

THE OBVIOUS OF PREJUDICE, AN UNAVOIDABLE TRANSCULTURAL PROBLEM

Silvia Amati Sas

The importance of the problem of the “stranger” and the principles (ideological, juridical, political) that define it are related to the great migrations of people within the globalised world. These themes are among the “new discomforts of society” (Kaës) and refer to the new psychoanalytic paradigm (Puget), which is the problem of links, alliances and unconscious pacts, relevant to the subject’s inevitable dependence and participation to belonging groups, and to the prejudices related to them.

I intend to propose prejudice as one of the non-discussed and non-conflictual subjective premises inside us, which, even if perceived, are not often represented, or become the object of critical thought because one’s own prejudices are “obvious” for the subject!

From an etymological point of view, the linguists tells us that “obvious” comes from the Latin “ob-vius” and from the verb “ob-viare”: from “via”, the way everyone can find: clear, manifest, evident. In the dictionary, “to obviate” means: to anticipate, prevent or eliminate difficulties by effective measures. Putting these ideas together, we can say that we feel as obvious the common way each of us thinks that everybody takes to avoid something negative.

We can consider “obviousness” as a background to subjective life, as a necessary illusion of the complementarity of contexts, where uncertainties and primitive catastrophic anxieties are deposed and immobilised, outside oneself (Freud, 1919; Bleger, 1968). We are in the realm of Sandler’s “background of safety”, the necessary feeling of the coincidence of the subject’s perceptions with those of a whole; an illusion of familiarity with the spatio-temporal and affective environment, which makes it appear evident, “natural”, taken for granted! This profound and naïve expectation makes the complementarity of contexts so much taken for granted that, when the subject is placed in extreme conditions, he/she becomes able to “adapt to whatsoever” (Amati Sas, 1985), that is, to consider as obvious even the most degrading and dangerous circumstances, which become paradoxically familiar, even if they are profoundly disturbing. We can see that, at a certain psychological level, we incorporate the context with no choice, nor conflict. This does not mean that we deny reality; on the contrary: it rather seems to be an introjection of reality such as it is (for example, the victims of an earthquake settle in the new reality incorporating themselves into the context); catastrophic news (earthquakes, boat sinking, bomb explosions), which provoke one’s perplexity, the day after become something

obvious in the transubjective and common perception of reality (and is accentuated by the undifferentiating style of mass-media!)

Manipulation of social contexts aimed at the acquisition of power (through terror propaganda, or other ways of traumatic violence) influence the common need for certainties and safety, provoking in everyone the need to conform to the common thought, without one's awareness. The use and abuse of social manipulation has become a tacitly accepted use, therefore it is not easy to deal with the social conformism generated by it.

For instance, in reference to foreigners, we may easily incorporate a climate of xenophobic propaganda, which, as historical experience shows, can dangerously degenerate into a racist or ethnocentric prejudice. The "prejudice about the stranger" is a transubjective phenomenon that can be found anywhere, in all cultures and traditions, and can be easily spread in a mass culture.

In a transcultural IPA working group, in which I have participate, we had a unanimous agreement on the universality of prejudice, which is present in every person's mind, in relation to group belonging, either some abstract belonging (ideological, religious), or to the concrete participation in different kinds of belonging (family, clan, tribe, country etc.).

Prejudice, as a form of thought, belongs to the order of preconceptions that have not yet became judgements. Many prejudices are convictions that will not easily develop into critical thought. We can "think through thoughts, or think through convictions" says Berenstein (1986). When we think through convictions, we ignore the existence of conflict or doubt, or that someone else might think differently. These two ways of thinking coexist in the subject and, necessarily, in intersubjective dialogue.

The developmental origin of prejudice may be the so called "eighth month anxiety", or "stranger's anxiety", which could be a first observable pattern of the feeling of belonging to the familial group, in relation with somebody else situated "outside" of it. The "eighth month stranger" becomes exquisite bearer/depositary of the unknown and of the new, provoking perplexity, amazement, estrangement, but also curiosity, accompanied by the expectation both of recognising the other as a fellow human being and to avoid being acquainted with its difference. This emotional signal connected with the discovery of the other situated outside the family, offers a psychic organiser in evolution. From there on, a process starts, repetitive and in constant transformation, which concerns self-continuity, in relation with the others outside the familiar self. What is expressed, at an object relation level, as a process of "separation/individuation", becomes, in the realm of belonging, a sense of inclusion/exclusion of the other that may establish in the child as a prejudice if the family attributes negative qualities like dirtiness, ugliness or aggressiveness to the "stranger".

