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**Tribute to René Kaës**

**A journey through the life and work of René Kaës**  
Rosa Jaitin\*



Photo from the AIPPF Congress (2018)

René Kaës was a leading figure in contemporary psychoanalysis.

A model psychoanalyst, researcher, teacher and friend, he was characterised by his openness towards others and his simplicity. My professional and personal journey is closely linked to him

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\* PhD in Clinical Psychology and Psychopathology (Paris Cité University). Research Habilitation (Paris Cité). Psychoanalyst, trained by The Psychoanalytic Society of Buenos Aires (APdeBA), The Latin American Federation of Psychoanalysis (FEPAL), The International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA). Director of the Center for Studies at the International Association of Psychoanalysis of Family and Couple (IAPFC), and of its journal *Trames*. Founding Member of The International Association of Psychoanalysis of Family and Couple (IAPFC), The French Society of Family Psychoanalysis (SFTFP). Full Member of The French Society of Psychoanalytic Group Psychotherapy (SFPPG). Founder and Director of the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Bonds (APSYLIEN, Lyon).



I met him in Buenos Aires during his first visit to Argentina, following the fall of the military dictatorship (1976–1982), and his presence helped us through the grieving process we were going through following the disappearance of so many (30,000) people. His first book, *The Group Psychic Apparatus*, and its introductory chapter on transitional analysis, were what prompted me to study his thinking.

In 1982 and 1985, I came across some magnificent texts in which René begins to address the question of internal groups, psychic groupness and the group underpinning of the psyche.



Buenos Aires, AAPPG Congress 1995

### **Life Journey**

I shall begin by introducing René in his own words, drawing on the two autobiographies he has written: one for Mexico on the occasion of receiving his honorary degree<sup>1</sup> and, more recently, on the website he has created with collaborators<sup>2</sup>.

*“I was born in 1936 in Lorraine, in eastern France, to a Lorraine mother and an Alsatian father, into a modest family, but one that was committed to giving its seven children the best possible education. I am the eldest of my siblings.”*

*“In more ways than one, I am a person of borders: national, cultural, social. I lived through the war years as a child worried about my loved ones (deported to Germany, involved in the fight against Nazism); my adolescence was shaped by the example of the Resistance.”*

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<sup>1</sup> *Brochure: René Kaës*, Doctor Honoris Causa, University of Guadalajara, Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> René Kaës (1936–2026). *Elements of psychoanalytic research on groups and the psychic reality of subjects*



### ***Family origins***

*“My father’s side of the family settled in France, in a small village between Alsace and Lorraine; at the end of the 17th century, my ancestors arrived from Bohemia, in central Europe, where they had been engaged in glassmaking, probably for generations. They emigrated and practised the same trade, in the same environment, and almost in the same language—German—even down to the same Germanic dialect. I spent a lot of time with my father’s uncles and aunts. They were cheerful and romantic, and during family meals they would sing Schubert’s lieder (songs).”*

*“I was very close to my maternal grandparents, at whose house I spent my holidays with my brothers and sisters. They instilled in me a certain patience that came from their work in the fields and a love of nature.”*

*...“At first, our travels were dictated by the moves imposed on us by my father’s work, and they were not a source of pleasure as they later became...”*

*I discover countries and cities on foot and travel the roads on foot rather than by car, whenever possible.”*

*“I was also very worried about my grandparents’ fate and saw my parents fretting over the lack of news and the risks my uncle was facing. One day, the German army arrived in our small town, hunted down members of the resistance and shot several of them; I witnessed one of those scenes, horrified. After their arrival, one of my classmates was sent with her mother to Ravensbrück, from where they never returned. When liberation came, we returned to Lorraine, to a fairly large town, Metz, not far from my home village. My grandparents were lucky enough to return safe and sound. “...”*

*“In my youth, I was actively involved in popular education movements and founded numerous film clubs. As a student, I took on responsibilities during the Algerian War within the framework of university trade unionism of the National Union of Students of France, which was then committed to opposing the Algerian War and in favour of the self-determination of its citizens.”*

This life experience, shaped by the Second World War and the struggle for the independence of the French colonies, gave René the insight to devote himself to researching topics such as ideology, malaise, utopias and the founding of the group of the 12 Apostles, towards the end of his life in 2026.



