

What are you thirsty for?
What are you hungry for?
Psychodrama and consumer society

Valéria Cristina de Albuquerque Brito

University Center UDF

e-mail: valeriacruzinaabrito@gmail.com

Revista Brasileira de Psicodrama.2012. 20(1),13-23.

Abstract

The present paper addresses the role of psychodrama in the field of psychotherapies in contemporary Brazilian society. Based on a sociocultural discussion of human suffering and how it has been understood, overcome, and treated in different periods of recent history, the author advocates for psychodrama and its potential in contemporary society as a discourse of resistance against the homogenization of modes of existence.

Keywords: Psychotherapy, consumerism, psychodrama, post-industrial society

A gente não quer só dinheiro
A gente quer dinheiro e felicidade
A gente não quer só dinheiro
A gente quer inteiro e não pela metade¹
(Comida, Arnaldo Antunes, Marcelo Fromer and Sérgio Britto)

In these postmodern times, much has been said about the harms of consumerism and its derivations. All this criticism gives way to a trivialized discourse that can hinder the rigorous and necessary critique of the deviations and excesses of postindustrial society. Within the scope of psychotherapies, especially psychodrama, it is imperative to question how the notion of subjectivity emerges from this context and the process through which health or subjective well-being can be transformed into a consumer good. The present essay addresses these issues from a socio-economic perspective, following the Morenian motto of asking questions that lead to more questions.

To this end, I request your collaboration, dear reader, with the writing format I have adopted in order to make my arguments more consistent. I employ references to Moreno's work, as well as others who can help paint a picture of contemporary society, namely, Costa (2005), Freedheim et. al. (1992) and Mancebo (2002). These authors are

¹ In English: We don't want just the money/We want money and happiness/We don't want just the money/We don't want part of it, we want it all.

included in the references but are not identified throughout the text. This choice was made for the sake of maintaining readability, as even though the sociocultural dimension is the backdrop of this discussion, it is not the focal point. Furthermore, the outlook I present on these themes is a mosaic of these readings over time. Thus, it is impossible to determine their exact origins.

First, I discuss the emergence of psychotherapies, exclusively psychological methods of understanding and treating human suffering, within the context of the development of the human sciences in the early 20th century, demonstrating the originality of the therapy proposed by Moreno. Next, I expound on the history of Brazilian psychodrama, pointing out some of its specificities, and conclude with some considerations about the contributions of the new generation of Brazilian psychodramatists, taking into account contemporary Brazilian society.

SUBJECT SUPPOSED TO KNOW

Psychotherapies are one of the products of modernity and of the idea of human beings as subjects. According to the dictionary (MICHAELIS on line, 2011) subject, or sujeito in Portuguese is defined as² :

Adj. (lat subjectu) 1) That is or is underneath. 2) Who was subjected to the power of the strongest; dominated, slave, subject, submissive. 3) That is easily subject to the will of others; docile, obedient. 4) That conforms; who is guided by someone else or something. 5) Adversarial, constrained. 6) That it has no action of its own; captive, tame, enslaved. 7) Committed to obey; dependent; subject. 8) That you are under an obligation to submit. 9) That can give place, occasion or opportunity to something. 10) Which has disposition or tendency to; dare 11) Who is naturally disposed, inclined or accustomed to something. 12) That it is capable of producing certain effects. 13) Exposed to anything, by its nature or situation: Subject to deprivation. sm 1) Gram. and Philosophy. Being, to which is attributed a predicate. 2) Philos. The being that knows. 3) Undetermined individual who is not named in any speech or family conversation. 4) Man, individual, person.

