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The crisis of couple

THE NARCISSISTIC CONTRACT¹

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Definition

Piera Aulagnier considers that the narcissistic contract is signed by the child and the group. The child's cathectization by the group anticipates the child's cathectization of the group. With this child's arrival to the world, the group cathects the infant as a future voice that will be requested to repeat statements of a dead voice, thereby guaranteeing the qualitative and quantitative permanence of a body that will continuously regenerate itself. As the counterpart of his cathectization of the group and its models, the child will demand that the group ensure his right to occupy a place independent of the exclusive parental verdict, to be offered an ideal model that others may not reject without also rejecting the group's laws, that the child be allowed to preserve the illusion of atemporal permanence projected onto the group and, above all, within a group project that his successors will presumably take up and preserve³.

Introduction

Piera Aulagnier (1975) describes that the child develops in a space (the family), where the subject forms; it is here that the Je may become. This space consists of the parental couple and the child. She

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² The Narcissistic Contract according to Piera Aulagnier and René Kaës.

³ Aulagnier Piera, *La Violencia de la Interpretación, del Pictograma al Enunciado*, p. 164.

also considers it important to take into account what happens on the extra familial scene, that is to say, social and cultural influence on the parental couple and therefore on the child's psyche; she grounds these ideas on contributions of C. Castoriadis (1975). It is noteworthy that she develops her ideas concerning the Narcissistic Contract on the basis of deficiencies in the constitution of the contract she has investigated in the field of the psychoses (paranoia and schizophrenia); this work is described in the second part of *Violence of the Interpretation*⁴.

P. Aulagnier works on the relation between individual and society, differentiating three spaces of cathectization for the child (Hornstein L. 2003): 1) the family; 2) first the school environment, then in adolescence, friends and in adulthood, friends and the professional milieu and 3) the social environment or space where interests, projects and hopes are shared⁵.

She emphasizes the effect of the parents' words on the child, parental discourse that needs to take into account the law to which they themselves are subjected, and highlights the effects of imposition exerted on them by the latter. In her view, the (metapsychological) function of the socio-cultural register, that is to say, the ideological discourse (ideology) of social institutions is important. Therefore, she considers socio-cultural reality and its influence on the constitution of the psyche important, underscoring the following:

a) The parents' relationship with the child carries the trace of the relationship between the parental couple and the social environment in which they are inserted and whose ideals they share.

b) In the same way that the discourse of the parental couple anticipates and pre-cathects the place in social discourse this baby will occupy even before the child's birth, it also cathects that place with hope transmitted by the standing socio-cultural model.

c) As for the child (future subject), he needs to find references for identification in the social discourse that will enable him to project himself into the future, so that when he removes himself from the support provided by the parental couple, he will not lose the necessary identification support of social discourse.

d) If there is conflict between the parental couple and their social environment, the infantile psyche may make his fancied representations (rejection, aggression, omnipotence or exclusion) match what occurs in social reality. Also, if the parental couple experiences social oppression, this conflict between the parents and their social milieu will influence the child's possibility to work through identification statements of socio-cultural discourse, society therefore

⁴ Aulagnier Piera, *La interpretación de la violencia y el pensamiento delirante primario*, second part of *La Violencia de la Interpretación* (pp.187-314).

⁵ Hornstein Luis, *Jornada Piera Aulagnier* (2003), pág 83

having a role in the fate of these children. Piera Aulagnier⁶ (1975) emphasizes that it is not purely coincidental that the history of families of those who later become psychotics so frequently repeats the same social and economic drama.

Group discourse

Piera Aulagnier⁷ also views the social group as *the set of voices present*, formed by subjects that speak the same language and are governed by the same institutions and ideology (religion, etc.). This group or set shares certain statements (mystical, sacred or scientific) specific to each culture concerning the foundation of the social group. These statements concern: the reality of the world, the reason of being of the social group and the origin of its models.

The indispensable function of these *founding statements* is to preserve concordance between social and linguistic fields and their interaction; they are consequently necessary for each subject's use of language. In order to function, these fundamental statements need to be received by each subject as *words of certainty*.

