

The Social Key to Dreams

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The unconscious, according to Bernard Lahire, is “socially structured.” This principle makes possible an individual sociology of dreams that requires—like all psychoanalytic interpretation—the presence of a third party to grasp the forces bearing down on the dreaming subject.

Reviewed: Bernard Lahire, *La part rêvée. L'interprétation sociologique des rêves, volume 2* (The Dreamt Part: The Sociological Interpretation of Dreams, Volume 2), Paris, La Découverte, Laboratoire des sciences sociales, 2021, 1216 p., 28 €.

La Part rêvée presents eight case studies that reveal the various effects of the social world on the dream lives of individuals. The enormous corpus of dreams it considers is interpreted in a manner consistent with the theoretical framework developed in the first volume of *L'Interprétation sociologique des rêves* (The Sociological Interpretation of Dreams), published in 2018, the major arguments of which are revisited at the beginning of the new book. This framework proposes an approach to dream formation combining the "legacy of embodied dispositions" and "an existential problematic--triggering factors and sleeping circumstances that result in specific types of symbolic expression, based on 'self-to-self communication.'" The biographical interviews summarized at the beginning of each chapter suggest the various social coordinates of each dreamer's life, while the explanatory factors framing the dream narratives identify the key events of the days preceding the dreams.

The book's goal is not only to defend the claim that dreams--which might initially seem ill-suited to such an approach--lend themselves to social-scientific analysis, but also to describe the paths that a sociological approach might follow. Bernard Lahire has developed a theory not of the social *use* of dreams--that is, of cultural modes of circulation--but of the process of dream *production*.¹ His work builds upon other sociological studies that show that individuals and intra-individual variations are possible and necessary sociological objects. This is a challenge to the Durkheim's position that private phenomenon, while socio-psychological, are not properly sociological.² There can be no sociological knowledge of individuals--in this instance, of their "dreamt part"--unless one follows Lahire (building on Bourdieu's view that the socialized body, along with institutions, constitutes one of the two indivisible forms of social existence³) in conceiving of the individual as "the social in an enfolded state." The individual is thus understood as a unique intersection of shared general shared traits. Lahire's study of dreams is a contribution to "sociology at the individual level."⁴

Case studies enable the verification of several major theses concerning the nature of dreams. First, dreams have a meaning. Second, interiority is by no means a zone of freedom, emancipated from constraint. In other words, the influence of society takes place within us; everything inside us is determined, or, at minimum, nothing occurs by chance. Lahire subscribes to the Freudian conviction that every part of a dream "appears determined in multiple ways."⁵

If the unconscious is socially structured--a claim to which we shall return--practices are incomprehensible as long as one remains "at the surface level" (32), in particular at the level of consciousness and the intentions explicitly formulated by actors. The sociological interpretation of dreams lends credence to the idea of unconscious determination, as well as the etiological importance of non-voluntary factors, even as it distinguishes unconscious determinations from practices, representations, and determinations motivated by repression.⁶ To grasp individual desire, dream content is far more relevant than the individual's conscious representations of it. Lahire embraces the view that interpretation aspires to become

¹ Bernard Lahire, *L'interprétation sociologique des rêves*, Paris, La Découverte, 2018, p. 69-70.

² Émile Durkheim, *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris, PUF, Quadrige, p. 10.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*, Paris, Minuit, 1984, p. 29.

⁴ Bernard Lahire, *Dans les plis singuliers du social. Individus, institutions, socialisations*, La Découverte, 2013, Avant-propos, p. 13.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Œuvres complètes*, IV, *L'interprétation du rêve*, Paris, Puf, 2003, p. 327.

⁶ Lahire, *L'interprétation sociologique des rêves*, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

conscious of and render explicit these hidden determinations. As subjects are usually unaware of the forces determining their dreams, of which they initially understand little, sociological interpretation, like psychoanalysis, requires a third party or a third-person description to bring to light the invisible connections between the various parts of dreams, but also between the parts of dreams, situations, experiences, objects, and real individuals.

Constellations of desires

Lahire makes the bold claim that the unconscious is "socially structured." In other words, social schema present in the body in the form of dispositions, which organize practice in specific contexts, "are transposed into dream schema" (19), that are themselves activated by trigger-events occurring in the present. If the unconscious is socially structured, it is because the social world consists of complex and occasionally unperceived regularities, which make behavior non-arbitrary and that reappears in the unconscious.