"Stranger", though having the same etymological root as "extraneous" and of "strange",

belongs to the field of the representable, symbolisable or thinkable (as much as the idea of family), whereas “strange” implies affective aspects that are more primary and perturbing, signalled by feelings of strangeness, fear of losing identity integration, “fear of breakdown” (Winnicott), the “terror without name”, fear of becoming undifferentiated.

Social prejudices like racism, or anti-Semitism, are historically determined and derive from public decisions of exclusion, which were taken by institutional powers. As an example, we may take the categorisation of the Jews as “infamous”, made by the Church in the Middle Age, through edicts in which they were compared to criminals, paedophiles, etc. As the historian Todeschini tells us, the infamous were excluded from society; they had “no fame”, which means no belongings. The institutional origin of these arbitrary concepts is lost in the mists of time, but they are handed down as actual convictions.

We may see that the great collective prejudices are “containers” of arbitrary and perturbing ideas, which are taken as “obvious” certainties.

We psychoanalysts are immersed, as much as our patients, in a mass-mediatic society, which influences us. How can we keep enough interest and alarm in social facts not to take them as obvious and eventually include them in the analytical dialogue?

The psychoanalytical distance, foreseen by a position of neutrality, may lead to the adoption of a trivialising attitude of defensive ambiguity, caused by the fear both of an open conflictuality, or an ideological compromise towards the patient.

Nonetheless, the suggested technical cautiousness of neutrality must not prevent us from thinking, because if neutrality should turn into prejudice (conscious or unconscious), this could induce us to “turn a blind eye” (J. Steiner) and to accept as obvious things that are ethically unacceptable.

Maybe we can add to Bion’s statement “no memory, nor desire” also “nor prejudice”? Thus psychoanalytic neutrality may not only consist in the indication of suspending judgement, but also in that of “suspending prejudice”: a claim even more difficult from Bion’s ones!

To understand how much the context of the present social reality is included in ourselves, as much as we are included in it, we need to widen the criteria pertaining to the intra-psychoic and intersubjective world, to those concerning the group, or shared subjectivity (transsubjectivity); this does not imply giving up the classic transference interpretations of the infantile unconscious past: it is, instead, a matter of more solidly observing the present and the actual pre-conscious socio-cultural shared reality.

My starting point in respect to social reality has been in relation to patients who suffered the consequences of political violence; the classic psychoanalytic theories did not help

enough my interpretation problems, but I found a useful dynamic way of understanding through José Bleger's model, which explain the subjective dependence on contexts (objects, institutions, etc.).

His concepts of ambiguity and “deposition of ambiguity” in the external contexts can be applied to the comprehension of the psycho-dynamic of socio-political violence and also of other forms of violence perpetrated within families and institutions.

“Ambiguity” is the clinical expression of an “ambiguous nucleus”, a residue of “primary undifferentiation” that remains within mature personality; Bleger's sound premise is that this “agglutinated nucleus of indiscriminate contents” cannot be born by the Ego and, therefore, it is compulsorily projected and deposited into external “depositories”, through a “symbiotic link”. We can imagine the ambiguous nucleus as a mass of existential uncertainties, undifferentiations, indefinitions, projected and deposited outside the Self, determining an obligatory unconscious dependence on external objects, contexts or institutions. This unconscious dependence on the external world returns feelings of safety and belonging to the subject.

When external depositories of the ambiguous nucleus are altered or lost, (due to natural or provoked causes, like exile, mourning, inflicted violence, etc.) ambiguity is suddenly re-introjected into the Ego and provokes different forms of anxiety (panic, perplexity, estrangement, confusion). But, right away, the ambiguous nucleus is obligatorily re-projected in the present context, with the consequent deposition, adaptation and conformity to the new situation.