In other words, the term “subject”, both in its original use as an adjective and in its current use as a noun, does not present a universal and reified value; it is a term that

² Considering that the definition of subject in English popular dictionaries do not emphasize the word Latin origin brought under” the author decided to translate the original citation from Portuguese dictionary: 1) Que está ou fica por baixo. 2) Que se sujeitou ao poder do mais forte; dominado, escravo, súdito, submisso. 3) Que se sujeita facilmente à vontade de outrem; dócil, obediente. 4) Que se conforma; que se deixa guiar por outrem ou por alguma coisa. 5) Adstrito, constrangido. 6) Que não tem ação própria; cativo, domado, escravizado. 7) Comprometido a obedecer; dependente; submetido. 8) Que se acha na obrigação de se submeter. 9) Que pode dar lugar, ocasião ou ensejo a alguma coisa. 10) Que tem disposição ou tendência para; atreito. 11) Que está naturalmente disposto, inclinado ou habituado a alguma coisa. 12) Que é de natureza a produzir certos efeitos. 13) Exposto a qualquer coisa, pela sua natureza ou situação: Sujeito a privações. sm 1) Gram. e Lóg. Ser, ao qual se atribui um predicado. 2) Filos. O ser que conhece. 3) Indivíduo indeterminado que não se nomeia em qualquer discurso ou conversação familiar. 4) Homem, indivíduo, pessoa. (<http://michaelis.uol.com.br/moderno/portugues/index.php?lingua=portugues-portugues&palavra=sujeito>)

denominates not all, but one of the many modalities of human existence. The use of the term “subject”, and consequently, the word “subjectivity”, to designate human beings points to the social-historical specificity of human experience. Employing this term is to adopt the model of human life style that spread from Europe across the rest of the world and that established itself as the hegemonic way of life in Western culture. In the Western model of life, which became hegemonic in the Modern Age, humans are defined as isolated units, individuals. They are no longer considered as members of clans, tribes and families.

Paradoxically, this individual, who is considered freer from the atavistic mandates of nature, is also more dependent on the work of others, and more reliant on the care of strangers and the ward of abstract entities, or State institutions.

The subject that emerges in the Contemporary Age is defined as the protagonist of a life grounded in external, but above all, internal conflict. We are divided between what we can and what we should do, between what we desire and what is expected of us. As subjects of modern Western culture, we have the freedom to be and to choose; however, we are also required to appear/seem and have/obtain. And, most of the times, even though we have acquired the material conditions that allow for privacy, we experience these inter and intrapersonal conflicts under the gaze of many, under various agencies of control, in the vastness of urban life.

As a corollary of this triumph of modernity, i.e., the power to conquer nature and ourselves, the sciences were developed, with their promises of progress through knowledge and technology, or, ultimately, promises of a life free of suffering. Indeed, over the last 500 years, the sciences have prolonged and made life easier for almost all, but certainly not with less suffering. Amid the wonders of technology, the discontent of which spoke the pioneer of psychotherapy (FREUD, 1930/2006), seems to endure, whether entangled or concealed, or even tamed, but far from resolved.

The “psy” disciplines – psychotherapy, psychology and psychiatry – have multiple origins and historical oppositions; there is no consensus about the meaning of their common root. According to a wide variety of interwoven lines and approaches, they propose to study/treat the soul, the mind, the central nervous system, the subject, the individual, or person, or human being. Such a diffuse object has never let us fully live up to the ideal of modern science, based on positivistic principles. Our status as sciences, as discourses that stand out from and are more consistent and accurate than normative, religious, artistic and political discourses has always been precarious or partial. As expressed by Popper (2000) regarding psychoanalysis, because of the very nature of the concepts, methods, and means employed by psychology/psychiatry/psychotherapy to investigate private life and intimate experiences, they can be easily “falsified”.

Thus, the discourse of the human sciences – especially the “psy” sciences – has always been of lesser status in the context of the sciences, especially those with the most technological triumphs, such as engineering and some of their applications to the life sciences. If on the one hand, today we know the reason for many of our body ailments and are able to treat most of them, we are still faced with great suffering derived from our relationships with ourselves and others.

Not by coincidence, this was precisely the time when psychotherapy was developed, in the attempt to understand the limits of the rationality that control our choices. Psychotherapy does not treat forms of suffering that originate from conditions we can observe, predict, or prevent, such as diseases or accidents, which in practice are more familiar and thus can be combated. Instead, psychotherapy addresses relationships that, in theory, we establish voluntarily and that are based on rational criteria. As the joke goes, “If you want to treat your stomach aches, go see a doctor. If the doctor can’t fix

them, go see a therapist to help you live with better with them.”

