Sovereignty and its Discontents

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Abstract:
The psychoanalytic conceptualisation of human subjectivity carries significant implications for any social and/or ethical movement that anticipates the displacement of dehumanising and exclusivist ideologies and the eradication of the structural, symbolic and embodied violences that they licence and support. Both the friend-enemy distinction and the distinction between the human and the animal typically rely on psychically and culturally available processes of splitting, or “othering”, in order to establish and maintain a stark boundary between self and other. In the contemporary globalising world the presence and persistence of such psychic and culturally-mediated mechanisms, serving as psychic and cultural defences against the anxieties generated by uncertainty, insecurity, risk and change, is itself a major hazard, a potential source of aggressivity, conflict, war and destruction. Yet these “othering” mechanisms play such a central role in the formation of psychic structures and are so deeply embedded within cultures that it is very difficult to see how they might be displaced. This paper explores such issues by looking closely at a self-sovereignty in crisis; Freud’s classic case of the Rat Man.

There is a long tradition, within both social theory and sociology, of turning to psychoanalysis in order to develop more satisfactory accounts of what Judith Butler (1997) has termed “the psychic life of power”. Characteristically such a turn has been employed to supplement explanations of social order and social reproduction. Hence the internalisation of social codes, the formation of a common personality structure or the interpellation of willing or conforming subjects have been typical ways of drawing together the social and the subjective. As Dennis Wrong (1976:31) has suggested, all too often the unhappy product of
such an integration of psychoanalysis into social theory has been what he terms an “oversocialized conception of man”. Indeed, the tendency has been to produce an account of a subject centred in his or her internalised relation to authority and power. This is an odd outcome as the very attraction of psychoanalysis lies in its resistance to such common-place notions of a centred subjectivity. Rather, psychoanalysis provides an intricate account of the decentred subject, a subject always in process, always organised for the moment, yet always subject to re-organisation, and always located within language, culture and social institutions. It is this account of subjectivity that holds most interest for sociology and social theory, if only because it breaks with any idea of a smooth continuity stretching from the cultural to the subjective and disrupts any idea of human subjects as cultural dupes or dopes. At the same time the psychoanalytic conceptualisation of human subjectivity and of the vicissitudes of becoming a human subject carry significant implications for any social and/or ethical movement, or project, that anticipates the displacement of dehumanising and exclusivist ideologies and the eradication of the structural, symbolic and embodied violences that they licence and support. In what follows I explore such implications by drawing liberally and in an eclectic manner on the work of Freud, Klein, Lacan and Kristeva to explore aspects of the psychoanalytic account of human subjectivity. To do so I look closely at one of the foundational moments of psychoanalytic theory and at an instance of what we might regard as its principal source; one of Freud’s case-studies, the case of the Rat Man.

In several of his last publications, and perhaps most centrally in his 2002 seminar on “The Beast and the Sovereign”, Jacques Derrida noticed and explored the trace of the animal – the wolf, the fox, the lion, etc. – in conceptualisations of sovereignty. The sovereign’s exceptional position beyond any need to answer or to respond, allied to a potential for both domination and excess, carry the mark of a deeply embedded distinction within Western thought, and more broadly within Abrahamic thought. This is the recurrent tendency within the Western heritage (and others) to insist on the application of a dichotomy – of an inviolable boundary between the human and the animal – one that treats all animals as equivalent in so far as they react rather than respond; have an inability to learn from history and its instituted imaginaries, to learn from its contingent, but consolidated stocks of know-how. As a consequence animals are thought to lack free-will and are to be understood as hard-wired, innately programmed organic machines – the absolute other of the human.
Another place we see this drawing of a stark boundary between the human and the animal is within the friend-enemy distinction; in certain ideologies of race, nation, class, ethnicity and gender that rely on a dehumanisation of the other as a way of removing that other from entitlement to hospitality or inclusion. Such ideologies typically mark and validate the exclusion of the other (human) by casting that other as animal-like or thing-like, as another type of life entirely or as something that lacks life. This raises a question as to why this split or dichotomy, with its entailments, is so entrenched, so resilient and so difficult to displace? That is the question that led me to speculate that a re-view of some salient aspects of Freud’s Rat Man case might prove of value in thinking into these issues of sovereignty, politics and ideologies of exclusion. For, in the case of the Rat Man we are offered a study of a self-sovereignty in crisis, organised around the signifier of the rat – the almost domestic, dirty animal, the uncanny, homely animal that is itself emblematic of the Freudian account of human subjectivity. It is this account of human subjectivity and its implications for a politics of inclusion that I am principally concerned with and I take up this theme in a manner that tugs at the edges of presumptions about sovereignty’s indivisibility. Entailed in this discussion is a concern with ontologies of the human and the political as these enter and inhabit – perhaps even haunt – subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