Bleger (1972) adds the “ambiguous position” to the two classic Kleinian positions. The ambiguous position is a pre-conflictual, pre-schizo-paranoid position, characterised by the accommodation to circumstances and the darkening of affections. In the intrapsychic dynamics, the ambiguous position is a transitional position, which gives the Ego not only the time to find other defences, but also to create novel discriminations, novel antinomies and which, in favourable circumstances, can allow intuition and discovery of new forms of comprehension and expression. Whenever external conditions are suddenly and traumatically changed, turning to an ambiguous position becomes a “major defence”. In these cases, the mimetic, plastic, oscillatory and malleable quality of ambiguity protects, through adaptation, obnubilation and indifference, the rest of the personality, which seems to remain “suspended”, giving the Ego time to activate other mechanisms of defence and resistance.

In the case of persistent external violence (both evident and hidden), ambiguity appears as a transsubjective “state of ambiguity”, an alteration in the capability of using critical thinking and of alarm mechanisms, what Eigen called a “diminution of the sense of catastrophe”. In a state of ambiguity, both the subject and the group may become easily penetrable and suggestible by ideological speeches, which can lead to the installation of paranoid convictions

and prejudices.

I consider that defence through ambiguity is a specific reaction to violence, either in the subject or in the group, and provokes what I have called an “adaptation to whatsoever”, which may convey social conformism and prejudices.

Somehow, each subject has an opposing reaction to conformism; this is shown by the shame or strangeness, by the need “to choose how to belong” (J. Puget), or by the concern for some Other, an “object to be saved” (Amati Sas, 1985) as can be found in the psychotherapy of extreme situations.

The three “spaces of subjectivity” (Berenstein, Puget, Kaës) help us to think the social as included in the psychic and therefore pertaining to the psychoanalytic field. In the intrapsychic space, the space of objectual relations, prejudices may appear as antinomies of the schizo-paranoid type, but they actually are convictions of an arbitrary and imprecise content, with the appearance of certainties. In the inter-subjective space, prejudice has a preventing function to control fear of exclusion, or to protect one’s own belongings from external influences (for example, in a couple, the “mother in law” prejudice).

In considering inter-subjective space, Berenstein and Puget bring forward some irrelevant ideas about the always present diversity of the other, who, beyond identifications and projections, offers by his/her actual presence, an irreducible alterity (otredad, ajenidad). Briefly, the other’s alterity poses the problem of tolerance of diversity, which is at the basis of prejudice.

Common and shared aspects of prejudice are situated in the transsubjective space. At this level, I wish to compare two somehow similar “common and shared” mechanisms: the “adaptation to whatsoever”, which I have observed in the treatment of the victims of violence, and the “denegative pact”, as described by Kaës.

The “adaptation to whatsoever” originates in the unconscious obligatory deposit, (without any choice), of ambiguity in common shared contexts; the “denegative pact” implies an unconscious sharing by the group of a certain view of reality, which leaves aside, or denies, other aspects of this reality.

An evident example of these two phenomena, which belong to everybody’s experience, is the 11th of September 2001, when New York twin towers were destroyed. We may say that this fact provoked, through the mass-media, a universal feeling of estrangement, as if the twin towers had become the framework, or context, of each one’s and everybody’s life all around the world. This peculiar situation refers to the subjective dynamic of contexts, which are perceived only when they abruptly change. On that traumatic occasion, the first moment of estrangement, perplexity and immobility were followed by the need to give a reason and a sense to that terrifying event. In a common status of post-traumatic ambiguity, we could

accept or adapt the definition of “new war” coined by Bush.

This unconscious agreement is an example of a “denegative pact”. But what is denied by this pact? “Radical negativity - Kaës says - a void, a nameless terror”.

With the very familiar symbolic definition of facts, that of “war” or “new war”, Bush offered a definition that denied the “terrifying novelty” (H. Arendt) of the fact.

In everyone’s adaptation to that definition of a new reality, we may see a “denegative pact”, aimed at avoiding the perception of our unconscious acceptance of things as they are, an “adaptation to whatsoever”, main consequence of abrupt violence.

