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Against Attachment Theory[1]

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Once I publicised a lecture titled 'Against attachment theory'. Someone asked indignantly, 'How can *anyone* be against attachment theory?'. Another wanted to know, 'How can there be anything *critical* to say about a theory on which there is widespread consensus?', I have come across similar reactions any time I questioned the tenets of attachment theory (AT). I question them because I see them as a set of hypotheses rather than articles of faith within a belief system. Inquiry, perplexity, and constructive doubt are normally deemed useful for study and research, and the strong resistance I encounter when wanting to discuss this topic beyond supine acceptance of its tenets seems to confirm that AT has become a belief system.

There appears to be a widespread consensus across theoretical orientations on the validity of AT, alongside a championing of its presumed universality. This might suggest the presence of *ideology* at work. Considering that sociologists, feminists and queer theorists have been saying for decades that AT constitutes an attack on working mothers, that it is a consecration of essentialism and the patriarchal system, as well as a defence of familialism, one could also ask: 'Why didn't the psychotherapy world even notice that there is a wider discussion happening on this topic?' One might equally want to stress that excessive emphasis on the importance of a secure base has meant the bypassing of the equally central aspects of exploration, adventure and lines of flight *from* the celebrated secure base. The one-sided, universally accepted view in relation to AT has contributed to the neutering of more subversive and innovative insights present in psychoanalytic/psychotherapeutic theory and practice, and to the reinforcement of a reductive understanding of mental distress and its potential 'cure'. It is high time for the articulation of a different view and a different praxis.

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Would it be right to call attachment theory an *illusion*? Freud was credited with being one of the representatives, alongside Marx and Nietzsche, of the hermeneutics of suspicion, and in *The Future of an Illusion*,[2] he tackles religious beliefs, which he broadly defined as 'illusions'. For Freud (in a manner that is reminiscent of Pyrrho, the sceptic philosopher of antiquity to whom we owe *epoché*, now banalised as 'bracketing'), a religious belief is made up of 'teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one's beliefs.[3]

Crucially, he added, 'illusions need not necessarily be false – that is to say, unrealizable or in contradiction to reality'.[4] Illusions are not delusions. 'We call a belief', he wrote, 'an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification'.[5]

Freud differentiated between illusion, error and delusion: Illusion is neither true nor false. To be at variance with reality is not illusion's main characteristic. An illusion may come true, which is not the case with either error or delusion. An error is factually false; a delusion is in contradiction with reality whilst being factually false. Above all, an illusion fulfils a wish; it can be seen as an error that can satisfy a wish. For instance, Christopher Columbus died a happy man, believing he had discovered a new route to the East Indies. He didn't, but such is the power of personal illusion. He was also celebrated as a great explorer, even though as a brutal viceroy and governor of the Caribbean islands on which he landed, he carried out the mass killings of native peoples.[6] Such is the power of collective illusion.

Illusion is deceptive, and oddly persuasive. Marx used a similar term, '*phantasmagoria'*, a sequence of artificial imaginings, to describe commodity fetishism – i.e. the propensity to assign to commodities (including money) a power that resides solely to the labour applied to create commodities. He also used the term when describing the monetary system. A similar, blatant example of illusion is the widely held belief in free markets, a belief dating back to eighteenth-century France and the Physiocrats, economists who believed that the wealth of nations was derived solely from agriculture. Why is the free market an illusion through and through? Bernard Harcourt explains:

> All free markets… are artificial, constructed, regulated, and administered by often complex mechanisms that necessarily distribute wealth in large and small ways. … [I]n a purportedly free market, the state is just as present, enforcing private contract; preventing and punishing trespass on private property; overseeing, regulating, policing, and enforcing through criminal, administrative, and civil sanctions… distributing wealth through the tax code, military spending, bureaucratic governance.[7]

Given the above definitions and examples, one could confidently say that attachment theory is an illusion; that despite its foundational and universalising claims, it is not ultimately 'true'; and that, as its wide appeal may suggest, it appears to fulfil a wish. If so, what kind of wish does attachment theory fulfil?

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AT has been described as 'the most important developmental construct ever investigated'.[8] It has been influential in many areas of research, particularly in Anglophone countries, and has been popular in describing parent–child interactions. It is among the most significant discourses in shaping perceptions of child development and parenting across and beyond Anglophone countries. It is a key notion in intervention programmes for underprivileged children and those suffering from neglect. More recently, it has supplied the main theoretical underpinnings – albeit in a simplified version – for the ever-flourishing trauma industry. It has also been accepted by the majority of therapeutic orientations as the necessary framework for understanding relatedness, a prevalent theme in counselling and psychotherapy practice today. In short, AT has been accepted as *foundational truth*.