This thesis obviously presupposes the entangling of the private and the social and that dreamers' "personal" problems are problems tied to relational forms found in family life, school, work, and other social settings. These problems--for instance, difficulties at school, housing concerns, suffering experienced at work--are thus simultaneously psychological and social.⁷ The social dimension of the relationships evoked by dreams is brought into relief through the interpretations Lahire proposes. Laura's dreams, in which her ex-boyfriend Adrien appears, can involve sexuality, but they also deal with social relationships that she experiences as alienating and implying her domination (she was always the one who had to adapt and give things up). Repeated references to money are linked to social experiences of being hard up and having financial constraints, whereas some psychoanalysts, following Freud, associate orderly, frugal, and stubborn personality types with drives that result in anal eroticism.

Just as social hierarchies organize the dreamworld, the latter is also haunted by the navigation of social space: educational and economic success, religious practices and their renunciation, entry into the dominant class, and so on. For example,

⁷ Jean Furtos, "Ce que veut dire le terme de clinique psychosociale," *Empan*, Erès, 2015/2 n° 98, p. 55-59.

Gérard, who ran away from his family in the mid-1970s and who replays, at night, how he abandoned a stifling social milieu, could still dream, on the night of August 7, 2018, of a competition and a ladder he was required to climb. The analysis of a corpus of dreams demonstrates that the desires invested in dreams are not exclusively sexual, but also relate to school, professional concerns, religion, politics, and associative activities like leisure and sport.

The book calls attention to the way dream spaces translate various forms of domination into images: class domination, gender domination, domination at school, and so on. Dreams also testify to the ways in which gender norms complement bourgeois and school-based norms and burden the lives of some dreamers. The major principles of dream representation include the symbolic opposition between high and low, which expresses social difference and class structures in visual terms. This opposition is found, for example, in many of Laura's dreams. Laura is a class defector, who doubts that she belongs in a program designed to prepare her for a competitive state examination. The book uncovers an array of symbolic structural oppositions, representing social hierarchies of various kinds: heavy/light, large/slight, clean/dirty, urban/rural, active/passive, professional/amateur, pure/impure, bright/dark, pretentious/modest, and so on.

In this respect, Freud's model of interpretation downplays, according to Lahire, the incidence of recent events and experiences compared to those of early childhood, while also overdetermining the role of familial and sexual factors in dream production. At the same time, the Freudian model downplays concerns arising from secondary socialization (school, social relations, work). Tom's second dream, of March 7, 2017, prioritizes school, replaying a painful experience in university preparation classes as if it were a prison. Many dreams can only be grasped at the intersection of multiple preoccupations, including, in this instance, school, religion, and cinematography.

Yet Lahire makes an important distinction: between the revalorization of recent experiences during sleep, on the one hand, and the explanation of dreams by the contextual factors that trigger them (including the process of collecting and interpreting dreams by the sociologist leading the survey), on the other. Dreams work on fundamental issues--hence the concept of "existential problematic"--and are not simply pictures or reflections of impressions from previous days. This problematic, however, also draws on recent and decisive experiences, such as the fact that Tom twice failed the entrance exam of the *École Normale Supérieure*. Similarly, one cannot understand Louise's dream about reciting verses from an unknown poem without

noting that, shortly before, a colleague from her association had referred to her ironically as a "poet." Louise's professional situation, which remains precarious despite her educational capital, reinforces her lack of self-assurance in public situations and feeds her need for recognition and gratification. The existential problematic does not arise solely from childhood, as relational modalities and their affective coloring are constantly being configured and reconfigured over the course of an individual's life.

The point is not that the significance of childhood experiences should be rejected as relevant material for dream interpretation. To the contrary, analysts confirm, for the most part, that such experiences are important determinants of dream life. Solal, for example, replays in his dreams the essential wound inflicted by his father's departure, due to a serious depression, immediately following his birth--a wound that "determines every other" (267). But interpretation shows that there are no family experiences--which themselves are often unconscious--that are not at the same time experiences of a social milieu. Intrafamilial experience is always connected to an "outside." Consequently, it is necessary to carefully reconstruct the social characteristics of the protagonists of the family scene, in the absence of which dreams cannot be understood.

Dream coherence

An analysis of an extensive collection of dreams shows that dream production is neither chaotic nor a medley of disparate scenes, but is, to the contrary, quite systematic. Moreover, dreamers often replay "in a quasi-obsessive manner" (26) an existential difficulty that is unique to them, so that they are always having the same kind of dream. Tom repeatedly dreams that he is with a child or baby who falls, hurts itself, or breaks its neck. Gérard dreams of missing transport, planes, and so on.