Thus, the advent of psychotherapy, and more precisely, the concept of the unconscious, did not represent so much a form of comfort for modern subjects, as predicted by S. Freud (1930/2006) – a narcissistic wound to be accepted – but a new demand to be met – a symptom. In simpler terms: it led to the knowledge of dimensions of experience that are invisible, but permeable to certain types of intervention. Consequently, modern subjects were summoned to sort themselves out. Anguish and subjective suffering were now a problem to be solved and not a condition to be understood. Thus, psychotherapy was absorbed by Western culture not so much as a science with specific research methods, but more as a normative discourse, as a modality of hygiene or educational principles, that must promote health, understood as functionality and productivity.

Instead of being more understanding, generous and tolerant of the different forms in which the irrational and uncontrollable manifest, we establish that some are more acceptable. Reduced to disorders, manifestations of subjective suffering acquire more and more names, acronyms and codes, in the usually futile attempt to minimize the pain associated with them, by relativizing stigma. We fool ourselves with the hope that we are all depressive or anxious, hyperactive or bipolar, or that all of us, with and without a diagnosis, are perfectly normal if we just used the appropriate treatments.

In our eagerness to conquer and control, it is difficult for us, contemporary subjects, to recognize when we are ill. To openly suffer at some point of our lives is not a fact that can be defined with an acronym and then treated with another, like a mathematical problem. It is a social role, part of complex relational dynamics, with their inherent challenges in terms of tele and spontaneity and complimentary roles.

WHO SHOULD SURVIVE?

In this context, sociometry, or psychodrama as a form of psychotherapy, peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, in the 20th century. It represented a counterpoint to the “squareness” of psychoanalysis, which at the time was associated with more conservative discourses. However, it has been experiencing a crisis in identity and public in recent years, which can be summarized by its visible effect a “turn toward the market”. This expression, which was broadcasted at a meeting of psychodrama educators almost like an exhortation to battle, refers to a set of procedures and institutional choices that seek to “attract” new students and clients (the term “patient” is considered by many politically incorrect). According to this line of thought, psychodrama should be “adapted” to the dictates of a consumer society that has transformed education, which should be a project for citizenship, into an investment plan, in which academic titles are obtained not to demonstrate knowledge, but to increase one’s chances of victory in the race for the best jobs.

This marketing moves demonstrates academicist but not actual academic inclinations, and since it is still underway in its numerous facets, does not allow for a more concrete assessment. However, it is possible to venture some of the mishaps of this proposal to disseminate psychodrama. Sociometry was born out of the intense criticism of typically modern scientific conceptions, i.e., those that are dedicated to explaining, promoting, and the Western subject. To the woe of many who sought in J. L. Moreno (1889-1974) evidence of a modern discourse within the “psy” and social disciplines, he was opposed to the main modern theories and philosophies throughout all his work, including capitalism/Marxism and psychoanalysis/psychiatry. As a Sephardic Jew of

loose European origins and an enthusiast of the “American way of life” in the mid 1950s and 1960s, the fact is that Moreno defended well-being and in no way considered it to be synonymous to comfort or stability or a result of explaining or controlling human life.

It is worth remembering that Moreno did not subscribe to the same Western model of being human as the other pioneers of psychotherapy did – that of the subject – and he did not create any theory about its functioning based on controlled experiences, in a controlled environment. Much to the contrary, he defined humans as gods and goddesses and created a research and investigation method that relativized the position of power of those who research and those researched. Furthermore, it could be carried out anywhere and/or the imaginary setting on stage. In contrast to the founder of psychotherapy, Moreno did not intend to create a modernistic, atheist, neutrality-based science, but a science that today would be considered post-modern. His discourse does not oppose itself to traditional discourses, such as religions, but seeks to integrate them to generate new possibilities: “(...) the origins of my work go back to a primitive religion and my objectives were the setting up and promoting of a new cultural order.” (MORENO, 1953/1993).

Even his enthusiasm with the democracy and cultural diversity of post-war North America did not represent adherence to a successful socioeconomic or scientific model. It was more related to his admiration of a sociocultural context different than the one that resulted in the European struggles and the hope that new models could be created:

Sociometry can assist the United States, with its population consisting of practically all the races on the globe, in becoming an outstanding example of a society which has no need of extraneous ideas or of forces which are not inherent in its own structure. (MORENO, 1953/1993).