## **Let's look at his academic and educational background**

*“After my school years at the college in Metz, I planned to enrol at the college Voltaire in Paris to prepare for the entrance exams for the Institute of Higher Cinematic Studies; given the financial cost of this project was too high, I had to give it up and look for other ways to nurture my love of cinema. After a wonderful year of preparatory studies at the University of Nancy, I began my studies in psychology and sociology at the University of Strasbourg between 1955 and 1963. I hold a PhD in Psychology (1966) and a PhD in Arts and Humanities (1974). During my studies, I had the opportunity to meet professors of great human and scientific stature: among them, Didier Anzieu, Georges Duveau, Marcel David, Theo Kammerer, Paul Ricoeur and Serge Moscovici.”*

*“I was fortunate to find in these professors a multidisciplinary approach that subsequently influenced my research interests, my practice and my teaching.*

*Anzieu taught us general psychology, psychopathology (together with Th. Kammerer and L. Israël) and social psychology. Anzieu was an extraordinary teacher: at that time, in 1955, there were few of us studying psychology; he had us practise psychodrama in some of his classes; I was thrilled by that staging which dramatised some of my internal conflicts with the others, and I was surprised by the creative force that emanated from those experiences. He introduced us to Lewin and Moreno. His teaching and those experiences opened my mind to certain issues that had become entangled in my childhood. Following the congress in Rome ( ), Anzieu invited Lacan to Strasbourg to give his famous lecture once more: I was dazzled by the structure, but I continued to search for the subject's singular place.”*

## **His family**

*“In 1956 I met my future wife, who had just finished her psychology studies in Strasbourg, having begun them in Lyon. Françoise became a clinical psychologist and later practised as a psychotherapist and child psychoanalyst. We had three children: the first did not live long, and the other two became, respectively, a winemaker and a manager in charge of international relations at a large company. We are grandparents to three grandchildren.”*

## **His academic career**

*“I secured my first post at the University of Strasbourg in 1958. I was appointed as an assistant lecturer of psychology at the National Higher Institute of Labour, which had just been founded by Professor Marcel David within the Faculty of Law and Economics. The institute's mission was to provide advanced training for managerial staff.*

*I carried out field research in industrial and craft enterprises, works councils and trade unions, and drew on the work of G. Duveau to provide a historical perspective on mentalities*



*for research in the psychology of social representations. It was alongside S. Moscovici that I conceived and defended my postgraduate doctoral thesis in psychology in 1966 on 'Cultural representations among French workers.*

*At the Institute of Labour, I worked extensively with small groups and became increasingly interested in the unconscious processes at work within them, which organised the flow of communication and representations both within the group and among its members. I also worked with Alcoholics Anonymous groups.*

*I left the University of Strasbourg in 1963, after completing my military service. That period was quite turbulent due to my trade union involvement in the National Union of Students of France, which was then one of the main organisations opposing the war France was waging in Algeria.*

*I secured a post at the University of Aix-en-Provence, in the south of France, where I initially taught social psychology. A few years later, when my clinical practice was more established, I founded the first laboratory of clinical and pathological psychology at that university.*

*It was at the start of that period in Aix-en-Provence that I began working again with D. Anzieu, who had just founded an association whose aim was to develop a dynamic group psychology inspired by Freud's theories. In fact, in its early days, this association sought a kind of compromise between Lewin-inspired group dynamics and psychoanalysis applied to the group. I joined this group and invited D. Anzieu to Aix on several occasions. In 1965, and then in 1966, I organised with him an initial group experiment conducted in accordance with the requirements of the free association method and the rules of psychoanalytic interpretation. Anzieu was the 'facilitator' of this group: 'facilitator' is a term borrowed from group dynamics, from which we wished to distance ourselves clearly. This term, which remained in our vocabulary for a long time, bore the mark of our starting point. It also had the advantage, at that time, of not publicly compromising the psychoanalyst as such in this type of work: working with groups was frowned upon and often criticised by couch analysts; only therapeutic psychodrama termed 'individual' was relatively well accepted.*

*In the groups we set up in 1965 and 1966, I played a dual role: organiser of the experience and observer of the group and of Anzieu. I drafted the detailed report of this initial work. Didier Anzieu and I subsequently discussed it separately and published it a few years later, in 1973, under the title *Chronicle of a Group*. Our joint work served as a source of research that informed our subsequent publications: his on the imaginary in groups and group illusion, and mine on the model of the group psychic apparatus, internal groups, and the formation of ideological, utopian and mythopoetic positions within groups.*