The case of the Rat Man has one of its beginnings when a young man - Ernst Lanzer as we come to learn much later (Freud names him Paul Lorenz) – goes on military manoeuvres as part of his military service requirement. Whilst there, an old army sergeant tells him of a terrible torture practised "in the East". “[T]he criminal was tied up … a pot was turned upside down on his buttocks…some rats were put into it… and they… bored their way in". (Freud 1987:47) As soon as he hears this tale, young Ernst has the terrible, but, for him, quite delicious thought that this torture should be performed on Gisela, the love of his life, and on his father, who has been dead for some time. Immediately he has these thoughts he feels dreadfully guilty, and yet he remains fearful that something terrible will happen to Gisela and to his father. So he invents a complicated ritual about catching trains, posting letters and getting people to hand money to each other. But this is no real answer to the dilemma of his desire, as the ritual is so internally contradictory that it preserves, unresolved, his dual passion to both harm and protect Gisela and his father. Soon after this experience this young man goes to visit Freud who, we are not surprised to learn, readily agrees to treat him.
The most striking aspect of this precipitating scene is that reference to “in the East”. With that one phrase the cruel captain invokes a whole fantasy structure about oriental despotism and the careless cruelty of the sovereign – he who dominates and whose every wish is a command. Consider the phrasing Freud uses to describe young Ernst’s face as he recounts the story of the cruel captain and the torture practiced “in the East”:

At all the more important moments while he was telling his story his face took on a very strange composite expression. I could only interpret it as one of horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware. (1987:47-48)

Here we have Freud’s major observation – that there is a subterranean process, an unconscious process that is in deadly conflict with this young man’s attempts to govern himself. It generates pleasure, but also fear and anxiety – fear for himself and for those he loves. It is exactly a Hobbesian fear – but this young man finds it impossible to sign up to the compact that would offer protection against the fear. He is, like all of us (only, in all likelihood, more so) a divided self, a centred subject, for whom the social contract is a sacrificial contract that he (and we) resent even as he (and we) assent.

As a very young boy (between the ages of three and four) Ernst had done something naughty – perhaps it was sexual, perhaps he bit someone. His father beat him as a punishment and in response the little boy flew into a rage and hurled abuse at his father. Having no “bad language” to use, he resorted to the names of common objects. So he screamed at his father “You lamp! You towel! You plate! and so on.” (1987:86) Although, on first impression, a rather cute story – we shouldn’t fail to notice that here we have a moment of terror, violence and fury. The resort to naming the father as a series of inanimate objects is itself a dehumanising move. This is reinforced by the indication that from this time forward Ernst was a coward – a coward not exactly out of fear, but rather “out of fear of the violence of his own rage”. (1987:86) In this we see a further instance of the fragility of his self-sovereignty.

If the young Ernst was almost lost for words of abuse – one of the major aspects of the case is the way a whole series of words come to signify the Rat Man’s unresolved ambivalence – what Freud terms a “regular rat currency”. (1987:94) Apart from scenes of biting, of worms in his anus, (like the rats of the story from “the East”) of rats at his father’s grave, of rats being killed, etc – there are all those little “rat” signifiers which –like rat’s tails- hang off a
series of words that accumulate in the analysis. So we have spielratte (referencing his father the gambler in colloquial German), we have hofrat (the new honorific attached to Fraulien Lina, the girl who was his nurse and object of desire when he was a child, with whom he took “a great many liberties” and who later married a judge, thereby transforming herself into Hofrat Lina), we have the worries about the cost of the analysis (in instalments or raten) and the corresponding condensation of ratten and raten – supposedly including Freud putting his daughter on the stairs – the girl, in Ernst’s dream, whose beautiful eyes turn to dung. (1987:94) In a massive condensation the signifier “rat” inserts itself throughout all aspects of the case. It is as if the words he didn’t have when he was a violent, but impotent, child have taken form, but remained unconscious, around the image and significance of the rat. In the process of attempting to become a civil subject, via mechanisms of identification, mirroring, repression, splitting and projection, the young boy who becomes the young man whom Freud meets, has established a boundary between the human and the animal that he subsequently uses – very unsuccessfully – to present himself as a loving son, a suitable husband and a competent worker. But isn’t this a characteristic of becoming a civil subject; a deeply sedimented, culturally, indeed civilisationally, ordained way? Aren’t these processes of abjection, that support the drawing of the categorical boundary between human and animal and friend and enemy, along with the dehumanising of the other as a means of distancing, disenfranchising and attacking that other – isn’t this exactly what is at stake when we posit ourselves as sovereign subjects?

