Book Review of “Dreaming in Dark Times” by Sharon Sliwinski

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Summary. Sharon Sliwinski’s book, *Dreaming in Dark Times*, reads dreams drawn from six bleak historical moments in the 20th century as texts in *political thought*. The book convincingly argues that rather than being a purely psychological phenomenon, dreams often dramatize harsh political realities, and might also become a potent political resource for resisting these realities. The book works through a productive tension between the dream that “shield[s] us against the world’s impingements,” and the dream that invites us into the world. However, Sliwinski’s ultimate commitment to a representation of the dream as a last preserve of individuality downplays the great subversive, even conspiratorial political horizon that the book promised by tying our dreams to the collective work of world-building.

In the very final paragraphs of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes:

> *“I think that the Roman Emperor was in the wrong when he had one of his subjects executed because he had dreamt of murdering the emperor […]. Would it not be right to bear in mind Plato’s dictum that the virtuous man is content to* dream *what a wicked man really does? I think it best, therefore to acquit dreams” (in: Schorske, 1981, p. 202).*

Sharon Sliwinski’s book, *Dreaming in Dark Times*, can be read as an attempt to disturb what Freud hoped he settled in these concluding lines of his seminal work. If Freud implores us to *acquit* dreams, the achievement of Sliwinski’s book is that it *implicates* them. The book is an endeavor in six chapters to read dreams as an “important species of *political thought*” (Sliwinski, 2017, 119). Each of the chapters re-inscribes a dream plucked from the historical record back into the bleak historical moment of its gestation: political imprisonment in apartheid South Africa (chapter one), sexual violence (chapter two), the horrors of total war (chapters three and four), colonialism and racial violence (chapter five) and totalitarianism (chapter six). In times of major political crisis, Sliwinski argues, dreaming—a seemingly private nocturnal phenomenon—might give voice to the unconscious not only of an individual dreamer, but of a society. Freud conceded that “the *furniture* of dream-life is borrowed from the real world” (118). But Sliwinski shows that in oppressive political situations, dreams might not only use the furniture from the real world, but also turn them into improvised barricades, so to speak. In other words, Sliwinski argues that in dark times, dreams become a potent site of resistance, *dis*-illusionment, and truth-telling—the stuff of which subversive political action is made. “In our *own* dark times,” Sliwinski writes, “attending to this alternative form of thinking may just help us live through, resist, and ultimately transfigure our shared social and political landscapes otherwise.”

The book provides two main reasons for why we should think about dreams as politically interesting. The first has to do with what we might call their ‘realist core.’ A vivid illustration of this idea comes in chapter five, *The Colonial Defense*, where Sliwinski discusses Frantz Fanon’s persistent interest in dream life. When a 14 year old Malagasy colonial subject relayed a dream in which he was chased at gunpoint by a soldier, the psychoanalyst and colonial agent in Madagascar, Octave Mannoni, interpreted the dream as conveying a sexual phallic fantasy. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon retorts to Mannoni: “*one should not lose sight of the real*” (100). The rifle, he insists, “is not a penis, but a genuine rifle, model Lebel 1916” (101). As Sliwinski summarizes it, Fanon’s clinical notes suggest that “dreamlife became one of the most dramatic theaters in which Algeria’s colonial war played out” (95). Dreams, as this extraordinary example shows, inevitably convey what Sliwinski calls ‘the DNA of their time’—“the conflicts that preoccupy a particular cultural milieu, but which remain latent in its public discourse” (xii). Dreams are both symptomatic dramatizations of these unprocessed political crises, and means of “metabolizing” them, both internally, and in concert with others. This ‘digesting in concert’ constitutes the second reason we should think about dreams as political.

Sliwinski observes that “dreams have a way of compelling us to speak” (xiii). Sharing a dream with others, the book shows, might be a potent form of political action. Chapter two, *The Mother’s Defense*, is a powerful illustration of this second part of Sliwinski’s wager. Sliwinski offers there a compelling reading of the case of a woman she calls Frau K, a patient of Freud’s who dreamt she saw her fifteen-year-old daughter lying dead in a box. Freud thinks that the box symbolizes a womb and reads this dream as fulfilment of a wish for infanticide. Indeed, Frau K admitted to Freud that while pregnant she wished that the child—the product of an abusive marriage—might die in her womb. But here the question that interests Sliwinski is not so much one of how to interpret the meaning of Frau K’s confession. Rather, Sliwinski calls our attention to the performativity of her utterance. What enables this different focus is an inspired pairing: Sliwinski reads Frau K’s story alongside Euripides’ Kreousa. The Greek queen was raped by Apollo, and, like Frau K, gave birth to an unwanted child she was determined to let die. But Kreousa is also, in Michel Foucault’s rendering, a

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practitioner of what the ancient Greeks called *parrhesia*, a form of public speech that involves the courage of truth telling. In one of the most dramatic moments of the play Kreousa bursts out at the gates of Apollo's temple with the truth about her rape. In reading these two women together Sliwinski reanimates the scene in which Frau K makes her utterance, thus allowing us to appreciate what we might call Frau K's "me too" moment. Sliwinski demonstrates the political courage this 19th century Viennese woman must have had to summon in order *to risk letting her dream* (her nightmare? her fantasy?) *appear in this political world*, as Julia Kristeva would have it (2006). In disclosing her dream, Frau K is not only letting a latent meaning surface, she is also, says Sliwinski, "reinsert[ing] herself into the web of human affairs, transposing her private concerns into the material of the social fabric" (Sliwinski, 2017, p. 42).

