
Drive theory and heredity in Amy Allen's Critique on the Couch

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Amy Allen's *Critique on the Couch* is a seminal contribution to the study of the relationship between psychoanalysis and critical theory. At a time when most authors prefer to ignore the difficulties raised by the pessimistic anthropology of psychoanalysis rather than turning those difficulties into the object of their reflexion, Allen's approach does justice to the inspiration of the founders of the Frankfurt School, who made psychoanalysis one of the pillars of their critical theory of society.

Critique on the couch is a systematic and meticulous study, in a style reminiscent of Joel Whitebook's *Perversion and Utopia*, an author with whom Allen maintains a permanent dialogue throughout the book. The particularity of this style is precisely not to be satisfied with a distant or opportunistic understanding of psychoanalytical theory, operating by punctual borrowing of isolated concepts. On the contrary, Allen dares to engage in the meanderings of metapsychology. As a result, the book is of interest to psychoanalysts, insofar as it brings to light questions of metapsychology that the psychoanalytic tradition, undoubtedly caught up in problems arising primarily from clinical practice, has tended to neglect (see, for instance, Chapter 2 in the book). Consequently, this work invites a true interdisciplinary dialogue.

Amy Allen's central proposition, clearly formulated at the beginning of her book, consists in affirming that critical theory needs psychoanal-

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ysis in order to reach some of its fundamental objectives. This proposal takes shape in a context that should be recalled: it is the controversy, revived by Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook², about the uses and the fate of psychoanalysis in the Frankfurt School tradition of thought. Allen's book is explicitly a continuation of this controversy (of which we can bet that it will be a fundamental piece from now on):

'Taking up Honneth's challenge, this introduction addresses the following questions: What (if anything) does contemporary critical theory that seeks to take up the legacy of the Frankfurt School anew need psychoanalysis for? In other words, what work do we, as critical social scientists, need psychoanalysis to do for us now?'³

Allen puts forward three elements in response to this question:

- First, she argues that critical theory needs psychoanalysis in order to establish a realist conception of the subject, one that would not fall into the pitfalls of normative idealism.
- Secondly, she considers that psychoanalysis provides critical theorists with resources to rethink autonomy without the need to resort to dubious developmentalist schemes or evolutionary theories.
- Thirdly, she argues that psychoanalysis offers a compelling model for conceiving the purposes and methods of critique. This model makes it possible to conceive emancipation without necessarily falling into utopianism or narrow rationalism.

These arguments are successively developed in distinct chapters of the book (Chapter 1 for the first point, Chapter 2, 3 and 4 for the second point and finally Chapter 5 for the last point). The developments that Allen devotes to the question of the Ego, or to the critique of developmentalist or evolutionary conceptions of autonomy, deserve a more generous treatment than is possible in this article. Insofar as I am unable to discuss in detail all the contributions of Allen's book, I have chosen to focus my review on a specific topic that interests me particularly. I will therefore

2 Honneth 2007, 2012; Honneth & Whitebook 2016.

3 Allen 2021, 3.

limit myself to the formulation of some considerations on metapsychology and philosophical anthropology regarding what Amy Allen calls a 'realist conception of the subject'. Allen defends a realist conception of the subject by relying largely on the psychoanalytical work of Melanie Klein. However, it seems to me that her interpretation of Klein's work calls for some remarks.

A realistic conception of the subject is one that does not overestimate the rational powers of the individual and that, consequently, takes into account "the sting of negativity"⁴. What do we mean by "the sting of negativity", an expression that has become somewhat emblematic in the recent controversy between Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook⁵? At first sight, this formula undoubtedly refers to Joel Whitebook's⁶ remarks on the "work of negativity", an expression borrowed from the French psychoanalyst André Green (1999). In this case, this expression designates the irrational forces at work in the subject. Otherwise put, by "work of the negative" we must understand the tendencies that are refractory to reflection, stand opposed to consciousness, and produce complex forms of denial of reality. Whitebook also refers to what he calls Freud's Hobbesianism, i.e. the idea that there is a deeply hostile and anti-social tendency in all human beings. This conception of negativity can also be linked to the Adornian theme of conflict between the individual and society: in his indictment of the neo-Freudians, Adorno insists at length on the antagonism that exists between the individual and society, an antagonism that revisionists seek to abolish by "sociologizing" psychoanalysis. This thesis refers, moreover, to a certain reading, very widespread among the first generation of the Frankfurt School, of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*: the egoistic search for satisfaction is opposed to the renunciations that civilization requires. Thus, there is a fundamental opposition between drive satisfaction and social requirements. In short, the

4 Honneth 2007; Allen 2015.

5 Honneth and Whitebook, "Omnipotence or Fusion?"

6 Whitebook 2001.

goals of the individual and those of society are irreconcilable and there can be no civilization without sacrifice⁷.