*D. Anzieu played a decisive role in my training. We shared a long and fruitful history of joint research, marked by lengthy discussions that were constantly renewed in an atmosphere of mutual challenge and encouragement; with a few exceptions, we always chose to publish the results of our research separately. Our teacher-student relationship evolved into a friendship that lasted until his death in 1999."*



*Within the framework of the association founded by Anzieu, I trained in psychodrama, in particular with Paulette, with C. Neri, in Rome, in June 1994. Dubuisson and Geneviève Testemale. André Missenard and Angelo Bejarano were, for me, privileged interlocutors.*

*And they became even more so when, in 1974, D. Anzieu and I wrote our theses on psychoanalytic work in groups.*

*Between 1965 and 1981, in two successive stages, I began my psychoanalytic training and started practising analysis under supervision from 1971 onwards. For various reasons, and mainly because the French psychoanalytic societies affiliated to the IPA considered at that time that psychoanalytic group practice was a deviation, a heresy, I joined the IV Group, founded in 1969 by P. Aulagnier, J.-P. Valabrega, F. Terrier and a few others following a split from the Lacanian School.*

*There I found colleagues interested in my research, others wary or hostile, but the theories of P. Aulagnier, M. Enríquez and N. Zaltzman, as well as the original training programme proposed by the IV Group, were for me an important and fruitful point of support.*

*I remained in Aix-en-Provence until 1981, and was then appointed to a post in clinical and pathological psychology at the Lumière University in Lyon. There I founded the Centre for Research in Clinical Psychology and Psychopathology.*

*From the 1980s onwards, I became increasingly interested in intrapsychic group formations and in the group effects that arise in the context of so-called 'individual therapy', across various psychotherapeutic practices."*

*"From 1970 onwards, I began working in psychiatric institutions, supporting care teams in hospital wards, day hospitals, crisis centres and medical-psychological clinics within general hospital departments, particularly in departments dedicated to seriously ill children."*

## **Honours**

He was Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Clinical Psychopathology at Lumière-Lyon 2 University. The academic community honoured him for his contribution to research and teaching by awarding him an honorary doctorate from the Free University of Brussels, the University of Guadalajara (Mexico), the University of Naples, the University of Athens and the University of Buenos Aires.



On the occasion of the honorary degree in Athens

## Works

In the early stages of his extensive body of work, the theme of social representations runs through his publications from 1965–1966 to 2002. This was preceded by themes of popular culture, workers' leisure, architecture and urban planning from 1959 to 1970, which he revisited intermittently from the 1980s until 2024.

Texts on teaching, research and the training of clinical psychologists span the period from 1976 to 2018.

During this same period, the author introduced psychoanalytic group theory, drawing on the work of his predecessors (Freud, Pichón-Rivière, Bleger, Bion, Aulagnier, Avron) and, above all, Anzieu, from 1992 to 2023. He contributed to the drafting of the Ceffrap theses (1974).

In his famous book on *L'appareil psychique groupal* (translated into several languages, except English), he argues that it is a fiction intended to help us understand the shared formation of the group and the individuals who make it up. It is not a concretely observable element, but, above all, a model for understanding the articulations between the intrapsychic space and the common psychic space shared by the subjects of a bond, in this case, the group. But he subsequently extends this concept to the clinical practice of couples, families and institutions.

In this text, he attempts to describe a mechanism of bonding and transformation of psychic reality, with the aim of establishing the bonds of a group and the intrapsychic relationships that have become necessary to produce the assemblage or combination of certain formations and certain intrapsychic processes, and of interpsychic formations and processes.

Following on from this, he introduces the notion of the demand for psychic work, following the model of the drive's functioning, with the aim of clarifying these modes of pairing.

This search for a psychoanalytic model of the group had been undertaken by other analysts, Bion, Foulkes and Pichon-Rivière. The hypotheses on which it is based follow the proposal of J.-B. Pontalis (1963), who had restored the group's status as a psychic object for its



members. Situated within the psychoanalytic field, the group is considered first and foremost as an object of drive investment and unconscious representations.