This concordance between statements of social, linguistic and subjective fields determines that the social model upheld by the group coincides with the ideals of each of its members. Ideology is discourse based on the speaker's (enunciator's) ideals.

A culture's foundational discourse institutes the narcissistic contract. This discourse may be sacred, scientific or mythical, although these types have certain common characteristics and functions.

Sacred and scientific discourses have in common that a) they require the preservation of certainty concerning the origin and b) the idealization of religious discourse and of scientific discourse is similar.

In social discourse, a sector of absolute truth is necessary, since it allows the Je to take possession of a fragment of this discourse whose certainty is independent of whatever each singular subject contributes to it (whether they are parents or peers). This permits the subject to be recognized in his truth by the social group, although this group may exclude a member that fails to share these statements.

The functioning and objectives of the social field are governed by a number of statements and/or laws imposed on its members.

⁶ Aulagnier P, La Violencia de la Interpretación, p. 158.

⁷ Aulagnier P, La violencia de la Interpretación p. 160.

Therefore, when each subject (an infant for example) adheres to this field, the subject takes possession of these statements and laws that offer him conviction concerning the truth of his past and belief in possible certainty concerning his future.

For Piera Aulagnier the simultaneous cathectization of the future model and certainties concerning its origin is important. If the origin of society is de-cathected, this will have unavoidable repercussions on its future and that of its members.

The subject needs certainties regarding his origins that provide him with support and a guarantee of these truths by the social milieu (both social discourse and written text) so that the child may free himself of dependence on his initial referents (the mother's voice). To enable him to be free of dependence on the mother, he needs a majority of the group of voices to cathect the same ideal: in other words, for the child to be able to project himself in the social group while occupying the place of that group's ideal subject⁸.

The Narcissistic Contract

The narcissistic contract is an exchange pact between the subject and the group (familial and concomitantly social)

The group expects the subject to take up for himself what the voice of his predecessors stated in order to ensure the permanence and immutability of the group. The group guarantees transference onto the new member (the child) of recognition received by his deceased predecessor.

As for the subject (the new member), he commits himself to repeating the same fragment of discourse. The subject perceives that the set (the group) offers the support his narcissistic libido requires, and for that reason includes himself in it or accepts group discourse. In exchange, the group recognizes that the subject may exist only if his voice repeats (group statements).

Therefore, the Narcissistic Contract is installed by virtue of a pre-cathexis or pre-cathectization of the child by the group (the family group) as a future voice that will occupy the place previously designated to the infant. Therefore, the group anticipates the role projected onto the child that the child must play and also projects onto him its ideal model concerning belief in the permanence and durability of the social set; for his part, when the child (future subject) cathects the ideal model proposed by the social group, he

⁸ The ideal subject is not the same as the ideal ego or the ego ideal, but rather refers to the subject of the group (see Piera Aulagnier *La Violencia de la interpretación*, p. 163.

develops or rather psychically strengthens the sentiment of his own immortality.

The ideal model sustained by the social group is projected into this child's future, attracting the narcissistic libido of its members. This group discourse provides the child with certainty regarding his origin, which enables him to access historicity, an essential element for establishment and development of the identification process and autonomy of the ego. The subject transfers his narcissistic libido onto the group, and it in turn offers him a future (illusory) premium, since the subject is given the illusion that a new voice (a child) will take up his discourse, which allows him to preserve the illusion of immortality through this future child-subject.

Although the Narcissistic Contract is universal, it varies with the subjects, the couples, since the quality and intensity of cathectization of the contract joining the parental couple to the social group is also variable.

The parents impose on the child's ego initial knowledge of the relation between them and the social field and the way in which the social group relates to the parental couple. The parental couple may possibly reject essential clauses of the narcissistic contract, as occurs in psychotic families that present a closed relationship in regard to the social group, which determines that its members (the child for example) are unable to find support outside the familial microcosmos that would enable them to achieve autonomy (outside their endogamous-type group), indispensable for their ego.