Ultimately, we can understand “the sting of negativity” as a set of irrational, egoistic and antisocial forces at work in the individual, which are a source of conflict and opposition. It seems to me, however, that in order to do true justice to the Freudian discovery, negativity should not only be conceived as a source of conflict between the individual and society. Freud’s genius was to show that the individual is not only at grips with forces that attack him from the *outside*, but also with forces that attack him from the *inside*. Drives that seek satisfaction in an egoistic and anarchic way come into conflict with the civilized social order, but they are also offensive towards the ego. This aspect of Freud’s discovery, the fact that “the Ego is not master in its own house”, dealt a blow to the illusion of the Kantian autonomous and self-transparent subject, freely deciding on his means and ends. Psychoanalysis has brought on stage a divided subject, dispossessed by an authority that she ignores, but which nevertheless acts within herself. An individual who, at times, turns against herself and acts against her best interests. Therefore, the challenge is to think together destructiveness towards others and self-destructiveness; the capacity to make others suffer and the tendency to inflict suffering on oneself; sadism and masochism⁸. This aspect is obviously at the heart of the negativity invoked by critical theorists when they appeal to psychoanalysis.

7 Whitebook 2004.

8 I emphasize this point because it comes into play in the discussion of the concept of death drive as used by Amy Allen. She is right to insist on the fact that among Freud’s disciples, it is certainly Melanie Klein who took the death drive hypothesis most seriously, to the point of making it a central axis of her own theory. Nevertheless, in Amy Allen’s use of it, this death drive appears most often in the form of instinctual aggressiveness. However, instinctual aggressiveness, as it can be observed in animal behavior for example, has an adaptive function. The drive, on the contrary, does not obey an adaptive logic. Therefore, it seems important not to assimilate the death drive only to instinctual aggressiveness. The drive carries within it the *human* excessiveness that unconscious sexuality confers on it. It is a search for excitation without limits, which is why it seems more appropriate to speak, like Jean Laplanche, of “the sexual death drive” (see Laplanche 2015).

The question that runs through the current controversy about psychoanalysis in critical theory regards specifically the aetiology of “the sting of negativity”. How can we conceive of the origin of this core of irrationality?

For Allen, only a theory of drives can account for “the sting of negativity” (a proposal with which I agree). She criticizes Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition insofar as the latter has renounced a strong conception of drives in favour of a theory of object relations, judged more compatible with the idea of an intersubjective constitution of the subject. The theory of object relations preserves, moreover, an element of human sociability, thus fighting against the pessimism of orthodox Freudian anthropology. Honneth’s choice is seen as a concession to social adaptation and an abandonment of the radical content of the original Freudian theory. According to Allen, Melanie Klein’s theory is better able to preserve the sting of negativity:

- because it is clearly anchored in a theory of drives, on the one hand;
- and because it does not lock itself in an essentializing biologism which would leave no place to social transformation, on the other hand;

The whole point of Allen’s demonstration is to support the importance of a theory of drives as a nucleus of negativity, while avoiding falling into the pessimistic conservatism often reproached to Freudism. To avoid this problem, one must escape from the biologism associated with the theory of drives. According to Allen, Melanie Klein’s theory makes it possible to reconcile these two requirements because it conceives of the drives as psychological and social properties rather than biological ones. Following the work of Fong⁹, Allen maintains that drives are “shaped” by the environment. Moreover, they are vectorized towards objects, as relational passions. Consequently, the subject is “turned” towards interaction and driven by eminently social forces. This argument makes it possible to avoid the fatalism commonly associated with the immutability implied by a biological conception of the subject and it thus opens up

9 Fong 2016.

possibilities of psychic and social transformation. Surely, if the drives are intersubjectively constituted, they can be transformed provided that one manages to act on these intersubjective conditions.