In the case of the Rat Man (like all of us, according to this psychoanalytic understanding) this is played out in the place of the other scene which is beyond any intentional speech and which contains a knowledge that he does not know he has, the scene of the unconscious. Even though this other scene is beyond any intentional speech, it slowly unfolds and displays itself as the Rat Man speaks. It inheres within his speech and slowly declares itself in its very insistence and repetition. Of course, the Rat Man attempts to intentionally reveal himself to Freud, but he actually says more than he intends. He intends to tell Freud about how he is a loving son, a loyal fiancée and an ambitious law student who somehow finds himself assaulted by thoughts and feelings that are quite alien to him, and that he has to work very hard to subdue and keep at bay. But in the very process of telling this story about himself he gives himself away, as it were. There is something in his speech that insists and persists, that repeats and eventually is heard; first by Freud and then by the Rat Man himself. This is “the
regular rat currency", as Freud puts it; that accumulation of rat signifiers that keep recurring in his speech.

In a now famous comment, after considering the assault on human narcissism contained within the discoveries of Copernicus and Darwin, Freud reflected on what he regarded as the third, and most profound blow to human narcissism; the blow contained within psychoanalysis itself:

[T]hese two discoveries - that the life of our sexual instincts cannot be wholly tamed, and that mental processes are in themselves unconscious and only reach the ego and come under its control through incomplete and untrustworthy perceptions - these two discoveries amount to a statement that the ego is not master in its own house. (1917:135)

In the context of this discussion, it is worth quoting how Freud understands the relationship between narcissism and our relation to Nature. Just a few lines before the above, Freud writes:

In the course of the development of civilisation man acquired a dominating position over his fellow creatures in the animal kingdom. Not content with this supremacy, however, he began to place a gulf between his nature and theirs. He denied the possession of reason to them, and to himself he attributed an immortal soul, and made claims to a divine descent which permitted him to break the bond of community between him and the animal kingdom. (1917:135)

Freud tells us, then, that the ego is not master in its own house. Moreover he tells us that humanity, in the history of civilisation, comes to break the bond of community with the animal and to place a gulf between human nature and animal nature. It is this gulf that the Rat Man gets trapped in and that we all remain susceptible to.

The formation of the subject takes place in a world of self and others, a world of bodies and parts of bodies, of sensations, memories and phantasies. It proceeds through processes of abjection, incorporation, identification, internalisation, mirroring, repression and the entry into culture and language. To achieve a capacity to speak and act in the world we come to exercise sovereignty over ourselves – but this is always subject to disruption by the unconscious. Our apparent sovereignty, then, is achieved at a cost – the repudiation of aspects of self and others, of bodies and parts of bodies, of sensations, memories and phantasies, of desires that cannot be incorporated into the organisation of the ‘I/me’ that I take myself to be. This positing of an ‘I/me’ emerges from the capacity to locate or situate the ‘I’ that I take
myself to be within a symbolic order as a speaking and acting subject who has some capacity
to decide, to choose, to respond. What we have seen is that this positing of an ‘I/me’ that can
act, choose and respond involves the splitting of the subject. Part of what is split off – part of
what becomes unfamiliar or uncanny – is those aspects of myself and my relation to others
that have been repudiated and repressed in order to establish an ego or “I”. These repressed,
split-off aspects remain as part of my unconscious but they resist recognition by the “I” that I
take myself to be. However, they have been preserved as part of my psychic organization – a
repressed part – and they insist on some form of representation. Typically they are recognised
as other than me – as strangers or enemies. Or as the uncanny. As Freud writes:

> When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of
> the “double” being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since
> surmounted - a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The double
> has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned
> into demons. (1990:358)

If this doubling and splitting persists –as it tends to do – then the only recognition I can give
to these repudiated, repressed parts of myself is to see them as the disliked, hated or despised
aspects of others whom I regard as unlike me – strangers, foreigners or those whom I can
successfully construe as different. In this way what we broadly regard as dehumanising,
stereotyping and scapegoating of others proceeds. So, Freud concludes that “this uncanny is
in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the
mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”
(1990:363-364)