It may also occur that the extra-familial milieu imposes a vitiated contract by not recognizing elements in the parental couple that would permit their inclusion in the social group (different forms of discrimination and exclusion), which determines that the parental couple feels ill-treated or victimized by the social group.

The Narcissistic Contract - René Kaës

René Kaës, influenced by the thinking of Piera Aulagnier in the eighties (Bernard M. 1999), takes her concept of narcissistic contract and extends it to groups and therefore to all links. He includes it in his investigations of *unconscious alliances* (Kaës 1993). Unconscious alliances form the constitution of human links and are established in the frame of a general law governing all human beings which is the prohibition of incest or the conformation of the subject based on the difference between the sexes and generations, which enables humankind to pass from the state of nature to the state of culture

(Bernard M 2001)⁹. In this context diverse unconscious alliances are produced (contracts, pacts and alliances) between the members of a link.

Based on a text by S. Freud (1914), *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, René Kaës (1993, p. 327) writes that his attention was drawn by three main ideas in this text: the first is that the individual is for himself an end in itself and at the same time a member of a chain to which he is subjected: the second is that parents make their child a carrier of their unrealized wish dreams, and this child's primary narcissism is supported by that of the parents; the third is that the ego ideal is a formation of both singular psyches and social groups.

Taking up Piera Aulagnier's *Narcissistic Contract*, Kaës considers that this contract generalizes the above Freudian ideas and explains correlative relations between the individual and the social group. Each newborn takes on the group burden as a carrier of continuity and, reciprocally, on that condition the group supports a place for this new element. Such are the terms, in brief, of the narcissistic contract. It demands that each singular subject occupy a place offered by the group and given meaning by the set of voices that, previous to each subject, developed discourse according to the group's founding myth. Each subject needs to take up this discourse in some way, since through it each makes a connection with the founding forebear (Bernard 2001, p. 106).

The constitution of the narcissistic contract involves structuring violence. Kaës (1991, p. 327) considers that Piera Aulagnier introduces the notion of a subject of the group and recalls the text in which she describes how the narcissistic contract is established by virtue of narcissistic pre-cathectization of the infant by the group as a future voice that will take its designated place. It gives the infant its role beforehand, as subject of the group, which it projects into him¹⁰. He considers that for P. Aulagnier the narcissistic contract lies at the foundation of all subject/society, individual/group, singular discourse/cultural referent relations (Kaës R.1991, p. 328). Parents, especially the mother, are *spokespersons* for expectations of the group to which they belong, aside from expressing their own desires.

For René Kaës (1991, p. 328) the narcissistic contract refers in the first place to an originary contract established between the child and the primary group (the family), that is to say with those individuals who are together by virtue of processes of *filiation* (blood relations) and in the second place to narcissistic contracts produced afterwards when the subject enters secondary groups (school, friends,

⁹ Bernard Marcos, (Seminar N° 8, October 2001)

¹⁰ Aulagnier P, (Spanish edition) *La Violencia de la Interpretación*, (1991) pp. 163-4.

occupation, etc.), groups formed through processes of *affiliation* (adhesion) (Bernard M 2001). These secondary groups re-work whatever was constituted in the originary narcissistic (family) contract and may come into conflict with it. This is to say that any ulterior belonging or adhesion to a group re-works what was at stake in the originary narcissistic contract.

Narcissistic contracts establish what has to be done and what its members (of primary and secondary groups) are forbidden to do, and involve a third that functions as guarantor of obedience to them. In contrast, *narcissistic pacts* (Kaës R. 1993, p. 329) have neither contract nor guarantor, and are instituted through violence and coercion. This (pathological) narcissistic pact is the opposite of the contract; it contains and transmits violence, allowing its members neither freedom nor autonomy nor subjectivization.

The narcissistic contract involves processes of identification: in positive, the child's identification with aspects of his parents, and also in negative: processes of identification with rejected aspects of the parents or aspects his progenitors were unable to realize.

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