In this way, by considering not specific dreams, but dream life in its entirety, it is possible to correct a major problem in dream interpretation: namely, the fact dream narratives and memories are essentially unstable. This justifies Lahire's protocols for dream collection, presented in the section entitled "Questions of Method" and followed by most of the study's dreamers: since dream images are deformed and disappear quickly, they must be written down as soon as one wakes up or when one wakes up at night. Yet dream content is notable for being insistent: memories that fade away

return to most dreamers at night when they sleep, sometimes over the course of decades.

This is particularly striking in the case of Gérard's dreams, which have been collected (without following the protocol) since 1979 (for a total of 700 dreams): "...the duration of the series constitutes an advantage that quite largely makes up for this omission [of current concerns]" (1057). This dream series reveals the dread Gérard feels due to abuse he experienced during childhood by a maternal grandfather at his family's home in Normandy. This abuse was gradually reconstituted through analysis, though Gérard has no direct memories of it. The recurrence of very similar dream scenes over more than thirty years rules out the possibility that these dreams were induced by interpretive circumstances (first analytical, then sociological), or that his dreams were simply confirmation dreams meant to satisfy the interpreters. This case study reminds us that dream thought, even when grim, can be highly systematic and coherent.

Analogies

According to Lahire, dreams develop through analogies. In other words, each part of the dream can stand for another, unexpressed part, of which it is the analogue. More generally, "dreams function by associating everything that can resemble something else, in different orders of reality..." (1008).

While dreams are never contingent, they nonetheless represent, in Lahire's view, the least censored space of expression, with the fewest taboos. This is evident in very raw dreams consisting of explicit sexual situations. Clément, for example, says that he is in the habit of dreaming of sexual relations with members of his family. While there is no dream freedom in the sense of a total absence of social influence, dreams are nonetheless a very unstructured symbolic form, in that they remain largely unaffected by social codes prohibiting certain content. Lahire sees this claim as challenging Freud's thesis that the manifest content of dreams is invariably censored. Of course, Freud maintained that the mechanisms of dream formation favored logical relationships such as resemblance, concordance, contact, and "as though" characteristics;⁸ but these are, in his view, simply ways in which the latent content can

⁸ Freud, *L'interprétation du rêve*, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

be deformed. Lahire makes a very different argument, as analogy does not consist in a disfiguration of content driven by primary processes, but refers rather to the only symbolic form available to dream thought for *presenting* things to the unconscious:

The purpose of this play of analogues is not to hide raw reality, nor is it to make it impossible to admit one's unconscious feelings to oneself. It is simply the only means available to dreams for working on existential problems. (782)

Variants and invariants

Though dreams are always unique to individuals, they also have general characteristics: a science of dreams makes it necessary to "de-particularize" (60) this phenomenon--in other words, to grasp the general mechanisms at play in expressions that are nonetheless so singular. First, there are the great symbolic processes at work in dream formation. In chapter 6 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud sought to describe the laws relating to the production and organization of dream material: condensation, displacement, symbolism, secondary revision, and so on. But this generality also results from the embodied social dimension that finds representation in dreams. The social forms that structure dreams endow them with a kind of regularity. Case studies notably show how being a class defector and the related feeling of illegitimacy can affect dreams. Yet Lahire does more than offer a theory of the unconscious representations of class defectors. The sociology of unique circumstances exposes itself to the difficulty that it requires considerable time and resources (hundreds of hours per case) and that it is not possible, consequently, to find quick and easy evidence for a particular thesis over a large number of cases.

The point is not that these individuals all have the same dreams, but rather that this existential concern is at the forefront of the motivations shaping many of their dreams. Lahire studies, incidentally, the dream production of members of a same sibling group, socialized in a similar environment. Some elements of their existential problematic might be expected to result in similar symbolic expressions. For example, Laura's twin sister faced the same economic constraints in childhood, as well as the same need to finance her studies as Laura, which nurtured a strong inclination towards frugality (particularly in relation to food), a fear of waste, and a degree of asceticism. Hence Laura does not only suffer from a personal obsessive disorder, expressing itself in dreams, but also from a disposition that is socially conditioned by her family's socio-economic situation.

Yet the general characteristics of dreams also results from the coherence of the enigma that recurs night after night. Consequently, to analyze a sequence of dreams often means analyzing these recurrences. The sociological understanding of dreams draws on the tendency of dreams, which Lahire has identified, "to objectify subjective relations to things" and "reify feelings" (142)--a tendency that makes dreams something more than a purely subjective phenomenon. Put differently, self-to-self communication does not obscure reality by individualizing it but makes it more visible by giving it a visual form that objectifies it. Even so, the coherence of dreams is far from given, and sociologists must reconstitute them into dream collections that at first glance seem composite. These general characteristics of dreams allow Lahire to speak of his case studies' "universal value" (212).