At the level of the transsubjective space, we can also approach prejudices thinking about the differences between belonging and identity, through the description of two different forms of identity: belonging identity and integration identity (Bleger). When the sense of identity is built on belonging, there is a minor tendency to relative comparison and more space for convictions, prejudice or fanaticism. In an “integrated identity”, the subject’s various belongings have been already processed and there may be a major tendency to comparison and think through judgements and not through convictions or prejudices.

Some prejudices are connected to transgenerational belongings, relevant to family or social class, others are openly ideological or religious; anyhow, there are endless possible belongings. In the psychoanalytic session, the interpretation on the patient’s belongings is a subtle problem, since they constitute an important part of the narcissistic Self, not as much at the level of the Ideal Ego, as on the Ideal of the Self!

A prejudice thinking may appear in the therapist in a counter-transferral way, when some of the patient’s belongings are confronted with some susceptible spot in his/her personal identity.

I will give an example that shows the obvious aspects of prejudice and its eventual insight through estrangement.

In a Latin-American panel in the Chicago IPA congress, a particular counter-transferral situation was presented. In the course of a psychotherapeutic treatment, a psychoanalyst of Jewish origin (Dr. Grinberg, of the Mexican Society) found out, much to her surprise, that her patient was the granddaughter of a Nazi, who had been a staunch partaker of Hitler’s movement. The psychoanalyst perceived a strong discomfort in herself and was convinced that she had to stop the treatment, feeling that it was impossible for her to carry on the work undertaken. Her dilemma consisted mainly on her Jewish identity and her conviction that, in this situation, it was impossible for her to maintain a psychoanalytic “neutrality”. Nevertheless, she had faced an ethical struggle related to her responsibility in the continuity of the psychotherapy, which she considered highly necessary to her patient.

The perception of her uneasiness led her to the insight of a prejudice of familiar origin (as a result of her family's previous generation experience), which she had not had the opportunity to elaborate before from a professional point of view. In spite of her desire to remain neutral, she perceived that she was inclined to share her family's judgement on the Nazis as an insurmountable prejudice with no possible solution. But the concept of analytical neutrality may sometimes function as a prejudice, as a conviction that might not allow us to think, leading to an impasse. However, the discomfort and sense of responsibility of the analyst led her to analyse her feelings and to find answers. The therapeutic treatment continued.

We see that the technical indication of neutrality may be defensively felt as an imposition, which does not allow the therapist's free creativity. It is interesting to remember with J. Sandler, that neutrality is "dynamic and fluctuating" and that it is "continuously lost and recovered". He considers neutrality as "an elastic concept complementing the analyst's fluctuating attention and answering ability".

The clinical example I have reported allows several observations. It is not irrelevant to say where in the world and in which historical context this kind of problems arise. The present imperceptible common ideology climate pervades the psychotherapeutic situation; this includes both protagonists' biography, the general cultural "climate" in the place where they live, and even the freedom of thought allowed by that specific historical period.

The Nazis-Jews problem is, for both of them, of transgenerational order. We understood later that the patient had chosen a Jewish psychoanalyst due to a "positive" prejudice, since she considered Jewish therapists, because of their European origin, more trustworthy, when compared with the local Latin-American ones!! Quite an entanglement of prejudices!

It may appear evident that, for a Jew, the German Nazi can be seen as a hostile "other", or, by definition, an enemy or a stranger. But, in this particular case, I think that the psychoanalyst's reaction of estrangement was not caused just by the appearance of the hostile stranger in the session's material; instead, it was due to the fact that she realised that her own "strange" and counter-transferal hostility towards the patient's origin was not to be related to their present therapeutic relation.

To perceive one's own estrangement opens to a dilemma: if what we perceive as so obvious and evident, is fair or unfair, true or untrue, is a mere conviction or a real judgement.

The feeling of strangeness signals the return of split or/and removed aspects of ourselves. It signals the return of a magma of traumatic and perturbing memories that have been transmitted through familial traditions, a prejudice which needs to be worked through, a dilemma to be transformed into a conflict which we can think, discuss, and eventually resolve.

This does not mean that "prejudice" ceases to be egosintonic; rather, that it has been

recognised and considered in its actual consequences, so to allow us to continue thinking and make decisions.

