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Tribute to René Kaës

René Kaës: The Master

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Abstract

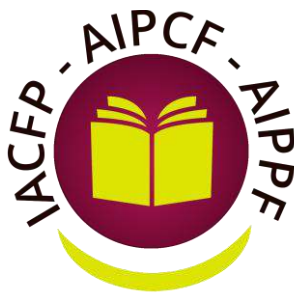
In this article, the author summarises René Kaës's most important theories and highlights in particular the originality and significance of this master of psychoanalysis. The most significant aspect of Kaës's thinking is the idea of the articulation between the inner world of the individual subject, and the space of the link between subjects. Kaës thus begins to postulate a third-type metapsychology, which looks at the relationships and conflicts between the different psychic spaces, leading him to assert that the subject's unconscious is at once intrapsychic and extratopic.

Keywords: third-type metapsychology, ectopic unconscious, unconscious alliance.

Resumen. René Kaës: el Maestro

La autora resume en este artículo las teorías más importantes de René Kaës y destaca especialmente la originalidad y la importancia del pensamiento de este maestro para el psicoanálisis de pareja y familiar. El aspecto más significativo del pensamiento de Kaës es la idea de que debe fundarse una tercera tópica basada en la articulación entre el mundo interno del sujeto individual y el espacio del vínculo entre los sujetos. Kaës comienza así a

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postular una metapsicología de tercer tipo, que se fije en las relaciones y los conflictos entre los diferentes espacios psíquicos, lo que le llevará a afirmar que el inconsciente del sujeto es a la vez intrapsíquico y extratópico.

Palabras clave: metapsicología de tercer tipo, inconsciente ectópico, alianza inconsciente.

Résumé. *René Kaës : le Maître*

Dans cet article, l'auteure résume les principales théories de René Kaës et met particulièrement en lumière l'originalité et l'importance de la pensée de ce Maître pour la psychanalyse, en particulier dans le travail clinique avec le couple et la famille. La portée la plus significative de la pensée de Kaës réside dans l'idée qu'il faut fonder une troisième topique qui repose sur l'articulation entre le monde intérieur du sujet singulier et l'espace du lien entre les sujets. Kaës commence ainsi à postuler une métapsychologie de troisième type, qui s'intéresse aux relations et aux conflits entre les différents espaces psychiques, ce qui l'amènera ensuite à affirmer que l'inconscient du sujet est à la fois intrapsychique et extratopique.

Mots-clés: métapsychologie de troisième type, inconscient ectopique, alliance inconsciente.

The death of René Kaës has deprived us of a great thinker, generous and profound, capable of reaching new frontiers and shedding light on previously unknown aspects of mental functioning.

His major works, ranging from *L'appareil psychique groupal* (1976); and then *Le groupe et le sujet du groupe* (1993), *La parole et le lien* (1994), *La polyphonie du rêve* (2002), *Un singulier pluriel* (2007) and *Les alliances inconscientes* (2009), *L'extension de la psychanalyse* (2015), right up to his latest works, *Le Maître* (2012) and *Utopies* (2024), demonstrate the evolution of a creative, rich and rigorous body of thought towards what Kaës himself would define as a third-type meta-psychology.

Starting from his origins in Piera Aulagnier's group, as a colleague and friend of Didier Anzieu, he founded CEFFRAP (Cercle d'Études Français pour la Formation et la Recherche Active en Psychologie¹) and thus began a research journey that, starting from the analysis of group dynamics, would lead him increasingly to explore the relationship between the individual and the group's psychic reality.

In the 1970s, he proposed the model of the group psychic apparatus, highlighting the

¹ Later renamed *the Cercle d'Études Français pour la Formation et la Recherche: Approche Psychanalytique du groupe, du psychodrame, de l'institution*.