Two thinkers keep Sliwinski company throughout her six exercises: Sigmund Freud and Hannah Arendt. We might say that they inspire the two parts of Sliwinski's argument. The first part, that dreams symptomize the unconscious of society, suggests a Freudian *quest for meaning-making*. As Sliwinski notes, Freud parted ways with the scientific milieu of his time when he made the simple but revolutionary observation that dreams are meaningful, interpretable content. The second part, that the impulse to communicate dreams makes them "a political matter proper," suggests an Arendtian *quest for world-making* (41).

Neither Arendt nor Freud is an obvious choice for a book that seeks to flesh out the politics of dreaming, as both are known (each for different reasons) for their reluctance to politicize inner life. This odd match, however, yields one of the most fascinating insights of the book: that our dreams are not entirely our own; that they "possess a queer kind of agency that outstrips our conscious control" and is not simply reducible to the canny meanderings of the unconscious (xxi). Like the poor lovers whose dreams, according to Shakespeare's Mercutio, are delivered into their brains by the whimsical dream fairy, Queen Mab, we are at the mercy of the foreignness of our own dreams. As a result of this lack of control, to communicate a dream, is always, in a way, to *speak without power*—"in a fashion that does not assume sovereign authority over the events" (127), and that is always at the risk of disclosing too much. Freud knew this all too well: "It inevitably follow[s]," he writes about his decision to use his own dreams as the central source material for *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "that I should have to reveal to the public gaze more of the intimacies of my mental life than I liked, or than is normally necessary for any writer who is a man of science and not a poet" (17). The notion of revealing to the public gaze more than one liked is startlingly similar to the way Arendt thinks about the risk and the promise of acting in the public sphere. And Arendt and Freud would seem to agree that this attenuated agency that our dream-life inflicts on us is not necessarily a bad thing.

To illustrate why this might be the case, we might return to Frau K. When she discloses her dream to Freud, she surely is not fully aware of its explosive or incriminating implications. How could she be? The meaning is not a readymade thing awaiting excavation. It emerges in the course of talk-therapy. The fact that she is speaking without power, that she is under the spell of her dream, makes the utterance risky, but it is also, in a sense, what makes her speaking truth to power possible and permissible. As Sliwinski puts it, Frau K's dream "provided a home for an experimental thought that could not be thought otherwise"—neither the idea of aborting an unwanted pregnancy, nor of spousal rape. On Freud's couch, however, "the dreamer found the courage to speak of it freely" (33). This is what makes political action for Arendt, and dream narration qua political action for Sliwinski, so risky, *and* so politically exciting. And as we know, a courageous utterance may fail, as when Mannoni casts a politically explosive dream into the castrating language of a sexual fantasy; or it may succeed, as when contemporary Kreousas and Frau K's speak up, and maybe even inaugurate their own "me too" movement.

The politically potent side of the idea that our dreams are "delivered to us from someone and somewhere else" receives daunting resonance in the sixth (and last) chapter, *On Folding Force*, where the whimsical Queen Mab (a "cruel and inconstant sprite," but still, a fairy), gives way to a perverse double: the chilling notion of Nazi manufactured dreams. The focus of the chapter is a 1968 book, *The Third Reich of Dreams*, authored by the Berliner journalist Charlotte Beradt who in the course of the 1930s documented dreams narrated by more than three hundred Germans, many brimming with high-ranking Nazis, storm-troopers, banners and slogans. As Sliwinski notes, Beradt finds in the dreams bleak evidence of how "the dictatorship effectively colonized the unconscious of its citizens" and implanted images in their psyches (117). Sliwinski, however, finds in the collection a more encouraging story: perhaps the dreamers resisted the dictatorship on a nightly basis—a testament to the victory and unassailability of the human psyche. "Dream-life," she concludes, "can serve as one of our *last and most important preserves* to stage a claim for the freedom of thought—in dream-life if nowhere else" (119).

This insistence on dream-life as a last bastion of individuality is in keeping with Sliwinski's commitment throughout the book to the idea that the dream is a "protective shield against attacks on our being" (14). Tellingly, all the chapter titles except for the last one indicate that the dream is the "Defense" of the Prisoner, Mother, Soldier, Artist, or Colonial Subject. Here, what was a tension for most of the book—between the dream that shields us from the world and the dream that invites us into the world, between what the dream protects and what it risks—seems now to be decided. This conclusion sounds a melancholic note. The ultimate representation of dreams as a bastion restricts the political horizon that was promised earlier, when Sliwinski tied our dreams to the collective work of world-building that might follow.

In Sliwinski's intriguing "Note on Technique" in the introduction I find a telling example of the political horizon the book opens up, but does not fully pursue. She explains there that her methodology in reading dreams from the historical record takes inspiration from two puppeteers who told her that in working out how to represent puppets in the act of dreaming, they realized that while lying down, the puppets *had to breathe*. Borrowing from the puppeteers' insight, Sliwinski says that she had strived in her book to "set the stage in a way so that each of the dreams under scrutiny might be given room to breathe" (xxii). Dreaming, Sliwinski explains, is an "intersubjective event that requires animation" (xxi).

An intersubjective event that requires animation is also quite an accurate definition for *conspiracy* (in Latin: "those who breathe together"). Could it be that this seemingly innocent "note on technique" is more substantial than technical? Sliwinski's book is after all dotted with hopeful, but underexplored democratic conspiratorial moments that her dreams and dreamers summon up. One of them is surely the gesture of trust Beradt's interlocutors made when they risked confiding to her pieces of their inner lives in a radically terrorized society. Sliwinski notes in passing that some were reluctant to disclose their dreams. But that they nevertheless *did* take the risk, goes unappreciated. To return to Frau K and her courageous speech-act, it seems to me that the most urgent lesson from her story for us today, is that in dark times, to breathe, dream and conspire with others, to speak without power, without protections, is a risk we must take.

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