I insist in saying that for this psychoanalyst, it was the insight of her strange feelings that let her realise the intensity of her own unconscious participation in the prejudice of her familial group (Di Castro) and the fact that she had to think and choose a new way to belong to her original group.

At the basis of this familial prejudice, there were the traumatic memories of a huge social disaster, which constitutes, in Yolanda Gampel's opinion, a "background of uncanny", a transgenerationally transmitted perturbing background, where safety is not any longer taken for granted, since what has become obvious is the estranging destroying power of the other.

However, if we look at the struggle for existence made by the survivors of social calamities, we may see that those people's main need was to recuperate the appearance of normality, the obvious aspects of everyday's life; this big effort was being made to spare next generations the catastrophic reality of what man is capable of doing to other human beings. Unfortunately, whatever the effort is to make life seem normal, this does not prevent the transgenerational transmission of uncanny feelings through discourse and ambiguous behaviour (H. Faimberg's generations' telescope).

The case cited above made me think of my own counter-transference prejudices, when, in the '70ies, I started, against my will, to deal with highly estranging psychotherapeutic situations. I remember I had asked myself how I could take care of a patient that had been capable of establishing emotional ties with her torturer. I guess this was just one of the usual obvious moralistic prejudices we may have towards other people's sexual behaviour.

Dealing with these patients, I went beyond my possible prejudices: first of all to consider the cruelty of torture contexts and of the methodically inflicted means of alienation applied by the torturers. Many years of therapeutic experience with these patients, helped me to understand that the familiarity sought by the torturers with their woman victims, meant: an "imposed consent", a specific and sinister treatment directed to the woman prisoners, to obtain their compromise, in order to test their degree of alienation.

What I have been able to observe during the therapeutic process with these women, was their shame, estrangement, confusion and sense of guilt, since they had, towards themselves, the same cultural prejudices I could perceive in me. For as extremely strange and paradoxical that may appear, we tend to judge the most perverse institutionalised situations as facts pertaining to normal private life; for this reason, I believe that, "contextualisation" is an essential therapeutic problem when we approach our patients prejudices or our own.

How can we overcome prejudice coming from the familial and cultural Super-Ego and

acquire the freedom needed to take into due consideration the enormous anomaly of a given experience, instead of focusing on the sense of guilt and indignity of the victim, which were intentionally provoked to destroy the victim's ideological belonging and moral integrity? Besides, these patients had to face, the meanness and prejudices present in their current environment, since, outside the therapeutic process, the world is not always empathetic, nor supportive. Not even political movements, or human rights organisations are able to remove the cultural prejudices that do not allow us to observe sexual abuse with indignation and equanimity.

In the psychotherapy of these patients, I find it essential to be able to understand the perverse context in all its nuances; trying not to mix in our interpretation the infantile past unconscious as being the origin of the present problems. This idea can also be applied to other violent situations of manipulated social exclusion, like mobbing, or other situations with a perverted aim (as, for example, in the case of a patient of mine, who had been the victim of a paedophilic organisation, aimed at turning its victims into prostitutes).

In these therapies we follow an “ethics of concern”, the preoccupation for the other's existence and destiny. We need to use our own indignation. In the analysis of each victim, we have to challenge the misunderstandings that infiltrate everybody's transsubjective life. Undoubtedly, we cannot change reality; we can only help that single person to come out of the conviction of being forever occupied by his/her perturbing traumatic experience, and offer him/her the opportunity to acquire the instruments needed to proceed with his/her life and self-analysis.

Let's go back to the problem of the stranger-foreigner that concerns the whole Europe. This problem gets more serious when the stranger who does not possess a permit of stay is declared a delinquent (an infamous), or, even worst, a non-person, who can be left adrift, just because he/she is a foreigner (“Are we a ‘who’ or are we a ‘what’”, asked H. Arendt). It may happen, though, quite curiously, that those who consider it correct to liken clandestines to delinquents, experience situations in which they recognise in themselves the opposite attitude; similarly, those who do not seem to take part in this prejudice, might realise they actually do.

