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What has become of Totem and Taboo?

Traditional theories of ritual, which Freud and Reik invoked at the beginning of the twentieth century and attempted to integrate within psychoanalytic thought, have been back in fashion for some years now. In addition, various interdisciplinary research projects are currently devoted to aspects of the 'dynamics of ritual'. The debate concerns not only rituals in the original sense but also re-tribalizations, modern totemisms and new ritual formations, for instance on the Internet or in the media. Civil-religious manifestations in relation to catastrophes, including commemorations of the Holocaust, also belong in this context.

As regards our own discipline, psychoanalysis seems substantially unable to respond to demand to the challenges of this field because it has lost touch with Freud's Totem and Taboo. It will be recalled that in 1920 the well-known American ethnologist A.L. Kroeber published a devastating critique of Freud's work of cultural theory, and that much store was set by the views he expressed in it because they flowed from the pen of a researcher who was himself close to psychoanalysis. Since then Freud's book has met with almost total rejection – and at first more so within than outside psychoanalytic circles. There is virtually no biography of Freud in which this cornerstone of his thought does not appear as a stumbling block, and which does not repeat Kroeber's dictum that Totem and Taboo has been ethnologically refuted. Psychoanalysts in consequence eventually came to consider the work solely from the point of view of its author's hidden conflicts and unresolved traumas. Totem and Taboo aroused interest as a manifest dream, to be deciphered in terms of its latent dream thoughts in the context of a continuation of Freud's self-analysis that was deemed incomplete.

What was consistently overlooked was the fact that by 1939, the year of Freud's death and of the outbreak of the Second World War, Kroeber had become more reflective: he was no longer happy with his vehement attack on Freud's book, in which he 'tore it to shreds' (Kroeber, 1939, p. 306), and could now turn to account much of Freud's description of the processes at work. Kroeber now saw Freud's thesis on the theory of culture no longer as a once-for-all prehistoric event – 'not a unique event' (1939, p. 309) – but instead, in conjunction with the Oedipus complex, as a systematic process of hominization extending over millennia. In this revision he also showed how much of Freud's thought and how many of his concepts – regression, infantile fixations, dream symbolism, the sense of guilt, etc. – had already trickled through into other sciences; the same was later to be true of Freud's synthesis of cultural theory. It is time for the manifest text of Totem and Taboo once again to arouse curiosity on the part of psychoanalysis, particularly as the use and further development of Freud's ideas on the primal tragedy of mankind by other disciplines have opened up new and exciting prospects.

The 'Ritual and Psychoanalysis' network wishes to provide information on the reappropriation of Totem and Taboo as the foundation of a general theory of culture. It also aims to forge links with scientists seeking psychoanalytic discussion partners in this field. For a world increasingly at risk of losing control of its own potential for violence, Freud's views on the theory of culture – which also enlighten us as to the ultimate foundations of culture and its cohesion – may be of more use than simply providing psychobiographical presumptions about their author.

References

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