Therefore, Moreno’s legacy could not be more contrary to the uses that have been made of it in contemporariness. This has been done, as said by a colleague of mine, head of one of our federated schools, with the perhaps well-meaning illusion of employing it as an “efficient social technology.” In other words, it has been used as an apparatus at the service of modern ideals, at the service of a subject that becomes members of groups, not to practice solidarity and be part of a whole, but to produce indefinitely, for longer periods, faster. These productive and efficient subjects have no time to suffer and cannot count on the group to support them when they suffer. It is up to the groups, which include health experts, to quickly decipher what ails these unproductive individuals. Moreover, as soon as the malfunctioning is identified, they must efficiently find the means and modes to correct, reprogram, or at the very least, suppress the effects of the disorder. “Social technologies” are expected to make subjects and group respect the limits imposed by the thirst for power and control, disguised as the comfort and efficiency promised by a machined-governed world, while also overcoming our natural limitations: fatigue, conflict, old age, pain, and death.

It is difficult for psychodrama, not understood here as a synonym of sociometry, as tends to happen among the psychodrama community, but simply as a technique, something that repeats itself predictably and with expected results, for which we are more well-known, to submit itself to this role attributed to psychotherapies, which work under the register of the modern understanding of subjects and subjectivity. First, it is a methodology derived from a phenomenological framework of science and is strongly influenced by the arts. Thus, it does not relate well with predictability and control, and at the same time, should it acquire these attributes, it produces negative effects. Quality works of art are always surprising. Even when there is the happy ending we all hope for,

there is tension up to the very end, an element that generates unpredictable forces. Technical skills must be at the service of such tension, and not represent an alternative: artistic appreciations that emphasize or are restricted to technical perfection are usually negative critiques.

Thus, even when psychodrama, understood here as any of the sociometric methods, is used with the goal of being merely technical, there is always a risk that whatever develops on stage, in the city or in companies will be excessively predictable, as is bad theater, or excessively linear, as are boring lectures or rallies. Moreover, even when it is successful and reaches the expected results, it does not represent a new experience, i.e., it is not a resource that participants

Even the most artistic and popular psychotherapy in origin, when coupled with the dictates of Western culture, within the molds of modernity, is transformed into technology, a consumer good, a service provided to promote the domestication of people and groups. Thus, in its cheaper versions, it becomes a disposable product, and in its most expensive version, an asset reserved for an elite that can afford the costs of celebrities.

Other forms of psychotherapy are better suited to these demands and cost less because their practitioners are trained in simpler, replicable techniques, with quicker and sure-fire results. Therefore, they do not need to invest as much time or money in their education, because their clients' disorders can be described and explained according to more concrete frameworks and more understandable terms, and in comparison, treatments are quicker. Consequently, they are less of a burden to their reference groups, such as families, companies, health insurance companies, or the State.

As I once heard from an undergraduate Psychology student:

If I am to spend a fortune on my education, it has to give me a degree and a way to make money quick. I'm not going to spend years just studying (italics mine) to better understand people, or myself; that's what my undergraduate program is for. So, regardless of the line of work, I will take a course recognized by the Ministry of Education, which will give me a degree that is worth something in civil servant exams, or a weekend workshop, which will give me tools I can apply immediately; I'm not going to pay for years and years of therapy.

In this context, it does not seem possible to “really” compete with more traditional or even the most innovative approaches. As has been proclaimed by some, psychodrama as we know it is truly close to its end if it seeks to abide by the dictates of consumer society and function as a form of “social technology”; psychotherapy for subjects and subjectivity, based on the epistemological framework defined by modern science.

IN THE WORDS OF THE CHILDREN

The end of modern psychodrama may be pointing to the limitations of modern times and announcing the end of an era. In Brazil, the ideals of the generation that lived through years of dictatorship, in its many facets, seem to be less and less useful for the generation born in the New Republic. At the global level, modern science, which was initially based on rational principles and more recently has become a synonym of positivism, also seems to have been put in check in a post-modern, virtual world. Physics is faced with an illogical universe, and sociology with liquid relationships.