The philosophical counter-tradition teaches us that imposing a foundation and presenting truth claims are power moves, and that a judicious researcher/practitioner will, at the very least, try to avert them. Unless of course a researcher becomes unwittingly invested in perpetuating the status quo while lip-praising science. Feminist scholars and sociologists alike have voiced fierce criticism of AT. They claim that it amounts to a powerful pretext for apportioning sole responsibility to mothers for the care of children and then blaming them for not doing it adequately. Similar criticisms point out that AT is weighed down by Western values and meanings presented as universal.[9]

Other scholars examined the cultural *relativity* (rather than the alleged *universality*) of what they see as three core hypotheses of AT, namely: (a) that caregiver's kindness leads to secure attachment; (b) that secure attachment leads to greater social adaptation; (c) that securely attached children see the primal caregiver as a secure base for exploration of the outside world. Could theories of attachment be articulated in more culturally specific ways? This is a sensible question when considering minority groups, or the fact that different cultures have different histories, values, ethnicities, philosophies and politics, and that what may be valid in the Anglosphere may not apply to the rest of the world.

Consider the following statement: 'When most investigators [have] ... a common cultural perspective or ideological position, the effect may be to retard or to corrupt the search for scientific knowledge by collectively blinding them to alternative conceptions.'[10] It may be surprising to find that the above passage is not from some subversive group's manifesto bent on destroying the system, but is from Janet Spence's 1985 American Psychological Association's presidential address. After nearly four decades, her statement could be applied to AT, to its ethnocentrism and foundational claims of universality – and more importantly, perhaps, to the uncritical acceptance it has received in the world of counselling and psychotherapy.

While virtually every psychological tenet and approach has been routinely scrutinised, AT has remained untouched. Family-systems theory has been taken apart for emphasising differentiation. Despite their wide ideological differences, both client-centred therapy and psychoanalysis were broadly criticised for their alleged individualism. Daniel Stern's work has been critiqued for its depiction of a 'masterful, feeling, continuous infant'[11] that matches Western notions of human experience.

Why, then, did psychotherapy culture fail to properly address AT's shortcomings? One explanation would be that psychotherapy and critical thought are not great bedfellows. A more specific response would argue that proponents of AT have, at least conjecturally, acknowledged specific cultural influences which temper claims of universality. All the same, the fact remains that attachment theorist's emphasis 'on the evolutionary roots of attachment' meant that they systematically understated 'the role of culture'.[12]

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The word 'attachment' first appeared in psychoanalysis as the English word used to translate Freud's *Anlehnung* ('depending-on'), adopted in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* to denote a kind of love arising out of the child's need for their self-preservation and directed at their caregiver.[13] Later on, John Bowlby (1907–90), drawing on his psychoanalytic training in Object Relations, on Darwinism, and on his own studies in animal behaviour, introduced the notions of 'attachment' and the 'attachment system'. Bowlby noticed the tendency in primate infants,

whenever they experienced anxiety or separation, to seek closeness to an adult attachment figure through actions such as crawling and weeping. In doing so, he observed, primate infants predict a reaction by the adult which will soothe their distress. Something similar happens with human infants, he argued, who have an innate ability, whenever they experience panic or disconnection, to look for the accessibility of a caregiver. This tendency is made up of many aspects: social, physical, as well as hormonal.

For Bowlby, the attachment system is like a *machine* which emerges and develops in relation to the experience of caregiving. When caregiving is not, according to his view, 'integrated', as with children growing up in institutional settings, the attachment system is not suitably activated. In order to operate, the attachment system needs an active response from the caregiver (invariably, in Bowlby's account, the mother) to the child's distress. 'Can we doubt that the more and better an infant smiles', Bowlby writes, 'the better is he loved and cared for?' He memorably adds: 'It is fortunate for their survival that babies are so designed by Nature that they beguile and enslave mothers'.[14] The mother remains central for Bowlby. What about the father? 'Little will be said of the father–child relation', he wrote; 'his value as the economic and emotional support of the mother will be assumed".[15]

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In the 1970s Bowlby's colleague Mary Ainsworth devised a standardised method for evaluating disparities in child attachment. She called it the 'Strange Situation Procedure'. Attentive to the levels of anxiety which may come up in children in relation to the caregiver's accessibility, she devised a series of episodes each lasting about three minutes: mother and baby are alone at first. They are then joined by a stranger. The mother leaves baby and stranger alone. Mother returns and stranger leaves. Mother leaves and the baby is alone. Stranger returns. Mother returns and stranger leaves. These various occurrences of union, separation and reunion utilise elements of novelty so as to activate and then observe the child's instinctive expectations. The child's response also depended on the caregiver's expression when returning and, crucially, on how regular or prolonged instances of separation are within different societies and cultures.

