our attention to the different kinds of groups, more or less stable, that arise spontaneously, and to study the conditions of their origin and of their dissolution. We should above all be concerned with the distinction between groups which have a leader and leaderless groups. We should consider whether groups with leaders may not be the more primitive and complete, whether in the others an idea, an abstraction, may not take the place of the leader (a state of things to which religious groups, with their invisible head, form a transitional stage), and whether a common tendency, a wish in which a number of people can have a share, may not in the same way serve as a substitute. This abstraction, again, may be more or less completely embodied in the figure of what we may call a secondary leader and interesting varieties would arise from the relation between the idea and the leader. The leader or the leading idea might also, so to speak, be negative; hatred against a particular person or institution might operate in just the same unifying way, and might call up the same kind of emotional ties as positive attachment. Then the question

would also arise whether a leader is really indispensable to the essence of a group – and other questions besides.⁶⁵

Conclusion: towards a starting point

Is there a recurrent theme that gives coherence to reflections on mass society from Taine to Freud? I think there is, and it is to be found in the progressive theoretical renegotiation of the duality between social homogeneity (or indistinctness) and social differentiation. At the beginning of the process, in what we have called the zero degree of any positive evaluation of mass action, this *duality* is actually a *dualism*: for Taine, society can open the door to homogenizing forces only at the expense of its internal cohesion. Equalization of conditions can only mean the breakdown of all hierarchy and differentiation – that is to say, the collapse of the social order. As we have seen, the bloodbath which had, for him, been the French Revolution was the direct result of the uniformity brought about by Absolutism, which had done away with all the intermediate bodies linking the individual to the state. For him, social homogeneity and the breakdown of any kind of social organization were synonymous.

From that uncompromising starting point, the story I have narrated is one of successive efforts to make homogenizing (or equivalential) social logics compatible with the actual working of a viable social body. The homogenization/differentiation duality was maintained, but it adopted less and less the character of a dualism. First, there was a blurring of the sharp distinction between the normal and the pathological and, parallel to this, a transference to the group of many functions which had previously been conceived as belonging exclusively to the individual. Le Bon saw the crowd as an inevitable part of the community, and devised some kind of manipulative catechism to keep it within its limits. For Tarde, the equivalential moment of homogenization is to be found in what he called 'imitation' – in the repetitive practices which usually follow the moments of creation or invention. So the equivalential moment is the very cement of the social fabric. This, as we have seen,

venture. There are many issues that Freud did not engage with, and many avenues, quite important for our purposes, which he did not follow. So my research has to appeal to a plurality of intellectual traditions. My hope is that this intertextuality does not make it unduly eclectic.