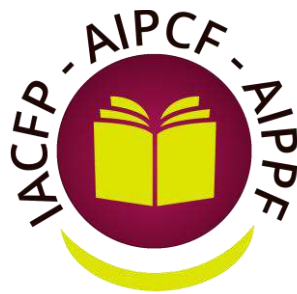
group structure of the psyche and the unconscious—concepts that form the very foundations of his model and which he would articulate in various ways until he offered us a coherent theory of the psychic apparatus of the couple and the family, as well as of institutions.

In an extraordinary article originally published in *Interazioni* in 2021, Kaës clearly and precisely illustrates many aspects of his thinking. First and foremost, he begins with the premises he finds in Freud regarding the mechanism of reliance on the psyche of the other (the mother) and on more than one other, on intersubjective reality; he thus asserts that he finds this organising principle in Freud.

In this article, from which I shall quote some key statements for the reader's convenience, Kaës demonstrates how the unconscious and its effects manifest themselves differently across various psychic spaces, each with its own specific topography, dynamics and economy. He therefore illustrates the unconscious within multi-subjective systems and, in particular, the three spaces of psychic reality: the space of the subject considered in its singularity, the space of the intersubjective links that are woven between one subject and another within the system, and the space of the specific system (the group, the couple and the family), specifying that the latter contains the other two. Kaës thus arrives at one of the discoveries that best characterises the psychoanalysis of the couple and the family: the concept of links. The theory of the link, moreover, has ancient origins, and various authors (Bion, Pichon Riviere, Berenstein, Puget) interpret it in different ways. For Kaës, the link is «the specific unconscious psychic reality constructed by the encounter between two or more subjects; the link is the more or less stable movement of investments, representations and actions that associate two or more subjects for the fulfilment of some of their desires [...]. Distinct from that which organises the intrapsychic space of the individual subject, the logic of the link is that of reciprocal implications, of mutual inclusions and exclusions» (Kaës, 2008, p. 770-771).

Of the many points we could make regarding this definition, I find the notion of the movement of investments, representations and actions particularly interesting. Indeed, links are in constant motion and express the subject's continuous back-and-forth with the other, whether situated in the present, the past or the future.

Kaës illustrates how a link cannot be reduced to the sum of its constituent subjects and defines the link in its three dimensions: as a space of specific psychic reality, as a process, and as a logic. In the second dimension, the link is the movement constituted by unconscious alliances and phoric functions—that is, those functions through which a subject can act as a spokesperson for the anxieties and sufferings of all others, or as a dream-bearer, symbol-bearer, symptom-bearer or ideal-bearer. This way of conceiving things illustrates how the subject in reality is always “*singularly plural*”, as he states in one of his books, and how the unconscious is polytopic.



The concept of the polytopic unconscious revolutionises the idea of the subject because it sees both the subject within the group and the group within the subject. As he states, the subject of the unconscious is both the subject of these links and the subject of these sets. “Various concepts describe this poly-topicality of the unconscious: unconscious alliances, phoric functions, the polyphony of the dream and the second navel of the dream – that is, the navel between the intrapsychic space and the space shared among multiple dreamers – the places of storage, encryption and exportation.” In his work on the “polyphony of the dream” (2002), he discusses the second navel of the dream, that is, the point where the dream, on the one hand, anchors itself to the corporeal, and on the other, “plunges into the unknown”, revealing the reciprocal relationship between subjects, thanks to the identificatory and phantasmal resonance that binds the members of the group together. Taking up Ruffiot’s idea of familial dream holding, Kaës speaks of a “common and shared dream space” within the family.

By further exploring work on the transmission of psychic life across generations or on co-occurring depression, he thus refines his idea of the extension of the ego’s limits and, more generally, of the intrapsychic space, which will be developed in the book *L’extension de la psychanalyse*.