From these observations, Ainsworth drew three classifications of child's behaviour. These are: (1) *Secure*, when the child shows signs of distress and wants closeness when the caregiver returns and is comforted, with the caregiver becoming a safe base from which the child can set out to play. (2) *Insecure-avoidant*, when the child shows no noticeable response during either separation or reunion but is then found to have unseen signs of distress such as faster heartbeat. In these cases, it was discovered that caregivers would tend to respond *conditionally* to the child, i.e. by being welcoming when the child did not show distress. (3) *Insecure-resistant-ambivalent*, when the child would be distressed before separation and would not be soothed at the moment of reunion. In these cases, it was discovered that caregivers were not consistent in their responses to the child. Mary Main and Judith Solomon later added a fourth grouping, viz. *disorganised/disoriented*, one where there is disruption caused by conflicting actions and feelings.

All four classifications have been influential in how the well-being of an adult will be assessed in later life. For instance, some research shows that disorganised/disoriented attachment in early life had strong links to dissociation in adolescence.[16]

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Given that for centuries, calls to 'nature' and 'biology' have been used against women and in favour of the patriarchal family and of gender conservatism, suspicion of AT from feminists and sociologists is more than justifiable. And so is the reasonable scepticism towards forms of research attempting to bring together 'biological, social and political assemblages'. What's more, over-enthusiastic appeals to the allegedly unassailable objectivity of neuroscience in the last two decades have strengthened conservative policies which have made wide use of AT.

Despite the undivided opinion in favour of AT in the world of Psychology, other fields beg to differ. Sociologists, anthropologists, feminists and queer theorists have mounted persuasive criticisms of AT. Their main point is that it is a 'profoundly conservative' view bolstering heteronormativity and defending the traditional family, enhancing the biopolitical disciplining of parents, and engendering 'mother-blaming scenarios' with women[17] deemed responsible for the future of the nation. Even though AT has been 'upgraded' over the last few decades through a neuroscientific twist, it is also true, as Erica Burman has made clear, that the 'neuro' turn has not been subjected to adequate critical reflection. Moreover, there is a social investment in the child which has little to do with the child's nascent subjectivity, and a lot to do with seeing in the child the future labourer/consumer.

Parallel to this, there has been a widespread return to antiquated ideas of character and resilience, both notions tending to forget the socio-political context, and blaming the parent instead – usually the mother. For Burman, the way in which AT conceives distress in the child is inconsistent: 'If the child will not settle to play some distance from her mother while she is there', Burman writes, 'the attachment is considered insecure. Conversely, this conclusion is also drawn if the child fails to protest at his or her mother's departure.'[18]

When the consensus on a particular area of research is so widespread that no dissent nor different views are really allowed, the question arises as to whether we are, as suggested earlier, in the presence of an *ideology*.

In their influential report *Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens*, former government minister Graham Allen and former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith underlined how important it is to make sure that children's attachment relationship with their mother is organised in a way that will produce obedient and self-reliant citizens.[19] Allen and Duncan Smith's simplistic understanding of AT was marshalled to support their insistence that the State should play a negligible role in supporting its citizens and for blaming mothers. They did not take into account the fact that research on attachment since the 1990s[20] has shown that the individual caregiver's sensitivity to the child has less effect on that child's attachment, the more the caregiver is *deprived of* economic, health and social resources.

The perverse merit of such a biased and psychologically illiterate piece of 'research' is that it reveals inadvertently the classism that AT encourages, and to which it is prone. The nurture and care evoked by attachment theory is terminally White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (W.A.S.P.) and middle class, a rarefied post-war scenery in the light, with a sense of a future, meaning and inherited wealth. For those in the dark pit of poverty, petty crime, malnutrition and the inevitable 'mental health issues', AT provides perfect pseudo-erudite padding to a veritable programme of authoritarian re-education dressed up in caring jargon.

Most psychotherapy trainings have now effectively become transmission belts for the dissemination of middle-class ideology and modes of living. To this sophisticated process of indoctrination, attachment theory – universally accepted across all orientations – has provided a coherent theoretical base and support.