The sociological interpretation of dreams thus provides an opportunity to revisit the question of invariants, which elicits great resistance in contemporary social science. It is indeed the case, as Lahire explains, that the social sciences study variations (inter-civilizations, inter-epochs, inter-societies, inter-groups, and inter-classes): "From the outset, sociology takes as its object the social variations of behavior and thought of *homo sociologicus*."⁹ But this does not mean that everything is variable: the book shows that dream content includes material that varies in relation to the historical, cultural, social, and gender attributes (among others) of dreamers, and, of course, in relation to each individual's unique story. But it also shows that dreams partake in the human as such: "Indeed, I presume that dreams are an invariant" (1150). He further maintains that dreams make use of universal symbolic resources (analogies, metaphors, condensation, visual structuring, and so on). In this instance, the identification of invariants does not imply a disavowal of historical and social difference, but is a condition of recognizing it, as no sociological interpretation of dreams is possible without establishing such a language. For our part, we would rather speak of symbolic manufacturing or symbolic mechanisms, as we are not sure that dreams pertain solely to language.¹⁰

⁹ Lahire, *Dans les plis singuliers du social*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁰ See Jean-François Lyotard, "Le travail du rêve ne pense pas," *Discours, figure*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1985, p. 239-270 at 270.

Conclusions

If sociology allows us to better understand the "dreamt part of our lives" (17), it is because the latter is characterized by order. We have indicated that dream life is determined through and through, that the unconscious which expresses itself in dreams is not only structured, but socially structured, and that dream life is highly coherent. Order conditions the possibility of interpretation. Interpretation is also conditioned by the existence of the general symbolic mechanisms at work in all dream formation, such as analogy. In this respect, the book advances the study of dreams by deepening, correcting, and bringing to completion existing interpretive models and providing more cohesive tools.

The book raises all kinds of questions, which is hardly surprising, given the vastness of its research field: namely, the sociological interpretation of dreams and, more broadly, of imaginary production. Some of these questions will undoubtedly be addressed in future publications that Lahire has announced. It will be interesting, for example, to learn about developments relating to the analysis of affects in dreams. If, as Lahire reminds us, "dreams are extremely logical visual and emotional entities" (25), the major symbolic operations seem particularly well suited to explaining the formation and meaning of visual representations and images found in dreams, without necessarily providing an economy of affects. One might also question the thesis, borrowed from Freud, that dreamers are selfish.¹¹ That dreamers are always selfish means that the problems encountered by a dream's protagonists inevitably echo the dreamer's own problems, even when the feeling of empathy is at play. It would be interesting to understand how and why, if the social and other relational forms shape dreams, the other does not exist, for the dreaming subject, as a possible object of genuine preoccupation. In other words, it is necessary to explain the connection between the social character of dreams and the dreaming subject's fundamental narcissism.¹²

Finally, we note that Lahire raises--without exactly settling it--the question of "the creative potential of each individual--even the least creative--as a dreaming subject" (355). This question has several components. First, there is the question of the degree of innovation in a dream production in relation to the universal cognitive and

¹¹ See Freud, "Du rêve," *Œuvres complètes*, V, Paris, PUF, 2012, p. 15-7 at, 50 and *Interprétation du rêve*, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

¹² To examine the claim that only selfish motives inspire dreams, see Silvia Amati Sas' analyses of the possible presence in dreams of "objects to save"--that is, of a concern for others.

psychic mechanisms that make it possible. Then, there is the fact that dreams may transform the problems that they address. Are dreams a space for "deciphering" enigmas, due to the fact that they can be replayed--in which sociological interpretation can help bring about "consciousness raising" effects resulting from its efforts to explain the experiences played out in dreams? Or are dreams a *dénouement* (525), which implies, perhaps, that they *add* something to the materials they use? Lahire writes about Gérard's case: "It is as if dreams were a space for the expression of personal difficulties and a safety valve allowing him to live a life he considers happy." Lahire thus condenses two dimensions, one that is expressive and mimetic, and one in which the dream is transformative. This aspect raises interesting questions about Freudian theory. Freud maintained that dream work is not creative, but does nothing more than condense, displace, and rearrange material in order to visualize it¹³--a claim that is currently disputed by theorists who emphasize the creative potential of dreams.¹⁴.

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¹³ Freud, "Du rêve," *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁴ Christophe Dejours, "Le rêve: révélateur ou architecte de l'inconscient," p. 7-38, *Psychiatrie française*, XXXVII, 2006/2, 2006.