In addition to the concept of the link, two theories in particular are important for couple and family psychoanalysts: unconscious alliances and the denial pact. In his book on unconscious alliances, he describes these as intersubjective psychic formations constructed «by the subjects of a link to establish the object-oriented narcissistic investments they require, the processes, functions and psychic structures necessary for them... Unconscious alliances are fundamentally inscribed in the psychic formation of the intersubjective link... they are the agent and the substance of the transmission of psychic life between generations and among contemporaries... each of us is a subject of the unconscious by virtue of unconscious alliances» (Kaës, 2007, p. 224-225). The group, the family and the couple are founded – according to Kaës – on unconscious alliances, narcissistic contracts and pacts that members unconsciously establish and are simultaneously obliged to maintain.

The second hypothesis that Kaës puts forward in this regard concerns the denial pact.

As a counterpoint to Piera Aulagnier’s thesis on the narcissistic contract, Kaës describes the denial pact as an unconscious alliance between the members of a family or, more generally, an institution or group, based on common defences such as renunciation and rejection, and the collective repression of thoughts, desires or acts of violence. Its purpose is to maintain the illusion of unity, the cohesion of the group and the link itself, by creating “zones of silence”, secrets and unprocessed phantoms that are transmitted across generations.



The extraordinary creativity that has distinguished him has led Kaës to examine two further aspects of family functioning: the “grandfather complex”, in which he analyses with great subtlety and depth the emotional and relational presence of the grandfather within the family and his relationship with the parent; and, above all, the dynamics within the sibling group, leading him to hypothesise the existence of a ‘sibling complex’.

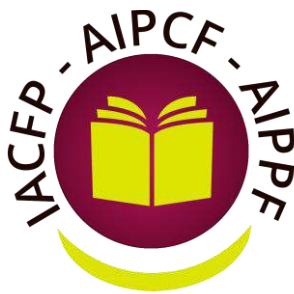
It is not only clinical reality that inspires Kaës’s observations, but also social reality; for example, the COVID-19 pandemic prompts him to reflect on the question of the transformations of the spaces of psychic reality in relation to material, biological, ecological, social and cultural reality. In his book on malaise, he offers us extraordinary reflections on the idea of a crisis in contemporary society, with reference to the crisis of identificatory processes. In this book, Kaës examines the malaise of contemporary society, introducing the concept of a crisis of metapsychic and meta-social guarantors, which, according to the French psychoanalyst, are the fundamental pacts and prohibitions that structure not only individual psychic life but also society, ensuring psychic continuity and social links; In this book, he focuses on the crisis and the breakdown of these pacts, which are capable of generating society’s malaise.

These reflections, which in a sense continue Freud’s work on *Civilization and Its Discontents*, explain the crisis of postmodernity by arguing that current social changes have called into question the processes of structuring psychic spaces and the foundations of the sense of identity. The mythical beliefs that underpinned the narcissistic foundations of our membership of a family and a social group have been called into question, and the destabilisation of these meta-psychic and meta-social guarantors has produced a crisis of identity within groups and the collective.

He thus arrives at this final conception, which he discusses in the book *L’extension de la psychanalyse*, where he begins to lay the groundwork for a third-type meta-psychology – that is a meta-psychology that illustrates the different topologies of the unconscious. First and foremost, he poses crucial questions on the matter.

Having asked himself, whilst comparing his conception with the Freudian one to which, as psychoanalysts, we are accustomed, whether “the Unconscious is solely of a psychosexual nature or whether it is not also, and jointly, founded in intersubjectivity”. He concludes that the extension of psychoanalytic practice to multi-psychic devices requires another model for understanding, namely “another metapsychology”.

Returning to his distinction between different psychic spaces, in other works, Kaës (2001) states that “the psychic reality of the link refers to a psychic reality without a subject”. And he wonders whether “this inevitably leads to the consequence that the Unconscious of the individual subject of the unconscious is situated in an ectopic or



extratopic place, in an external topos, unthinkable within the categories of the metapsychology built upon classical treatment and inaccessible with the usual tools of its method”.