For his part, D. Anzieu had proposed, in 1975, a model for understanding the group based on the model of the dream: for this author, the group is, like the dream, the medium and the place of the imaginary fulfilment of unconscious childhood desires. Like the dream, like the symptom, the group would be the association of an unconscious desire seeking its path towards imaginary fulfilment and of defences against the anxiety they provoke.

Subsequently, the model of the group psychic apparatus was used by psychoanalysts, in particular, A. Ruffiot (1981) and E. Granjon (2005), working with family constellations to account for the psychic organisation of the family group. Later, Rosa Jaitin (2006) worked with this model, applying it to the configuration of sibling relationships.

From 1986 onwards, René addressed the issue of group associative chains and the diffraction of internal groups, providing tools for clinical analysis. These articles are drafts of three books published in 1993, 1994 and 2007.

In 1987, I was in direct contact with René, as I had begun, at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Buenos Aires, a research project to study the issue of massification in higher education. The themes of representation, space and time – variables on which I was working – also interested René, as they formed part of his early reflections in his work on workers and culture in France.

René was one of the first French authors to outline a metapsychology of bonds, establishing a correlation between the subject of the unconscious and the social and cultural subject. It was during this period that the correlation between the group, personal and social trauma, and their relationship to crises first appeared in his work. His text on *Le maître* subsequently explores these issues in greater depth.

### **Bonds, unconscious alliances and negativity**

From 1989 onwards, René opened up a new path – a motorway, in fact – as it allowed for faster progress in the clinical understanding of suffering. Drawing on the work of Piera Aulagnier, with whom he had maintained a close professional relationship, he introduced the theme of unconscious alliances, integrating the pact of denial into the narcissistic contract and distinguishing the different levels of negativity within bonds. From an epistemological perspective, René Kaës (2005) distinguishes the bond as a site of specific psychic reality; as a configuration of bonds, be it a couple, a family, a group or an institution; or as a site of the unconscious.

These themes, together with those of unconscious alliances and inter- and transgenerational transmission, constitute two axes that bring us together once more, through my practice as a couple and family psychoanalyst.



In *Les alliances inconscientes* (2009), René Kaës asserts that unconscious alliances organise the intersubjective bonds of subjects. They are the cement of the psychic matter that binds individuals together, whether in a couple, a family, a group or an institutional setting.

We have observed that unconscious alliances are the result of different modes of bonding that produce the unconscious and impose a psychic task on their subjects. These demands for work involve a mutualisation of investments in the bond, which obliges them and, in some cases, constrains them.

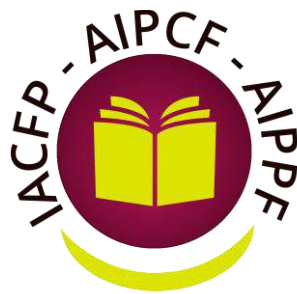
The subject of the unconscious is constructed within unconscious alliances, as a subject within intersubjectivity. (Kaës, 1993, 2007). As a corollary, we might agree that unconscious alliances create the unconscious; and that the psyche is open to the unconscious of the other, of an other, of several others. To form bonds with others, it is necessary to set aside disagreements through the modalities of the negative and the community of negation that enables the weaving of bonds. This is how reciprocity and a community of defence mechanisms are constituted.

René, drawing on Freud's work, explores the question of transmission and shows that it is inseparable from transference. In addition to these transferable and transformable objects, the "negative" is also and above all an unconscious organiser of transmission. These are therefore raw, non-transformable, encrusted, incorporated, inert objects, which often attack the psychic apparatuses that must be transformed, be it the group, the family, the couple or the analyst.

Transmission is linked to the need to ensure continuity between members and generations in the case of the family, and between members and successions in the case of institutions. Transformation allows a shift from raw elements to more representable ones, and transforms sensory experiences into more organisable and exchangeable psychic experiences.

However, it seems important to clarify that 'transgenerational' inheritance also includes elements that remain awaiting representation, without necessarily being of a traumatic nature. The concept of relative negativity, proposed by René Kaës (1989), could account for these aspects of non-pathological transgenerational transmission.

In 2000, he published a second edition of *L'appareil psychique groupal*. He retained the original text from 1976, but added extensive comments to each section, incorporating the critiques and changes that led him to develop his research in the following years, introducing the concepts of unconscious alliances and the group subject. These are concepts that require a reformulation of the conception of the 'individual' psychic apparatus and the subject of the unconscious.