It is this thought that Kristeva draws on when she proposes that we are “strangers to
ourselves”. (Kristeva 1991) She goes on to suggest that to remain as such - to remain
strangers to ourselves - in the contemporary world of interdependency, globalisation and
mass migration, is to remain in a psychic state that supports aggressive nationalism,
dehumanising racism and ethnic particularism as defences against the anxiety generated by
the presence of the imagined-as-other within our familiar territory. In the contemporary
globalising world, in what Ulrich Beck has termed the global risk society, the presence and
persistence of othering mechanisms - serving as psychic and cultural defences against the
anxieties generated by uncertainty, risk and change - is itself a major hazard, a source of
conflict, war and destruction. Yet these othering mechanisms play such a central role in the
formation of the “I” that I take myself to be – in the development of our psychic structures–
that it is very difficult to see how they might be displaced. Moreover, these same othereing mechanisms – as I am terming them – have a deeply-sedimented place within the Western (and, perhaps, Abrahamic) traditions. They are, at once, both subjective and culturally instituted. As such they constitute one predominant way of dealing with insecurity. As we have seen, this splitting or othering process is evident in the recurring dichotomies between the human and the animal and in the friend-enemy distinction. Supported by this deeply embedded cultural imaginary, the split and decentred subject leans on and exploits such sharp distinctions, and the culturally available splitting mechanisms, in order to appear, to itself and others, as sovereign. In the case of the Rat Man, his very failure to manage this trick of self-cultivation reveals its inner logic. But there is another aspect to this. Where does sovereignty lie in the case of the furious, enraged boy who curses his father in epithets that suggest he doesn’t have the (im)proper words to say? Surely it lies, if anywhere, in that phantasy that turns him into a coward – the phantasy that if once let loose his fury would annihilate his father. It is this sovereign phantasy, like a scene from the seraglio, that, through a reversal, plunges him into a life of fearfulness for those whom he loves.

Enough has been said to highlight that the location of sovereignty is undecidable – because it is, despite its own phantasy of itself, decentred. Sovereignty is, at once, within and without the law and thoroughly dominated by the friend-enemy distinction, due to its very need to construe itself as self-identical and centred. Is the Rat Man sovereign when he subjects himself to the law of the father, or when he asserts his aggressivity and violence in defiance of the father? Or should we pay attention to that other composite scene, so resonant of Hamlet, in which the Rat Man, having studied assiduously, as if to please his dead father, in the hour after midnight opens the door to his apartment and inspects his genitals in the mirror, as if to flaunt his sexuality against the will of the father. In re-telling this scene Freud writes:

This crazy conduct becomes intelligible if we suppose that he was acting as though he expected a visit from his father at the hour when ghosts are abroad. He had on the whole been idle at his work during his father’s lifetime, and this had often been a cause of annoyance to his father. And now that he was returning as a ghost, he was to be delighted at finding his son hard at work. But it was impossible that his father should be delighted at the other part of his behaviour; in this therefore he must be defying him. Thus, in a single unintelligible act he gave expression to the two sides of his relation with his father. (1987:84-85)

Such instances illustrate the very antagonism that lies at the heart of the sovereign subject. At the political level the need to ward off, or defend against, a self-recognition as decentred
subject, as a stranger to oneself, readily turns into the friend-enemy distinction. This leads us to imagine, as its displacement and replacement, the possibility, indeed the urgency, of a beyond of sovereignty; perhaps what Derrida has termed a democracy to come and what Kristeva discusses as a new cosmopolitan ethic in a world of nations without nationalism. (Derrida 2002:205; Kristeva 1993)

Footnotes:

1 This argument is developed in Cash (2003), “Conclusion: politics, history and the unconscious” in Joy Damousi & Robert Reynolds, (eds.) History on the Couch.

2 I was fortunate to be able to attend Jacques Derrida’s seminar on “The Beast and The Sovereign”, presented at the University of California-Irvine in 2002. As yet, little from this seminar has been published. Derrida’s Rogues: Two Essays on Reason is, perhaps, the best available reference to date. However, see especially his forthcoming “The transcendentual “stupidity” [“bêtise”] of Man and the becoming-animal according to Deleuze” in Derrida/Deleuze: Psychoanalysis, edited by Gabriele Schwab and to be published by Columbia University Press.

3 For the classic statement of the friend-enemy distinction, see Carl Schmitt’s The Concept of the Political.

References:


