

## **Antinomies of the Super-Ego: Étienne Balibar and the question of the psycho-political**

### **Re-inventing the Super-Ego**

How, drawing upon psychoanalysis, might one think of the relationship between psychological states or conditions, on the one hand, and political forms and practices, on the other? What resources does psychoanalysis offer for conceptualizing either the psychological dimensions of the ‘political’ or, for that matter, the ‘politics’ of the psyche, especially in their collective or social instantiations? For many years, these have been enormous questions for those working in various fields of the humanities wanting—in different ways and at different times—to articulate psychoanalytic interpretation with political theory. Looking at the writings of Étienne Balibar, one particular response to such questions is to interrogate, in a short yet dazzling text included in the recently published volume *Citizen Subject*, the Freudian conception of the super-ego, notably in its development during the early 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

Before we come to this essay, however, originally presented on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Freud’s birth (and in an amphitheatre named after Freud’s teacher Jean-Martin Charcot), it is worth situating the interactions it provokes between politics and psychoanalysis in terms of Balibar’s larger project, if it may be called that. A key point of departure for many of his writings is, of course, the enduring question of citizenship, dealt with in a range of influential texts including those found in *We, the People of Europe?* and *Equaliberty*. Citizenship is obviously both an abiding and a recursive or iterative problem for political thought. It arises in many contexts, not least of which is the question of Europe in all its senses; but it also imposes itself through the far from unrelated—though not simply identical—issue of world populations in flux, the relationship between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, and so on. Needless to say, these questions have been powerfully renewed in more recent times, under different yet connected conditions and circumstances, making the 2015 English publication of Balibar’s Wellek lectures,<sup>2</sup> almost a decade and a half after their original delivery, as well as the recent release of collections like *Citizen Subject*, also prepared over many years, far more timely than belated. The publication of such titles, in other words, reopens the question:

Whither citizenship? Given the rising instance and intense complications of statelessness and forced migration world-wide (not to mention travel bans imposed recently by the US), given the finance politics that, in Balibar's own terms, make Europe an 'apartheid' of sorts,<sup>3</sup> given the increasing privatization of public and welfare provision as an example of the erosion of what citizenship means in its practical as well as ideological sense, given the ongoing transformation of the various relationships of nation-states to the private interests of multinational companies (and, for that matter, the transnational social and economic effects of certain nation's or groups of nations' fiscal policy on the world's stage), given the far-reaching effects globally of debt capitalism, given the intensifying lack of separation between the political and economic spheres that would seem to mark the transition from liberal democracy to neoliberalism,<sup>4</sup> given the impact of certain nationalisms and fundamentalisms of various types over the past decades, given the politics of security and 'counter-terrorism' that affects rights of all kinds—given all of this, what is to be made of citizenship today?

The contribution made by Balibar's Wellek lectures to the critical thinking of citizenship, civility and violence today is as undeniable as the impact of his many other writings. A word is due about the role played by psychoanalysis throughout these lectures, however, one that if anything seems to have intensified rather than diminished during that long editorial period between their original presentation and final publication. While it would be wrong to say that the entire thesis is explicitly framed and developed through continual recourse to psychoanalytic concepts, arguments and ideas, nonetheless I would argue that in crucial ways the 'psychoanalytic' is resorted to, albeit through a deliberately transformative gesture, as a vital resource for the *form* of thinking that Balibar deems necessary in relation to his subject matter. In particular, the 'limits' of political philosophy alluded to in the book's subtitle are arguably traced out through a distinctively *resistant* relationship to psychoanalysis which amounts neither to a rejection nor a critique, but which instead exploits the resistances *of* psychoanalysis in the interests of the most relevant questioning concerning the 'political' today.

Obviously the question of violence is a key motif for the particular project of these lectures. At a number of points in the published text, as he re-engages the legacy of Freud, Balibar considers the idea of a 'cruelty or capacity for destruction' that is located beyond the Freudian death drive itself, in order that he might re-think extreme types of violence which exceed the forms of authoritarianism, domination and oppression that are familiar within the

historic arc of the nation-state. This ‘beyond’ tips over instead into a violence that stems from an ‘*idealization of hatred*’ (perhaps more and more recognizable today), which Balibar considers in terms of an extension or transformation of fascism beyond its ‘ordinary’ or state form (59-60). The reference point for the theoretical possibility of such a mutation in the conceptual toolkit of Freudian psychoanalysis is, interestingly, Derrida’s essay, ‘Psychoanalysis Searches the States of its Soul: The Impossible Beyond of a Sovereign Cruelty’, which was presented as an address to the States General of Psychoanalysis held at the Sorbonne in 2000 (four years after the Welleck lectures were originally delivered, hence my remark above). Thus the thinking of violence in its contemporary guises comes to entail, for Balibar, critical re-engagement with psychoanalytic concepts, categories and forms of thought in the broader sense. In particular, through the reference to Derrida, it is clear that an understanding of sovereignty in its current manifestations (operating as a shifting ground as much as a stable phenomenon) benefits from this critical interaction or alignment. Importantly, however, the grounds of psychoanalysis are themselves transformed in the process. Picking up once more on Derrida’s evocation of ‘the beyond of the death drive’, for Balibar the latter entails ‘the dissociation of the tension or “unity of opposites”’ between life and death, resulting in drives which we must recognise in terms of the modern principle or contemporary problematic of sovereignty itself. Balibar writes:

This no longer has anything to do with the psychological analogy of ill-will or human “evil”; the hypothesis is, rather, that the constitutive association of death with life is turned back against life itself, inverting the function of defense of the “ego” or of individuality and turning it into a process of unlimited appropriation (including—perhaps most importantly—*self*-appropriation). (143)

The ‘beyond of the death drive’ exposes psychoanalysis to the ‘other’ of itself, then; a resistant other which in fact threatens to unseat the ‘psychological analogy’ from which new understandings of sovereign or political forms might otherwise seem to derive. That said, on closer inspection this mutation in the ‘psychological analogy’ may not in fact obliterate its relevance so much as restore and re-emphasise the paradoxical or perverse consequences of Freudian thought itself:

I say that we are beyond psychologism here, but we naturally find ourselves on a very uncomfortable tightrope, as in Freud himself, between psychology and metaphysics,

or between two ways, empirical or speculative, of invoking the idea of human nature. The idea of the “death drive” and its beyond or limit can be reduced neither to Hobbes’ “war of all against all” nor to Darwin’s “natural selection” and all its applications in the political realm. (143)

Here, the death drive—never simply reducible to ‘nature’ (so that the ‘uncomfortable tightrope’ is not happened upon ‘naturally’!)—itself tends to denature, distort or otherwise deconstruct all the borderlines between psychology and metaphysics, the empirical and the speculative, the ‘original’ and the ‘historical’, between natural and non-natural ‘war’ or ‘selection’, good and evil, and so on. In this sense, the death drive as much as its ‘beyond’ or limit already pertains to a situation in which the ‘psychological analogy’ that would permit ‘applications in the political realm’ is subjected to an altogether different logic. The normative form—that of analogy or application—which an orthodox psychologism grants is not so much dispensed with in favour of a move ‘beyond’ psychoanalysis itself, as it is reconstituted in a manner that is more faithful to the ‘origin’, if one may put it that way. To go *beyond* psychoanalysis or the death drive is in fact also to go *back* to them in the most vigilant and rigorous fashion. From this perspective, in its thinking of the modalities of violence in both their historical and contemporary cast, Balibar’s Wellek lectures should be read and evaluated according to a rather complicated procedure whereby the conditions and characteristics of psychoanalytic discourse are transformed and renewed at just those moments that ‘psychology’ might seem to be left behind. For sure, psychoanalysis surfaces explicitly in many places throughout Balibar’s lectures, but the frame of reference it makes possible is operative not only when he discusses anxiety, the Möbius strip, the mirror-stage, *object petit a* or the Real in Lacan (through which access to relevant forms of political thought is sought), but also—and perhaps precisely—where the book deals more generally with questions of sovereignty, ‘life’, violence and civility. This is another way of saying that psychoanalytic thought once more seems to become most powerful at the point of a certain *resistance* to itself; a resistance one might be tempted to call ‘internal’ since it is far from merely extrinsic, but a resistance that is nonetheless also a radically ‘other’ force operating within that of which it is still an essential part.

But, bearing this in mind, let us come back to Balibar’s essay on the Freudian super-ego, which we have said represents a crucial moment in his rethinking of the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics. As Balibar points out, the question of the super-ego is

intrinsically connected to that of the relation between political and psychic frames of reference, marking thereby an original point of entry of psychoanalysis into the realm of political thought. For Balibar, however, the Freudian concept of the super-ego must be understood in its historical elaboration as conditioned by a particular exchange between Freud and Hans Kelsen, the Austrian jurist and philosopher, that happened during this period.

As Balibar shows, Kelsen detects in Freud's work the effort to conceptualize the State through developing the question of the relationship between individual and society from a psychoanalytic point of view. For Kelsen, the psychoanalytic perspective is valuable in potentially overcoming the limits of mechanical sociological abstractions, current at the time. However, he identifies a problem or drawback in Freud's thinking to the extent that, from Kelsen's standpoint, the very concept of the State inheres, as Balibar puts it (235), 'in the positing of a *juridical norm*' that itself seems incompatible with the modalities of psychic life on any personalized scale. Indeed, by potentially transposing the psychic dynamics of the psychoanalytic subject onto the question of political formations, Freudianism risks yoking its conception of the State to images of domination, subjection and dictatorial intent. Kelsen's reading therefore challenges Freud to acknowledge the separation of the juridical order from the particularity or indeed totality of subjective identifications, while at the same time summoning the psychoanalytic approach as potentially invaluable in maintaining the constitutional form of the State. Kelsen's dissatisfaction with a purely sociological interpretation of the juridical norm leads him, therefore, to turn to psychoanalysis as a critical supplement of legal and political philosophy. However, far from being charged with providing the explanatory apparatus linking social forms to the primordially of psychic life, psychoanalysis is instead—through a critical reversal—perceived as the “therapeutic” instrument of defense against the regressive archaism' (237) which threatened the democratic State, notably at this time, through fantasies or mythologies hypostatizing State omnipotence. It seems, though, that the question of the origin of these very same fantasies may reveal an intrinsically problematic or at least indubitably complex dimension in the conceptualization of the State. For if there is always the risk that subjects perceive injustices in the State, then this implies the idea of the 'juridical order as a coercive order which entails a *sanction*', in Balibar's words (237), and thus an assumption of juridical 'personality' to the extent that the State's power is thereby linked to rather anthropomorphic ideas of action and intention. To defend the State against 'regressive archaism' in the political sphere is also to recognize the aggrieved sensibilities of those who purvey such politics and hence to acknowledge, albeit

perhaps unwittingly, the likely inevitability of a *motivated* conception of the State, over and above a functionalist construal of the norm. The upshot of this insight is both that Kelsen's instinct about a psychoanalytic supplement being required to rectify sociology's limits gets reinforced, but also that the separation of the juridical norm, on which he insists, looks to become a rather more complicated matter.

If Kelsen's reconceptualisation of the practical value of psychoanalysis nonetheless challenged Freud to revise the '*antipolitical*' strain of his discourse that, in Balibar's terms, 'dissolves the specificity of all institutions within a generic "prehistory" of humanity', this led to a certain predicament: the 'citizen' form of the subject imagined by the republican jurist threatened to evacuate the psychoanalytic content of such subjectivity (even while it opened up the supplementary possibility of the complication outlined above). '*The unconscious or the political*'—for Balibar, that seemed to be the choice which Kelsen presented to Freud, notwithstanding the corrective or therapeutic value psychoanalysis might derive in addressing 'pathological representations of sovereignty' resulting from certain lapses in purely juridical conceptions of the State (239). And yet the fact that such pathologies seem to arise, historically, not just where such images of the State are inherently lacking but where they are threatened from without, as it were, itself implies that any attempt to separate the juridico-political from the 'unconscious' is inevitably complicated by the psychic reaction, akin to a subjective identification, that the 'norm' typically elicits.<sup>5</sup>

If such an insight seems to permit the re-implication of the 'norm' or the 'normal' and the 'pathological'—an easy win for Freud, one might imagine—nevertheless to the extent that the collaboration between Kelsen and Freud arises from broader concerns about the capacity of the constitutional State to withstand authoritarian or revolutionary challenges (Balibar emphasises Freud's growing pessimism on this point), Freud's reaction is not just to dissolve the juridical back into the psychological, but to reframe the question of the psychoanalytic supplement of the 'political'. This involves Freud in questions of obedience, coercion and revolt. Here, however, 'the State's monopoly upon legitimate violence' is not itself psychologized, Balibar argues, as a phantasmic projection of the unconscious, which would only redouble the question of the 'political' and the 'psychic' to the point of an 'infinite regression' (241). Instead, the psychic processes involved in the reaction to State power are, in Balibar's terms, 'fundamentally *antinomial*' in character. The 'psychic tribunal' endured by the subject, in which the ego is a constant site of anxiety, recalls an analogy with the inner

workings of conscience and consciousness that runs from classical conceptions of morality all the way through to Kantianism. Yet, for Balibar, Freud tests or twists this ‘moral’ analogy in a modern sense by effectively reinvoking the question of the norm that sanctions, in terms of the role played in such a ‘tribunal’ by a hypermorality that at once ‘reigns in’ the unconscious but also, in its very excess, surpasses distinctions between good and evil, autonomy and heteronomy, morality and law. Here we find ‘the ultrajudicial authority of the super-ego’ as the archetype of every real tribunal, rather than their allegorical equivalent (245). Such an ‘authority’ is tied to familial or collective discipline aimed not so much at prompting full identification as a certain separation and individualization. The conception of the super-ego does not therefore entail the dissolution of the ‘political’ into the ‘psychic’ but rather operates as the mechanism by which subjects are interpellated as individuals (Balibar uses this Althusserian term). The subject is not subject of a law that projects and extends a regressive psychic truth, but is instead psychically individuated, in relation to the law, on the basis of just this ‘psychoanalytic’ term. Where Kelsen had perhaps struggled, despite himself, to separate the juridical norm from the psychoanalytic supplement (but also to put their relations in order), Freud attempts to rework the essentially antinomial relation of psyche and law—the ‘political’ itself, perhaps—in a way that recovers for psychoanalysis a degree of theoretical consistency that Kelsen’s writing seemed to place in doubt, while also leading to implications that cause psychoanalysis to overspill itself, if one may put it that way.

The part played by the super-ego in the ‘juridical moment’ of subjection involves social or structural relations whereby the connections between paternal or parental authority and political authority are not necessarily to be conceived in terms of the usual, orderly linear analogies. Instead, it is the ‘ultrajudicial’ authority of the super-ego that repetitively redoubles, torsions, invaginates, matricizes, or continually retransfers and turns inside out the relationships between the two—to the benefit of the forms of guilt and repression, the continual threat of punitive action, and even the onset of alienation and anomie that together subjectify individuals within grids of power. This subjectification entails not so much the collaboration of familial and social levels of authority as the persistent operation of contradictions between them. And yet the juridical order that establishes the context for this situation is only grounded on the very same conflicts that thereby threaten its decomposition as much as they secure its ‘politics’—a conflictual situation, then, which is therefore continually repressed as much as it is maintained. Balibar terms this the ‘*impolitical*’ limit or condition of the political itself.

## Freud's Super-Ego

Balibar's reading, therefore, of the evolution of a Freudian conception of the super-ego—and, crucially, its implications for an emergent psychoanalytic discourse of the 'political'—turns upon the critical reworking of this term in his 1923 essay, 'The Ego and the Id'.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, it is important to grasp the specific set of claims that Freud wishes to set out and repeatedly underscore throughout the essay, as well as to trace the textual operations that underpin them. Certainly this text displays a degree of critical sophistication—one might better say, theoretical ambition—in its construal of the super-ego that one would perhaps struggle to find in earlier writings. First of all, on several occasions Freud is at pains to point out that the super-ego is not only an 'energetic' reaction-formation against the earliest object-choices of the id, but is also a 'residue' of them. The super-ego, in other words, constitutes itself on the strength of a situation in which ego-formation, faced with a legacy of unsatisfactory identifications arising from the id's forsaken cathexes, resorts to the supplementary agency of an ego-ideal which in fact threatens to overwhelm it, a power therefore that the ego endeavours to resist even in the context of a certain constitutive dependency upon it. Freud thus writes that 'the ego is formed to a great extent out of identifications which take the place of abandoned cathexes by the id... the first of these identifications always behave as a special agency in the ego and stand apart from the ego in the form of a super-ego, while later on, as it grows stronger, the ego may become more resistant to the influences of such identifications' (48). In other words, the super-ego arises on condition of the unresolved early conflicts of the ego with the problematic object-cathexes of the id—a conflictual situation that recourse to the super-ego not merely overcomes but also in a certain sense prolongs or exacerbates. Hence, should the ego fail to master the cathexes emanating from the id, the reaction-formation of the ego-ideal will as much resituate as resolve them on the ego's behalf. From this point of view, the the super-ego emerges not simply to help the ego overcome the id—something the ego can't manage alone—but it works instead to re-establish a connection to the unresolved concerns of the id that the ego proves itself unable to tackle by itself. Thus the super-ego is not merely an ally or counterpart in the ego's hostile relations with the id. It is, in fact, radically proximate to the id and can even act as its representative or broker *vis-à-vis* the ego. Freud goes so far as to state that the

super-ego reaches deep down into the id and as such displays a greater degree of detachment from consciousness than the ego is capable of.

On several occasions, Freud tells us that the position occupied by the super-ego in the psychic field occurs on the strength of a parental dynamic characterized by Oedipal relations. On the one hand, the super-ego differentiates itself from—and seeks to dominate—the ego on the basis of an identification with a ‘higher’ human nature modelled on the moral position typically held by one’s parents. By the same token, however, the super-ego as a reaction-formation provoked by the id’s most powerful impulses is precisely the ‘heir’ of the Oedipus complex, ‘heir’ to those early conflicts of the ego with the object-cathexes of the id. The super-ego, in other words, is at once parent and child. Taking to the stage in the drama of Oedipal overcoming that the ego must perform, the super-ego serves only to reintroduce the constitutive ambivalence responsible for its own appearance on the scene. It encourages a moral identification with the father—‘you ought to be like this’—but also imposes a prohibition or repression that safeguards the limits of such identification—‘you may not be like this’, ‘you may not do all that he does, some things are his prerogative’ (34). The ego is thus exhorted to attain maturity in the image of the parent but at the same time it is powerfully repositioned as an offspring, indeed subjected to an arresting infantilization through which Oedipal relationships are powerfully reconstituted. Thus the parent-child doublet that characterizes the ambivalent ‘familial’ role of the super-ego is strangely recreated in the very image of the ego, as if the unstable patterns of domination and struggle played out between them are intersected by an uncanny non-self-identical doubleness that destines their kinship relations to remain fraught and unresolved.

Freud tells us that the dread inspired in the ego by the super-ego is ‘the fear of conscience’ connected to the Oedipal relations that permeate their interactions (57). Here, again, the super-ego assumes a hyper-parental power while at the same time doing so through access to the legacy of an unresolved primal encounter between ego and id. Thus, one might say, the guilt inflicted upon the subject, making of them at once a conscience-following grown-up and a blameworthy adolescent, derives from the whims or caprices of an impossibly childish parent. To be fearful of ‘conscience’ is to know that, whether one accepts or rejects it, one loses either way. Conscience is cruel, in other words, casting its victim in an impossible predicament that in fact only reflects the cruel duplicity of the perpetrator. As Freud himself puts it:

In all these situations the super-ego displays its independence of the conscious ego and its intimate relations with the unconscious id... From the point of view of instinctual control, of morality, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be' (52-54)

The super-ego is at once more 'knowing' of the originary power of the unconscious than the ego might ever be, and yet at the same time, precisely to the extent that it is under the influence of the unconscious itself, such 'knowledge' must inevitably stem from what is profoundly unknowable. 'Analysis eventually shows that the super-ego is being influenced by processes that have remained unknown to the ego', writes Freud, and through this insight it becomes possible 'to discover the repressed impulses which are really at the bottom of the sense of guilt'. 'Thus in this case the super-ego knew more than the ego about the unconscious id' (51), just as psychoanalysis knows more of such matters than anyone else precisely on the strength of its unparalleled contact with unconscious forces which are themselves, nonetheless, barely susceptible to those conscious or ego-driven strategies for which the term 'knowledge' seems primarily designed. Psychoanalysis, in other words, adopts the position of the super-ego at the very moment it proclaims the possibility of such paradoxical 'knowledge' through its own conceptualisation of the ego-ideal. And, again, such a gesture may appear to us at once excessively parental and extraordinarily capricious, even infantile in both its unexamined presumption and its precocious double logic. In the process, of course, Freud's claim in 'The Ego and the Id' that psychoanalysis is 'an instrument to enable the ego to achieve a progressive conquest of the id' (56) becomes deeply problematical to the extent that through its effective identification with the super-ego such analysis is just as much embroiled in the powerful impulses of the id and presumably, therefore, just as cruel 'as only the id can be'.

It is interesting, however, that during the course of his essay Freud makes explicit the analogy between analysis and its subject-matter not by drawing out the implied identity between the psychoanalyst and the super-ego, but instead through putting the 'physician' of the psyche in the position of the ego itself. The latter he describes as 'poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers; from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego'. On this score, one can well imagine how

readily Freud might identify with such a beleaguered counterpart in trying to negotiate such complex and multiple forces or pressures. The ego, then, is presented—much like the analyst—as ‘a frontier-creature’ mediating between the world and the id. (Elsewhere he writes that the super-ego is constituted by relations that, in contrast to the ego’s facing toward the external world, are at bottom internal to the world of the id, so that the interactions between the ego and super-ego are essentially a matter of this boundary or threshold between the two (36).) Putting psychoanalysis in the position of the ego rather than that of the super-ego obviously appeals to Freud’s sense of his discipline or practice as the rational pursuit of a well-brokered relationship between the conscious and unconscious realms which inevitably weigh upon each and every individual. To the extent that such a depiction of psychoanalysis serves to ameliorate or even conceal the otherwise unfortunate connotations that may be drawn from an implied identification with the super-ego, however, the ‘frontier-creature’ is here as much guilty of forceful repression as felicitous conciliation. As Freud tells us, the ego is prone to repress the unconscious origin of its own guilt, and, in the case of the hysteric, the ego ‘fends off a distressing perception with which the criticisms of the super-ego threaten it, in the same way in which it is in the habit of fending off an unendurable object-cathexis—by an act of repression. It is the ego, therefore, that is responsible for the sense of guilt remaining unconscious’. If this is the predicament of psychoanalysis itself, it is all the more telling that Freud continues: ‘We know that as a rule the ego carries out repressions in the service and at the behest of its super-ego; but this is a case in which it has turned the same weapon against its harsh taskmaster... the ego succeeds only in keeping at a distance the material to which the sense of guilt refers’ (51-52). Freud’s own explicit identification with the ego thus turns out to constitute merely another manoeuvre in the internecine battle with that ‘harsh taskmaster’ that threatens to expose its guilty secrets. In this sense, the ‘truth’ of psychoanalysis discloses itself once more from the perspective of the super-ego, rather than emanating from the ruses of the ego—albeit that the latter turns out to deploy exactly the same weapons as its supposed adversary.

Indeed, this drift of the ego towards the super-ego that it wants to resist—a drift brought about not least because such resistance is mounted through recourse to the rival’s own amoury—leads to some rather revealing textual constructions. The ego ‘behaves like the physician during an analytic treatment’ in the sense that ‘it offers itself, with the attention it pays to the real world, as a libidinal object to the id, and aims at attaching the id’s libido to itself. It is not only a helper to the id; it is also a submissive slave who courts his master’s

love' (56). Drawn intimately to the super-ego through acts of courtship presumably bent on a certain yielding and consummation, such an ego becomes in the process an instrument of the id as much as its opponent. The distinction between ego and super-ego, so important in other parts of the text, here seems to erode. The ego itself begins to take on a semblance of cruelty, duplicity and immaturity that we've already identified as more characteristic of the id or the super-ego. It 'too often yields to the temptation to become sycophantic, opportunist and lying, like a politician who sees truth but wants to keep his place in popular favour' (56). The image of the ego—or, for that matter, the analyst—as a 'good' politician, a dignified and rational representative serving the interests of others from a balanced and dispassionate point of view, here quickly mutates into the inevitable corollary of the corrupt official who is guilty of lies and flattery, who is capable of bribery and intrigue, and whose respectable veneer is merely a convenient cover for rampant self-interest. This is the ego that uses the entire arsenal of its 'harsh taskmaster' to better resist their nature, only to succumb all the more deeply to it as a consequence. This is the ego with whom, as we've already suggested, Freud identifies, not fully appreciating the implications of such an act. Elsewhere, meanwhile, Freud observes that 'in the matter of action the ego's position is like that of a constitutional monarch, without whose sanction no law can be passed but who hesitates long before imposing his veto on any measure put forward by Parliament' (55). Once more, we glimpse an image of the ego's impotent sovereignty, its fading power eloquently traced in the effete figure of a puppet king dominated by forces they can barely comprehend. Lastly, by undergoing 'the attacks of the super-ego or perhaps even succumbing to them', the ego's fate is that of the 'protista' or protozoa that is 'destroyed by the products of decomposition that they themselves have created' (57). The fall from grace is complete, the ego reduced to a bare organism capable only of self-destruction.

### **Psycho-politics**

If such a turn of events is worrisome for a psychoanalysis that wants, however duplicitously or unadvisedly, to identify with the ego, it also suggests consequences for the organization of systems that are not merely natural but in several of Freud's examples explicitly political. This brings us back, perhaps, to Balibar's concern to weigh the political implications of the Freudian concept of the super-ego as it develops over time and in a variety of forms and contexts. As we saw, Kelsen's engagement with Freud—which Balibar views as so critical in

terms of the refinement of the latter's thinking—demonstrates Kelsen's own incapacity to entirely exclude from the juridical conception of the state that he wishes to uphold the performative injunction we might associate with the idea of a sanction, one which itself causes identification on the part of the subject with a *motivated* force or power. To the extent that this 'sanction' appears inseparable from the workings of the juridico-political in its state form, the psychoanalytic supplement to political theory is not reducible merely to therapeutic inputs designed to ameliorate regressive mythologies. Instead, the implication of Balibar's essay is that Kelsen's intervention, in all its complexity or equivocality, permits Freud not simply to dissolve the juridical back into the psychological, but rather to reframe anew the question of the psychoanalytic supplement of the political itself. For Balibar, the subject that may be derived from this encounter is less the subject of a law that itself embodies and extends a regressive psychological truth, but is instead psychically individuated in respect to the operations of a law constructed upon deeply antinomial relations. Such relations, in other words, function by intensifying and exploiting contradictions rather than by promoting or enforcing analogies and correlations, in such a way that any simplistic model tracing connections or resemblances between certain political formations, on the one hand, and particular psychic conditions, on the other, rather misses the point.

Whether or not the political 'figures' found in Freud's essay 'The Ego and the Id' work in such a way as to bear out this assertion, it is certainly true that the image of the super-ego that emerges from its pages may be characterized, on the one hand, as much by its detachment from the ego as by dint of patterns of identification or types of projection; while, on the other, the non-self-identical doubleness of ego and super-ego (far from the same thing as a correlative interrelationship) serves to position the ego in terms of forms of agency or sovereignty that are exposed as ineffectual, exploitable, and finally empty. While the 'sanction' of the constitutional monarch seems quite different from that of the super-ego, adding merely the weak veneer of respectability to a corrupt and manipulative political order, what lurks behind it is still the cruel power of a super-ego that the ego can barely repress, indeed which it may hold at arms length only to intensify by half-masking its insidious sway. The subject of the state 'sanction' for which the super-ego may provide a certain name is therefore not merely the citizen but ultimately the sovereign himself. It is also, of course, the psychoanalyst, whose ego-formation and self-identification turns out—if 'The Ego and the Id' is anything to go by—to confirm what Balibar calls the antinomial forces at work in the very question of a psychoanalytic supplement of politics. The intricate dynamics of this

question should, we must assume, be read back into not only Freud’s writings or for that matter his exchanges with interlocutors and contemporaries like Kelsen, but they must surely also condition any effort to weigh the legacy and value of psychoanalytic thought from a political perspective (including the attempt by Balibar himself). For Melanie Klein, the shift from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position in the journey of ego-formation was thought to lessen the severity of a super-ego not contingent as in Freud upon the primacy of Oedipal relations. For Lacan, certainly insofar as authors like Slavoj Žižek are concerned, the super-ego forces us to betray the law of desire, demanding *jouissance* as nothing but a violent and traumatic intrusion which causes more pain than pleasure, notably since the betrayal it imposes on us constitutes the actual origin or explanation for our guilt. However, various attempts within the field of psychoanalysis to refine or rework the concept of the super-ego are surely just as much subject to the question of this psycho-political dynamic. It is one that asks not merely about the ‘psychic’ conditions of politics, but also the ‘politics’ of psychologizing discourse in all its forms. And let us remember, its ‘double’ effects—if past results are anything to go by—are likely to be as much antinomial and divisive as they may be instructive and empowering.

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<sup>1</sup> Étienne Balibar, ‘The Invention of the Super-Ego: Freud and Kelsen, 1922’, in *Citizen Subject; Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, translated by Steven Miller with a Foreword by Emily Apter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 227-255. Where relevant, page references will be given in the main body of my essay. As well as the text on Freud, this volume includes essays on Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Blanchot, Benveniste, Derrida and Nancy, connected to its major themes.

<sup>2</sup> Étienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, translated by G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Where relevant, page references will be given in the main body of my essay.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, ‘Outline of a Topography of Cruelty: Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence’, included in Balibar’s *We, the People of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 115-132, esp. 121ff. Further page references to this text will be given in the main body of the chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Wendy Brown’s ‘Neoliberalism and the end of liberal democracy’ (*Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), 37-59), Balibar offers some commentary on this topic in his own essay, ‘Antinomies of citizenship’, *Journal of Romance Studies*, 10.2 (2010): 1-20; this material also forms the introduction to Balibar’s *Equaliberty: Political Essays* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 1-32.

<sup>5</sup> Later in the same essay, Balibar writes of Kelsen’s conception of the juridical norm as coercive, and as such based on an ideological legitimization of State violence over non-State violence: ‘An order defined in such a manner possesses an absolute character, since it isn’t possible to get outside of it or legitimately to resist it. I believe, more precisely, that according to Kelsen, such an order forms a *fiction of the absolute* in the mode of an “as if”, since it entirely depends on the *institutional supposition* of the juridical, obligatory, and

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coercive character of the “fundamental norm” that grounds it. This is the very point at which the Freudian reversal...would intervene’ (254).

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIX (1923-1925), translated under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 12-66. Where relevant, page references will be given in the main body of my essay.