Introduction: After *Beyond*...? Freud's death drive and the future of a better world

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This special issue celebrates the 100th anniversary of the publication of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and appears in the midst of unprecedented times. The two first decades of the 21st century have witnessed the reemergence of fascism in many parts of the world: the persecution of religious, sexual and racialized minorities; the criminalization of migrants; and the demeaning of local and global politics of equality. In these circumstances, it has seemed urgent to reread this revolutionary psychoanalytic text and to ascertain if it can still give us a figuration for resisting and, *a fortiori*, battling an apparently insurmountable drive to destruction and annihilation of alterity.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud equates the death drive with a tendency inherent not only to the psyche but to all forms of the living, to life itself. Although the great majority of the psychoanalytic establishment of the time chose to dismiss the idea, the death drive eventually became a sign of epistemologically justified nihilism or, paradoxically, a model of repetitive and creative survival. From the standpoint of psychoanalysis, while the manuscript introduced the question of violence as intrinsic to life and psychically insurmountable, positing a challenge to philosophy and the social sciences, the radicalism of the death drive did not entirely reduce Freud to despair. For example, Freud ends his letter to Einstein regarding war and the possibilities of building a world in peace on a note of optimism: “Whatever fosters the growth of civilization works at the same time against war”.¹ At the same time, a close reading of *Beyond* teaches us that life and death, not only as substances but as tendencies or drives, relate to each other in a complex and

even paradoxical manner. The death drive, writes Freud, does not work alone and goes always hand in hand with Eros. It is silent but not lonely.²

This enigmatic formulation of the psychic economy remains an open invitation to stop and reflect on the theoretical, practical and of course political consequences of both: the unobtrusiveness of Thanatos; and the power of Eros where it meets its opposite. If we agree with Freud in conceptualizing the death drive not only as a limit to life but as a cruel tendency towards destruction essential to the living substance, we are obliged to consider if there is any possibility of resisting violence or, in a Derridean manner, of deferring it.

The return of certain forms of fascism, xenophobia and racist and sexist tendencies of the present; the hideous wave of *feminicidios* in many parts of the world; and the apparently ceaseless human exploitation and extermination of entire ecosystems that have now shown us their autoimmune effects all illustrate an urgent need to reclaim and rebuild the analytical, critical and conceptual tools to construct a better and more livable world, one in which every form of alterity is experienced not as difference to be destroyed but as deserving of current and future time-space. In this context, revisiting Freud at the end of the second decade of the 21st century is an endeavor that should enhance our critical engagement with the scope of this ethical and political imperative in order to achieve two things: first, to promote action beyond the limits of the unstable and contingent reality of circumstances imposed on the human capacity for ethical-political sharing; second, to bring into relief what Butler would call a project of non-violent cohabitation.³

For Derrida (2002), the Freudian discovery of the death drive as an inherent tendency of human nature towards destruction meant that nothing could be said about violence – and specifically about cruelty – without psychoanalysis.⁴ Of course, while psychoanalysis by itself is not enough to conceptualize violence, nothing *can* be said without it. In this sense, it is necessary to explore and elucidate the idea of having to advance *beyond the beyond*, based on the clarification of the oxymoron “the limit is the possibility” in ontological, political and ethical terms. The ontology of undoing, rather than being a limit, is the condition of possibility for a truly revolutionary action and not only, so to speak, reformist. Every battle, even if somehow lost beforehand, must be fought.

The intellectual and political commitment of the contributors to this volume arises within the context of these ethically challenging times. They have all responded to the same proposal: to re-read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* thinking of the possibilities of a better future, while faced with the indubitably destructive wave of fascism, capitalism and inequality.

In “The Maternal Death Drive: Greta Thunberg and the Question of the Future,” Lisa Baraister develops a critique of the destructiveness of our time through an analysis of different temporalities belonging to the logic of Freud’s death drive. She then proposes a “maternal death-drive” that supplements the Freudian one. This maternal death drive accounts for a kind of repetition that is

differentiated from a life drive and remains articulated with what she understands as the developmental time of life, a time that opens the future as a field of possibilities. In “Auto-repugnancy: In-between Freud’s ‘Pleasure Principle,” Penelope Deutscher analyses the reproductive interest through Derrida’s understanding of the psyche, that is, as an auto-differentiating machine that moves from life to death in a circuitous movement. She also scrutinizes the epistemological status of biology in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and its consequences for Freud’s conceptualization of the psyche. Jimmy Casas examines the case of an art exhibition in Brazil that recently agitated a right-libertarian political group. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle, ‘A Child Is Being Beaten’ and the Scenography of Fantasy: Boutique Libertarianism in a Brazilian Moral Panic,” Casas offers a critique of moral panic as well as a general theory of fantasy. In “Psychoanalysis, Historical Injury, and the Language of Castration: The Murder of Transgender Women of Color,” Yukari Yanagino offers a nuanced analysis of the murder of transgender women of color in the United States through a study of infantile sexuality and certain psychic mechanisms that, articulated with the sociopolitical history of oppression of black and feminized bodies, construct the perception of these women’s bodies as that alterity that must be annihilated for self-preservation. In “Freud’s Trope of the ‘Beyond’: On Conditions, Critique, and Violence,” Emma Ingala analyses the beyond as a trope that corresponds to the condition of possibility of the psyche, as well as the locus for a critique of violence that could open the social and political space of foreclosed destructiveness. Finally, my own contribution, “Collective Working-Through of Trauma or Psychoanalysis as a Political Strategy,” proposes psychoanalysis as a theory and practice that can be understood as a political strategy for overcoming collective trauma. Working-through as a healing process is a task that requires the accompaniment of an other (or others) and therefore belongs to a broader understanding of a politics of care.

When we were preparing these papers, little did we know and less could we imagine of the force with which the COVID-19 pandemic was about to hit the world. In the face of this most recent crisis, humanity faces countless challenges. As the pandemic advances, and even when it runs its course and comes to an end, new and incalculable horizons for thought and collective action will appear. As far as I can tell, and for the time being, the most promising of these is that of building and acting from a position of global solidarity, even though we know that the richer countries are hoarding imports, ventilators, medicine and vaccines, whilst staying home has been a privilege of the affluent class around the world. If the virus can remind us of something we already knew and are reluctant to accept, it is that taking care of others means taking care of ourselves. Revisiting this classic piece of Freud’s psychoanalytic writing and reframing it for our current times might also contribute to enlarging the theoretical work for emancipatory politics in the 21st century and inspire democratic politics today. We hope that the reflections gathered here may lay

the foundations to critically thinking through new ways of organizing in solidarity, that is, with Eros as the driving force.

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud (1933/1981) Why war? *Standard Edition* 22. London: Hogarth Press, p. 215.
2. Sigmund Freud (1920/1981) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. *Standard Edition* 18. London: Hogarth Press, p. 63.
3. See Judith Butler (2020) *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. London: Verso.
4. Jacques Derrida (2002) Psychoanalysis searches the states of its soul: The impossible beyond of a sovereign cruelty. In: *Without Alibi*. Translated by P. Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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Guest Editor

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