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Could there be, however, biases on the other side of the argument? Must preference towards biology rather than culture necessarily imply a dyed-in-the-wool, politically conservative viewpoint?

In my own experience, and in the experience of several trainee counsellors and psychotherapists I talk to, part of the problem lies with the fact that the four attachment styles tend to be taught and learned as a rigid taxonomy rather than a set of hypotheses attempting to describe fluid phenomena. To understand attachment behaviour as a static set of categories that comes *before* the dynamic interplay of biological, social and political energies is a mistake. The value of AT lies in providing us with a psychology of primary dynamic processes and relationships. What are, for instance, the subtle *processes* and *relational phenomena* operating below the layer of the classifications? Unfortunately, the study of these processes is ignored in favour of a mechanical learning of classifications within whose labels clients at times find themselves pigeonholed.

Inspired by the ground-breaking work of Gilbert Simondon,[21] Gilles Deleuze invited us to consider how the classificatory systems partly hide important generative processes within attachment phenomena. He invited us to look at 'spatio-temporal dynamisms [that] are the actualizing, differentiating agencies'. These must be examined, 'even though they are hidden'.[22] In a sense, the promise of AT has yet to be fulfilled. Its foundation in *ethology* (i.e. the close study of human behaviour and social organisation from a biological perspective) has yet to be realised.

Appeal to biology can go two ways: it can be, and often is, reductive. Or it can expand towards a stimulating observation of biological, social, political assemblages which function beneath and beyond the level of the 'person'. The person does not come before these layers but is *composed* of them. What would it mean to apply in a positive way the call to biology present in AT in relation to the life of an adolescent? 'In the life of an adolescent', psychiatrist and social activist Félix Guattari writes, 'the intrusion of the biological components of puberty is inseparable from the micro-social context within which they appear'.[23] Similarly, in relation to childhood, Guattari points out that an ethological perspective would be able to identify that 'the child, as an individuated organic totality, only constitutes one intersection among the multiple material, biological, socio-economic and semiotic components which traverse it'.[24]

Whether in relation to the child, the adolescent, or indeed the adult whose current experience is affected by early attachment styles, the crucial issue for the therapist to bear in mind is that the person does *not* come *before* the environment, but is co-determined with it. Similarly, the attachment system (and its classifications) does *not* exist *before* the exchanges and processes through which it takes place.

It is crucial to differentiate between the taxonomy of attachment styles (and their subsequent reification into unmovable tenets) and attachment *phenomena*. A rather nuanced and minoritarian viewpoint in Humanistic Psychology in relation to transference and countertransference may be valuable here: instead of blanket denial of their emergence, this

stance invites us to closely study transferential and countertransferential *phenomena*. Similarly, when critiquing AT, it may be good to pay attention to valuable – and even affirm the meaning of – attachment phenomena. For Deleuze and Guattari,

> it is not a question of denying the vital importance of parents or the love attachment of children to their mothers and fathers. It is a question of knowing what the place and the function of parents are within desiring-production, rather than doing the opposite and forcing the entire interplay of desiring-machines to fit within the restricted code of Oedipus.[25]

Attachment phenomena are real, and child–parent relationships are important. But greater attention is needed to understand in what ways complex and intertwined social, biological and political assemblages are at work *prior to* and, as it were, underneath the individual selves. Unlike phenomenology, which often refers back to the individual (the Cartesian subject to whom phenomena appear), the study of phenomena – and of attachment phenomena in particular – is here emphasised on a *pre-individual* level. Studying phenomena means just that: maintaining their autonomous occurrence without assigning them to the human subjects. Reifying the latter – turning them into 'things' and self-existing units – is the first step towards turning AT into an expedient weapon for justifying the normalisation of society and the proliferation of systems of mental surveillance. The jury is out as to whether surveillance and normalisation are intrinsic to AT, or whether they are a by-product of its over-simplification.

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One of the foundations for AT, especially according to Bowlby and Main, is the study of human and animal behaviour. This is stimulating in so far as it makes AT an ethological rather than anthropocentric perspective: it looks at the environment, at animal/human behaviour first; it does not place the human at the centre. AT came out of dialogue with ethologists such as Nikolaas Tinbergen (1907–88) and Robert Hinde (1923–2016), who were friends of Bowlby. A very important aspect of ethology is that, as both Bowlby and Main explain, every child has to maintain a line of potential movement from and to the caregiver in order to explore the world.[26] 'Whereas other mammals might have burrows or other associated spatial milieus to which they return, primates have determinate figures, living milieus, to whom they always wish to know their line of flight.'[27] A safe environment fosters exploration – for the child as much as for the adult. The aim of establishing a secure base is to allow exploration, what Deleuze and Guattari call 'line of flight'.