This interpretation of Melanie Klein's work deserves nevertheless some comments. One can understand the issues at stake in the reading put forward by Allen, but the latter seems overly influenced by the relational interpretation of Greenberg and Mitchell¹⁰, in particular on one point: even if one can conceive of the drives as being shaped by human relationships, the fact remains that in Kleinian metapsychology these drives are fundamentally innate. There are many passages in Melanie Klein's work that attest to this fact:

"The repeated attempts that have been made to improve humanity – and in particular to make it more peaceable – have failed, because nobody has understood the full depth and vigour of the instincts of aggression *innate* in each individual"¹¹

'I formerly made the suggestion that the ego's capacity to bear tension and anxiety, and therefore in some measure to tolerate frustration, is a *constitutional factor*. This greater *inborn capacity* to bear anxiety seems ultimately to depend on the prevalence of libido over aggressive impulses, that is to say, on the part which the life instincts plays from the outset in the fusion of the two instincts'¹²

For Klein the drives 'are there from the beginning' (a statement that Allen herself repeats many times), even if they can be latter influenced by environmental factors. Clearly, this 'from the beginning' means 'already there at birth'. The Kleinian theory of the drives thus confers an important place to heredity, an aspect that Allen seems to underestimate in her reading. Doesn't this fact imply revising downwards the role of cultural and social factors in the formation of the drives? What is the determining weight of the hereditary factor compared to the influence of relationships?

10 Greenberg & Mitchell 1983.

11 Klein 1975, 257. Emphasis added.

12 Klein 1997, 68. Emphasis added.

This conception of the drives raises, moreover, another problem. The otherness of the drives and consequently, their negativity, comes from the fact that they are *not there from the start*. This is a point on which the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche particularly insists¹³:

‘What is also contested by us is the notion of a primordial id, at the origin of psychic life, an idea that goes directly against the novelty implied in the notion of drive, as a sexual process not adapted (in man) to a pre-established goal. If the notion of id retains a meaning, it is to characterize the repressed unconscious which, by its otherness, becomes truly “something in us”, an “internal foreign body”, an “id”.’¹⁴

In this quotation, Laplanche establishes a link between the drives and unconscious sexuality. The drives are a product of infantile sexuality, hence their characteristics (polymorphous perversion, autoeroticism, etc.)¹⁵. Following Laplanche, and in truth a tradition of French psychoanalysis, the negativity of the drives can be explained by their sexual and unconscious roots. But in Allen’s conception, the drives appear as entities dissociated from sexuality, as autonomous forces of another kind, in particular the death drive. This dissociation makes it difficult to understand the specific characteristics of the drives, as well as the way in which they manifest themselves. How can we explain the disruptive character of the drives without appealing to their genesis, which depends on the repressed unconscious and infantile, perverse polymorphic, sexuality?

The drives become an internally attacking force for the subject because they are emanations of unconscious sexuality. They thus develop into an instance of alienation inasmuch as they result from the introduction of foreign elements in the psychic functioning, to such an extent that they will constitute an ‘internal foreign body’. Therefore, the sexual unconscious and the drives constitute a source of negativity precisely because they are not an inner nature or an original, more authentic self, but in

13 Laplanche 2005, 2015.

14 Laplanche 2007, 198-99. *Translated by the author.*

15 Freud 2015.

fact a second nature¹⁶. However, if drives are ultimately forged in relationships with others shouldn't they rather, as Honneth postulates, constitute a potential of sociability (even a wounded or mutilated sociability), instead of becoming asocial? By choosing to conceive of drives as relational passions, Amy Allen risks repeating the flaws she criticizes in Honneth's intersubjectivist conception. For my part, I believe that a radical and critical conception of the subject, on the contrary, should be able to account for the genesis of these hostile forces that undermine the individual from within other than by appealing to heredity¹⁷.

Some remarks, which were intended only to point out a few aspects of Allen's approach that merit questioning, cannot detract from the merit of the author's work. Like any good scholarly work, *Critique on the Couch* provides at least as many answers as it raises good questions. Between the proponents of an untamable and hostile Nature and the proponents of a civilizing Culture, Allen has opened a stimulating third way, which we hope will inspire other researchers.

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16 Dejours 2016 ; Tessier 2014.

17 Laplanche 2015, *Between Seduction and Inspiration: Man*.

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