To discover in ourselves an unsuspected prejudice, might cause estrangement, but it essentially makes us feel ashamed. Shame implies a conflict in respect to thoughts or attitudes we did not want, or did not believe to have. We often don't realise our conflict and ambiguously defend ourselves from unpleasant affects with a certain degree of indifference. In the anti-foreigner political propaganda, there is a strong anticipation of dangers, job loss, threat to the territory, possible changing of habits, religion, etc. It is not easy to make thinkable our unconscious participation in the collective fears. These fears influence our behaviours and our opinions more than we believe.

We don't usually talk about our own prejudices and, if we do, we are not willingly listened to, since this would interrupt the heimlich, the "safety feeling", the comfortable compromises and "denegative pacts" established with the whole.

Talking about our own prejudices, I found interesting André Green's opinion, as expressed in an interview granted to Maurice Corcos in 2006, when he said: "Secretly, I must admit some unpleasant things about myself: sometimes I realise I am a racist. What can I do? Expiate? No, ... the only way to cope with racism is to fight in order to obtain laws that prevent from its consequences. Thus, it doesn't matter whether "I love or I do not love" my feelings, since there is a law that protects the people I don't love ..."

I agree with Green in that we must fight to have laws against racism, but I don't think that the eventual existence of such laws may solve the subjective problem caused by our prejudices towards the others or the others' prejudices towards us. Instead, I believe that psychoanalytic observation of these difficult problems, in the intimacy of the therapeutic session, or through group experience might open a way to understand the public aspects of prejudice and of its manipulations.

Bibliography

- Amati Sas, S. (1989). Récupérer la honte. In: J. Puget, R. Käes et al. (a cura di) *Violenza di Stato e Psicoanalisi*, Gnocchi) Napoli.
- Amati Sas, S. (1994). *Etica e trans-soggettività*. Rivista di Psicoanalisi 1994, XL, 4.
- Amati Sas, S. (1996). *L'ovvio, l'abitudine e il pensiero*. Setting 1.
- Amati Sas S. (2005). *La transsubjectivité entre cadre et ambiguïté*. Journée du 5 avril dédié à l'oeuvre de R. Kaës, Aix-le-Bains. Non pubblicato.
- Benvenisti, E. (1976). *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, chapitre 7 - Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Berenstein, I. (1986). *Acerca de las convicciones*.
- Berenstein, I. et Puget, J. (1997). "Lo vincular". Paidós, Bs As.
- Bleger, J. (1972). "Simbiosi e ambiguità" (1994, Ed. Lauretana).
- Borensztejn, C.L. (2009). *El enactment como concepto clínico convergente de teorías divergentes*, Congresso IPA, Chicago.

Corcos, M. et A. Green (2006). "Associations (presque) libres d'un psychanalyste", Albin

Michel, 2006.

Di Castro, R. (2008). "Testimoni del non-provato", Carocci.

Eigen, M. (1985). Towards Bion's starting point: between catastrophe and faith. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 66, 321-330.

Freud, S. (1919). Il perturbante. *O.S.F.*, Vol. 9, 81-114.

Grymberg, M. (2009). Prejuicio, contratransferencia y trasmision en el vinculo transferencial - Panel Congresso IPA Chicago.

Kaës, R. (1989). Le pacte dénégatif dans les ensembles transsubjectifs. Dans: «Le négatif, figures et modalités». A. Missenard et al., Dunod.

Kaës, R. (2009). «Les Alliances Inconscientes», Dunod.

Parens, H. and others (2007). "The Future of Prejudice". Ed. Aronson.

Puget, J. e Wender, R. (1982). Analista y pacientes en mundos superpuestos. *Psicoanálisis*, IV, 3.

Puget, J. (2009). Panel on Prejudice - IPA Committee on prejudice (including anti-Semitism) Working Group - Janine Puget (chair)

Sandler, J. (1959). The background of safety (1987), in: "From Safety to Super Ego", Karnak.

Ventrici, G. (2004). Transubjetividad: un termino con historia, un termino que hizo historia y un termino histórico. En: "Pensamiento vincular: un recorrido de medio siglo". Publicacion Asociacion Argentina de Psicologia y Psicoterapia de Grupo.

Winnicott. D.W. (1974). Fear of breakdown. *Int. R. Psycho-Anal.* 1, 103-107.