Review

Dreaming in dark times: Six exercises in political thought

Sharon Sliwinski
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Sharon Sliwinski's mesmerizing book, *Dreaming in Dark Times: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, explores a series of dreams from dark times: Mandela's recurring nightmare while in prison; a dream reported to Freud by a woman who dreamt her daughter was dead; nightmarish visions from WWI; the dreamlike photos of London bombed in WWII; Frantz Fanon's patients' nightmares under colonialism; and Sarah Kofman's dream of her father killed in Auschwitz. Strangely, through all these macabre dream sequences, the book leaves the reader with a hope that, even in the darkest times, human beings can create meaning and resist abomination through their dreams.

The central idea of the book is that 'dreaming is a distinct species of thinking that can represent, contain, and transfigure the most profound of human conflicts' (p. xi). A dream is a kind of communication, 'a gossamer transport for the expression of difficult desires, ideas, and conflicts' (p. xii). How and what we dream, Sliwinski argues, can profoundly shape our collective social and political lives. As vehicles for otherwise 'unthinkable thoughts', dreams 'can fold and transfigure the force of a harsh reality' (p. xiii).

Sliwinski borrows from Freud the idea that dreams contain thoughts that have been largely barred from consciousness. But she moves beyond Freud with her novel notion that dreams beg to be communicated, not just between the dreamer's unconscious and conscious, but between the dreamer and the larger world. In this sense, some dreams have a political *errand*. 'Dreams have a way of compelling us to speak, and it is this latter gesture – the drive to disclose the experience to someone – that transforms dream-life into a political matter proper' (p. xiii).

While Sliwinski draws on Freud, her account of dreams is the inverse of his. Where Freud famously saw dreams as the royal road to the unconscious, Sliwinski sees those that emerge in dark times as paths for negotiating political trauma. 'What else is a dream but a name for the inexplicable urge to speak of something that one has no power over, a kind of speaking *sans pouvoir* – a means to give voice to what is otherwise unspeakable?' (p. 128). Sliwinski follows Freud in making much of the

central processes of dream-work – condensation and displacement – but she sees these processes as ways of *making* meaning in dark times, while Freud saw them as ways of *disguising* meaning. For Freud, unconscious dream thoughts, the latent content of dreams, have to find a way to get past the censor (the agency he later called the superego) in order to emerge in consciousness, and they do so by being distorted through condensation and displacement, as well as symbolization and secondary revision. Interpretation works backward, starting with the manifest content of dreams and then, by following the twists and turns of associations, arriving at what the dreams really meant.

Sliwinski takes Freud to be showing how dream-work is a process of making meaning, as she conjectures in how Freud would have understood Charlotte Beradt's project to catalog the dreams of subjects of Hitler's Germany in the late 1930s. But Freud was actually quite clear that, as he saw it, dream-work serves to distort thoughts that the censor cannot tolerate – often desires that are not socially acceptable. For Freud, dreams dissimulate, allowing wishes to be fulfilled incognito. Their manifest content cloaks the psychical realities of desire: it does not yield it.

Barely mentioning Freud's central notion of dreams as wish-fulfillments, Sliwinski argues instead that dreams disclose new realities, including transforming an 'unthought known' into subjective experience (p. 14). That her view differs from Freud's far more than she acknowledges hardly matters. Taking Hannah Arendt as her traveling companion, she argues that dreams can 'serve to reanimate a world that has been flattened by dark times' (p. 19).

Sliwinski begins her first chapter with Nelson Mandela's recurring nightmare during his years in prison: that he had been released from prison and no one was there to meet him, and in fact there was no one anywhere. He walked to his own home but it was a ghost house, all the doors and windows open but no one there at all. The dream struck Sliwinski as a 'profound testimony of the political conditions' of Mandela's unfreedom (p. 3). But what kind of statement was this, Sliwinski asks, and what can it disclose about political conditions? 'Does a dream attest? And to whom?' Borrowing from Freud, Sliwinski explains, first, that dreams think, but not in the sense of waking thought, not in words but in experiences. 'These thoughts are a kind of *mental bricolage*' drawing on both daytime experience and 'the vast storehouse of memory traces' (p. 4). While they might seem nonsensical and random, dreams do contain meaning, even if we can hardly bear it consciously. Sliwinski tethers this notion of dream thinking, rooted in memory and experience, to Arendt's concept of 'enlarged thought,' which draws from Kant to point to the kind of thinking in which one imagines the world from the standpoint of everyone. In the case of Mandela's dream, the exhibited enlarged thought is to remake South Africa as a nation for everyone.

Chapter two takes up a dream that Freud reported, almost in passing in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of a woman who dreamt that she had seen her 15-year-old daughter 'lying dead "in a case"' (p. 27). In working with Freud to see how this dream could actually be a wish-fulfillment, the woman admitted to hearing that 'box' or 'case' was a term used euphemistically for women's genitalia, and so she thought perhaps it could have been a wish from 15 years earlier not to have a child. As Freud writes, 'Indeed after a fit of rage after a violent scene with her husband, she had beaten her fists on her body so as to hit the child inside it' (p. 28). Sliwinski reports that she had passed over this dream a number of times without paying it much mind, but it was a student who brought out its force. In class 1 day he 'read the scene aloud, and when this failed to arouse interest from his colleagues, he dramatically acted out the gesture of this young mother beating her fists upon her own body, desperately wishing that the product of her unhappy marriage would die in utero – *in der Büsche*' (p. 28). Now with her attention trained to this dream, Sliwinski follows its course more closely through Freud's texts to find that, despite Freud's attempts to put this dream into the box of wish-fulfillments and typical dreams, it was a dream of transgenerational trauma and violence.

Starting with chapter three, Sliwinski focuses less on particular dreams and more on dream-like phenomena, first turning to April 1917 and the war experience that shaped Second Lieutenant Wilfred Owen, whose later poetry was borne of 'shell shock' or what later became known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The stories and dreams that came home with the soldiers who suffered through this ghastly war also called on Freud to amend his own theory of dreams beyond the pleasure principle.

In chapter four, Sliwinski takes us to London circa September 1940 and Lee Miller's surreal photography of bombed out streetscapes. Miller's photography was most evocative when it was dreamlike, less so when it attempted to be realistic. To explain this phenomenon, Sliwinski turns to Wilfred Bion, who himself had suffered from German bombardment, and came to believe that 'dreaming provides a key emotional function', serving 'as an indispensable mental space or 'container' in which to process the emotional content of our experience' (p. 87). Bion argues that dreams serve as a 'contact barrier' between the unconscious and the conscious, allowing for a demarcation between internal fantasy and external reality, as well as a passage way between the two realms. Dreams contain and process fantasy so as not to flood consciousness. The dream becomes a protective shield. Likewise, Lee Miller's dreamlike photography offered a barrier against being flooded by the overwhelming reality of the bombing, allowing the viewer to create meaning out of utter devastation.

In the last half of the book, this study of dreams flips around, from dreams being messengers to dreams being mechanisms for repairing the social-psyche. Dreams can be sites of revolt and refolding reality, as we see in the dreams of Fanon's patients suffering under colonialism, hoping 'for the reconstitution of the speaking

being' (p. 114), and in Sarah Kofman's memoirs of her father, only made possible by a dream. 'Perhaps dreaming is nothing more and nothing less than this,' Sliwinski writes in closing, 'an unanticipated opening in thought and being, evidence of an indestructible alterity in each of us, an attestation to the fundamental human capacity to give form and shape to what is possible to say and think' (p. 128).

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