A group of young psychodramatist colleagues wrote:

We believe that this ability to resist and reinvent reality, even if through long and painful processes, results in the difference between health and illness, for each being, institution, category or professional group. These new times do present not only daily enemies, but also precious allies, such as new technologies that allow us to extend the limits of time and space. (CAMPOS, M. G. C., SARDA, S. C., DIAS, M. E CUNHA, L. C., 2010, s. p.).

This text, as well as many others that have not been published or even written, situated outside of the conventions of educational organizations or even as an inside reaction to them, shows that psychodrama lives on. However, it lives an unofficial, new life, probably different, yet not less interesting, than the one foreseen by previous generations. Thus, if psychodramatists still dare to begin a phrase stating that they believe – and in the cited text there were four authors – and that they believe not in the dictates of the market or consumption, but in lengthy processes and in the value of new technologies as allies, Moreno is still a current reference. Maybe the roots of his thinking, which lie in old traditions, have not been buried by the dust generated by machines of destruction. Furthermore, perhaps his forecast of a science made by the people and for the people has generated fruit that are fostered by machines of creation.

Thus, in these postmodern times, food has changed, but hunger endures. Intense and quick-paced news reports pose complex questions: How to feed seven billion people in a world in which a country like the United States consumes four times more than it produces, while an entire continent, Africa, consumes less than half? Must we really go from one place to another so efficiently if airplanes require so much energy and we are able to see and talk to the world from our own homes? How can we treat 40% of the seven billion of individuals, scattered across rich and poor countries, that will present some type of debilitating mental disorder in their lifetime? How can virtual connections contribute to bring people closer together instead of helping them to hide behind new masks and modified bodies?

Sociometry, Moreno's legacy, represents a methodology to acquire knowledge that is widely accessible because of its simple method, yet complex results. Thus, it is still revolutionary today, maybe more than ever, in a society made up of a wide variety of people seeking to form communities, made up of strangers, who simultaneously hide and reveal their matrix. Perhaps we have something to offer that is worth more than what money can buy (for this we already have credit cards), something that gives sense and meaning to our suffering.

Maybe psychodrama, understood as a psychotherapy that is prêt-à-porter, has already been sufficiently consumed and we can face such consumption from a more spontaneous-creative point of view, in terms of an ending, and not as an objective and purpose:

Make space for the unborn, make space for the newborn, for everyone born, Every time a new baby is born make space for him by taking the life of an old man or an old woman. (...) sociometric democracy in which the unborn, the living, and the dead are partners-instead of keeping the unborn and the dead of our partnership. (MORENO, 1953/1993).

REFERENCES

CAMPOS, M G. C., et al. Axiodrama: uma possibilidade de resignificar o tempo e a impaciência na pós-modernidade. Textos do XVII Congresso Brasileiro de Psicodrama, Águas de Lindoia, Febrap. Available at: <http://www.febrap.org.br/publicacoes/arquivos/15_654_REVISADO_2.doc>. Accessed on: Oct 31 2011.

COSTA, S. Amores fáceis: romantismo e consumo na modernidade tardia. Novos estud.- Cebrap, 73, Nov. 2005. Available at: <http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0101-33002005000300008&lng=pt&nrm=iso&tlng=pt>. Accessed on Oct. 31 2011.

FREEDHEIM, D.K. (ed.) et al. History of psychotherapy: a century of change. Washington, DC, US, American Psychological Association, 1992.

FREUD, S. O mal-estar na civilização (1930). Volume XXI. Ed Imago, Rio de Janeiro, 2006.

MANCEBO, D. et al. Consumo e subjetividade: trajetórias teóricas. Estudos de Psicologia, 7(2), 325-332, 2002.

MORENO, J.L. Who shall survive? First Student Edition. Based on the Second edition, 1953. American Society of Group Psychotherapy & Psychodrama, Royal Publishing Company, Roanoke, VA, 1993.

POPPER, K. R. A lógica da pesquisa científica. São Paulo, Cultrix, 2000.

Valéria Cristina de Albuquerque Brito. Psychologist. Psychodramatist Supervisor. Master of Science and PhD in Clinical and Cultural Psychology.