René Kaës subsequently explores the polyphony of the dream (2002). In the book bearing this title, he argues that the formation of the dream, beyond its recipient or recipients, bears the imprint of the encounter with the other. The dream takes place in a shared dream space, a porous, strange and sometimes unsettling space. The desire to dream in the shared dream space is probably the fulfilment of humanity's oldest desire. The dream takes place in a dream space where the dreams of various dreamers, interwoven with the statements or perceptions of others, correspond and interpenetrate, in a space where dreamers send signals to one another and make themselves heard by other dreamers, by various listeners, both internal and external. This is what happens when, in psychoanalysis, group therapy and family therapy, dreams intersect and respond to one another. Alongside the bodily navel, where the dream rests upon the mycelium of the unconscious, there exists a second navel of the dream formed by that dense fabric from which the polyphony and poly-topia of dreams emerge.

### **The Extension of Psychoanalysis**

But his 2015 masterpiece on the extension of psychoanalysis already opens the door to the search for a metapsychology of bonds. In other words, the unconscious is constructed as a group and expresses itself through bonds; it is from there that subjectivity emerges. Put another way, the unconscious has a double boundary in which a paradoxical relationship is established between the interior and the exterior, functioning as an 'ectopic' unconscious space, outside the intrapsychic topography.

The three spaces of psychic reality – intra-, inter- and trans-subjective – require specific analytical approaches, such as couple, family, group and institutional psychoanalysis. R. Kaës emphasises the porosity and interference between these three psychic spaces, rather than a rigid superimposition. Each space, although it has its own consistency, influences, transforms and transmits the unconscious from one space to another.

These psychic spaces have different dimensions: the private, which corresponds to the singularity of each subject; the common, which designates the shared psychic matter that unites the members; sharing, which represents each person's unique place within these alliances; and, finally, the different, which highlights the differences and discontinuity between subjects. These spaces, although distinct, interact and transform, and their porosity is essential. It is the passages between these spaces, when they are open, that allow for the establishment of a living intersubjective bond and a balanced intersubjective dynamic.

Thus, the methodological conditions for the analysis of bonds are based on the premise that the transformation of the unconscious psychic reality is only possible



through a framework suited to the analytical work on the various configurations of bonds and in accordance with the criteria of the psychoanalytic method.

Metapsychology of the third type derives from another paradigm of the unconscious. It differs from a metapsychology of the first type, centred on the intrapsychic space and essentially on the unconscious of the singular subject. It also differs from metapsychology of the second type, which focuses largely on the effects of intersubjective bonds on the intrapsychic space. Third-type metapsychology explores the formations, processes and effects of subjectivities in the three spaces (intra-, inter- and trans-subjective) distinguished by R. Kaës. The author calls it ‘third-type metapsychology’ because it arises from an encounter with other unknown, alien and complex spaces that we must decipher and identify.

### **Psychoanalytic responses to facing catastrophes: Ideals, utopias and beliefs**

The 2016 texts on ideology, together with *Le malêtre* (2012), *Utopies* (2024) and *Les Douze et leur fondateur* (2026) provide continuity regarding the work of the unconscious as a resource for confronting catastrophes. It opens doors to the transformative potential of intra-inter- and trans-subjective bonds in the cultural and political sphere.

These lines of research are introduced by the book on Ideology. This text is a response to the proclamation in the 1970s of the death of ideologies that organised and continue to organise the disasters of the 20th and 21st centuries. But as R. Kaës (2016) argues, “ideology, as a psychic position, never dies. To proclaim its death overlooks the fact that ideology is defined not only by its content, but by a specific, recurring mental position which, far from losing its relevance, is reinforced, even in a radical and deadly form, observable today as never before”.

This text, drawing on the clinical practice of individual and group psychoanalysis, laid the foundations for understanding the process of change in couple and family psychoanalytic practice. The ideological position is transformed through the working through of the mourning of omnipotence, of the structuring or cruel ideal, and of identification with an alienating idol. Therapeutic work allows us to observe the transformation from the ideological position to the “mythopoeitic” position in relationships.