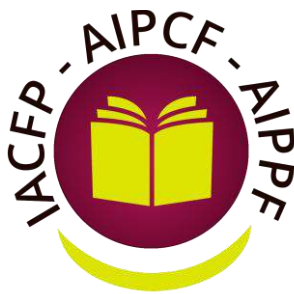
The most significant aspect of Kaës’s thinking is the idea that a third topology must be established, based on “the articulation between the common and shared psychic reality, the inner world of the individual subject, and the space of the link between subjects”. It is within this articulation that the subject is formed, as a subject of the unconscious. To raise the question of intersubjectivity, according to Kaës, means recognising the articulation of “heterogeneous psychic spaces, each endowed with its own logic”.

He thus begins to postulate a third type of metapsychology – one that looks at the relationships and conflicts between different psychic spaces. Kaës (2015) therefore states that “the subject’s Unconscious is, at the same time, intrapsychic and extratopic: it is *within the subject*, subject to its endogenous determinations; it is *between subjects*, where it relates to the other and to more-than-one-other; and it is *outside the subject*, in the link as a specific space, a couple, a family, a group, an institution”. The subject must therefore perform a dual psychic task, one directed inwards and the other towards the intersubjective, extending to the socio-cultural space.

Aulagnier’s lesson is strongly felt in these statements, according to which the other – the mother – precedes the subject and invests it, introducing it to the symbolic order. Even the body, for the Italian-French psychoanalyst, is preceded by a body imagined by the mother during pregnancy, and the body is a mediator and a relational link between two psyches and between the psyche and the world. Winnicott’s lesson, and his conception of transitional space – which is neither entirely subjective nor objective and which will never disappear in the course of our lives, being capable of re-emerging in art, in the imaginative life and in creative work – is powerful, at least for me.

Thus, the multidimensionality of reality becomes apparent, as does the importance of our perception and thought accepting this multidimensionality in order to understand it. Edgar Morin (1997) asserted that Freud was a multidimensional anthropologist. Could we not say the same of Kaës? But we can say that, just as Freud opened the doors to our understanding of inner reality, so Kaës did the same for the group psyche, extending the concept of unconscious psychic reality to psychic spaces other than those of the individual subject.

A multidimensional approach and the theory of the polytopic unconscious and the link allow us to understand new pathologies, or rather to shed new light on old pathologies, but above all to equip ourselves with new tools to address them. How we use the other, how the other is implicated in the origin and maintenance of serious



disorders, and, in particular, to what extent serious disorders are an expression of the group's overall functioning, of the quality and type of links that exist within the group between its members, are some of the questions that this type of approach allows us to ask. This is not to replace the logic of the intersubjective with that of the intrapsychic, but to observe the coexistence of the two levels. As I said in the introduction to the book *L'extension de la psychanalyse*, «This involves observing the links within the subject's mind and intervening not only on the geography of internal relations, but also on the processes of splitting, dissociation, denial and negation, whereby the patient never brings certain parts of themselves into the session because, in everyday life, these are externalised and immobilised in the other and in their relational life outside of analysis». This is an inevitable consequence of the fact that each of us carries not only our own psychic space, but also another space that we share with other subjects.

His latest book is significantly titled *Utopies*. Drawing on the philosophical concepts of Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella, Kaës examines the origin and utility of utopia on a social and clinical level, revealing it to be, ultimately, a powerful defence mechanism. He asserts that utopia arises as the result of a process of mentalisation that transforms unconscious fantasies into communicable and shared representations. It derives from the psychic work of transformation between the unconscious, the body and the group.

The utopian stance is founded on an ideal of change, oscillating between potential space and delusional reasoning. In its paradoxical nature, clinical practice teaches that utopian imagination can be a means of profound inner transformation.

Finally, Kaës recalled how psychoanalytic practice, as it evolves, prompts a re-examination of metapsychology. Clinical work with couples and families, groups and institutions found in René Kaës one of its most important thinkers. This clinical work, which he regarded as an extension of the setting and of psychoanalysis itself beyond the boundaries of the intrapsychic, increasingly constitutes a useful lesson for young people, so that they may be equipped to face the challenges posed by particular pathologies.

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