A line of flight is important for two reasons: (a) as a way out when danger appears within the familiar milieu; and (b) as a route of exploration outside of the familiar milieu. Children confronted with separation and reunion in the 'strange situation' encounter the possibility of experiencing what Deleuze and Guattari call 'becoming-orphan', a state of isolation and abandonment cut away from supporting bonds. The jury is out as to whether this experience is limited to neglected children or whether, as some research seems to imply, children are inclined by evolution to hold universal fantasies of survival and abandonment.

What is beyond dispute is that toddlers 'crawling about exploring the various rooms of the house [they live] in'[28] are natural-born explorers. They map their surroundings, drawing connections between the bodies and the energies they encounter in their search. An important part of the exploration is coming face to face – for the child as for the adult in our consulting room – with the very real feeling of abandonment, an

experience which has a potentially positive outcome: it may help the adult's individualisation, becoming freer and less dependent on the parent figure and parents' substitutes.

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John Bowlby wedded ideas from Melanie Klein's Object Relations school of psychoanalysis (within whose confines he trained), to ethological research and Darwinism. These various currents of thoughts share a particular understanding of biology and evolution which emphasises nurture and self-preservation, and bypasses risk and evolutionary leaps. In Object Relations in particular we find a fundamental detour from classic psychoanalysis which will prove detrimental to psychotherapy as a whole, viz. the wholesale *biologisation of sexuality*. With the elaboration of his theory, Bowlby will then later deliver the final blow by placing the emphasis on the survival *instinct* and ignoring the drive.

With its emphasis on the nurturing quality of the bond between the primary caregiver and the child and on the importance of a secure base, re-created by the nurturing relationship between therapist and client, AT has almost exclusively focused on one aspect of human experience whilst ignoring another, equally crucial aspect. In classical psychoanalytic terms, it has privileged *instinct* at the expense of the *drive*. While there is no obvious disconnection between the two, the drive builds, as it were, on the surf of the instinct-wave, breaking through a new curve beyond instinctual self-preservation and the biological need to reproduce. While the two are not separate, there is rupture. The drive generates a qualitatively new terrain, which is the domain of sexuality, no longer realised in terms of reproduction of the species but in terms of culture, i.e. in terms of the fertile terrain inaugurated by the primary scene of seduction, through the transubstantiation of the enigmatic message into one's own cultural message. It is also a sexuality no longer confined to the genitals but also pre- or para-genital. 'What is most important is that it is a sexuality that has its source in fantasy, where fantasy is not self-generated, but, rather, follows the experience of being impinged upon and incited.'[29] Gaining access to a life of fantasy is, arguably, the beginning of culture – that is, of a creative development of biological instincts. Focusing exclusively on the latter, understanding the communication and interaction between caregiver and child solely in terms of nurture, implies seriously restricting the development of the child into an emerging cultural subject and a subject of desire.

Current consensus in psychotherapy and counselling on the question of early attachment amounts to a 'moralisation of childcare', understood as a 'radically de-eroticised and de-eroticising activity' which represents 'an assault on the theory of infantile sexuality, the theory of the drives, and any account of the unconscious'. How much of the invaluable insights from psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have been sacrificed 'in the name of a self-serving and delusional morality'? The difficulty when studying attachment phenomena consists in having to accept that the very same actions that 'help to sustain the infant are those which will be, of necessity, overwhelming and enigmatic, will communicate an adult sexuality that cannot be fathomed'.[30]

What is the outcome of accepting a consensus that understands attachment solely in terms of nurture, and leaves out the unconscious communication of adult sexuality? Could this be the reason why contemporary therapy has arguably become so terrified of eros, of erotic transference and countertransference?

Attachment theory, then, important and in many ways valuable to our understanding of human development, is not a universally valid construct – especially in the way it seems to be taught and learned in most therapy and psychology trainings. It is culturally determined, grounded in Western values. Critiquing AT does not mean denying that children *do* form an attachment to their primary caregiver(s) and that this affective connection constitutes a crucial step to the life of the adult and citizen. The question is what kind of adult and citizen one has a mind – whether an obedient, immature subject complying to an unjust social order, or a compassionate, empathic citizen who can think, act and contribute creatively to society.

Notes and references

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