*Le malêtre* (2012) builds on his earlier work on ideology, the first edition of which was published in 1991 (a topic revisited in 2016). In *Le malêtre*, R. Kaës draws on the resources of contemporary psychoanalysis to understand the new forms of psychological suffering and the ‘malaise’ of our time, largely linked to the changes that have destabilised the uncertain world in which we live and in which our descendants will live. These resources are grounded in psychoanalytic practice engaged in work with groups, families, couples and institutions. The links between the formations and psychic processes unfold within relational configurations, and the structuring of the intrasubjective psychic group provides us with alternative perspectives on “mal-être”. This book offers food for thought to help us avoid



falling into alarmist positions. We must continue to consider what psychoanalysis can or cannot contribute to the current “mal-être”.

In line with these reflections, R. Kaës published his text on utopias in 2024. Utopia is a subject that generates a great deal of interest today. It is an imaginary construct which, following Thomas More, is characterised by specific features. Whenever societies have undergone processes of crisis or major catastrophic upheavals, as is the case today, the ‘mal-être’ in culture provokes disorganising effects. The utopias that have been reinvented promise us another world, beyond the time and space of misfortune, a possible form of healing and restoration that offers hope.

Most utopias have taken a literary and philosophical form, proposing social, cultural and political change within a closed space and time. Today, the dystopias inherited from the last century dominate over positive utopias.

There is a constant connection between utopia, catastrophe and the need for change. It is this link between these three elements that drives the creation of new utopias—utopias that are dreamt of, kept secret and gradually inscribed, without ever disappearing, within the fabric of society and culture. Excellent literary, sociological, economic and political analyses of utopias continue to be produced, enabling us to work out the necessary waiting periods for the realisation of new utopias. The purpose of Kaes’s text is to question, with the aim of exploring the forms of the unconscious present in work with utopias. We can thus understand the genesis, functioning, contents and effects of the unconscious psychic reality through its manifestations in the various settings of psychoanalytic work. Whether in classical psychoanalysis, in adolescent therapies, or in relational settings. In this way, we might contribute to the development of a psychoanalytic anthropology of the mentalities that sustain hope.

To conclude this series of publications, very recently, in March 2026, a work was published in collaboration with Chantal Fiodo: *Les Douze et leur fondateur – Une approche psychanalytique*. This latest text explores, through the study of the group of Jesus and his apostles, how the unconscious psychic reality is formed within a group, woven at once from tension, creativity and rupture. It is neither a theological essay nor a historical study; rather, this text analyses, through group psychoanalysis, the unconscious dynamics that bind the founder to the members of his group and which allow the emergence of innovative and transformative thinking. What psychic formations and which unconscious alliances are mobilised when the founder and his companions create a revolutionary way of thinking capable of transforming psychic, social and cultural balances?

One of the original features of this text is the prominence given to the group of women, in their relationships with Jesus and the group of men, which highlights the two very different ways of being a disciple and an apostle. It reveals a human and surprising Jesus, a being who attracts and causes a stir, presenting an attitude of tenderness and attentiveness.

It is an unprecedented exploration of the workings of the unconscious in creative groups, of the way in which thought emerges, spreads and creates a new way of thinking about the



world. It is the way in which René Kaës, drawing on his faith, has confronted his mortality, leaving behind a model of life, living and passing on his message right to the end.

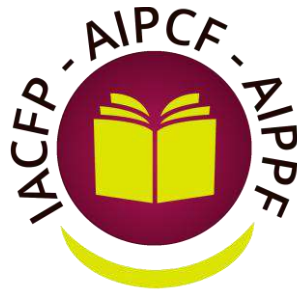
### **To conclude**

This presentation outlines the main areas of René Kaës's work, which concern the epistemological issues of the group; the group psychoanalytic method; psychodrama and group psychopathology; group support for the psyche; the structures, forms and functioning of psychic reality in relationships, intermediate formations and phoric functions; transitional analysis, the politopy of the dream, unconscious alliances, phoric functions; time and temporality within the spaces of psychic reality; unconscious alliances; the intercultural as a third difference; filiation and affiliation, the fraternal, psychic transmission, hypotheses regarding a third-type metapsychology; 'unease' in the world, psychoanalytic research on institutions, crises, ruptures and catastrophes, state violence, the workings of the unconscious and of historical, social, cultural and political determinants in utopia.

This issue of the journal will offer the opportunity to explore a large part of this thematic diversity, drawing on the theoretical and clinical contributions of family and couple psychoanalysts.

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