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Foreword to the second Italian edition, edited by Andrea Di Fiorino

Vladimir Michailovič Bekhterev: “Suggestion and its role in social life”

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Хара Предисловие ко второму итальянское издание, под редакцией Андреа Ди Фиорино

Владимир Михайлович Бехтерев “Внушение и его роль в общественной жизни”

The work “Suggestion and its role in social life” is worth a new Italian edition. The first Italian edition was at 1909 (Turin, Fratelli Bocca editori), ten years after the first edition in Russian. The interest of the book may be measured by three Russian editions, in 1899, 1903 and 1908. The first German edition was at 1899. The French edition was at 1910. The English translation, a very careful work of the editor Lloyd H. Strickland, was very recent, at 1998, based on the third Russian edition (Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey).

Vladimir Mikailovitch Bekhterev was an outstanding man of science, neurologist, psychiatrist and psychologist, a clinician and experimental investigator in different domains, from anatomy, physiology, to mental and nervous disorders, biology and sociology. He theorized an integrative view of nature, from physical realms to psyche, named reflexology. The conception of reflex had a much broader sense than the conception of Pavlov’s conditioned reflex. Bekhterev (1857-1927) and Pavlov (1849- 1936) lived both at St. Petersburg (Petrograd, Leningrad) in the same epoch of heroic discoveries of some fundamental laws of the activity of the brain and mind. Pavlov was Nobel Prize at 1904.

Bekhterev was a medical doctor, a neuropsychiatrist and a psychotherapist, with an intense clinical practice, but also a science investigator. The magnitude of his work can be measured by the establishment of several laboratories of investigation as the Psycho-physiological Laboratory of Kazan(1885) and the Psycho-neurological Institute of St. Petersburg (1907). The famous Institute for the study of the brain and psychic activity of Petrograd was founded under his initiative at 1918 and since then directed by him, working as an important center of teaching and investigation, from basic biological sciences, with salience to the study of the brain, to psychology, pedagogy and sociology. He published around 600 scientific papers. The most important works are Suggestion and its Role in Social Life (1899), Consciousness and its Borders(1888), Psyche an Life (1902), Objective Psychology (1907), Subject Matter and Tasks of Social Psychology as an Objective Science (1911), Collective Reflexology (1921) and General Principles of Human Reflexology (1926). An Autobiography was published at 1928, after his death. The scientific journals founded by Bekhterev are the “Neurologic bulletin” (1893), the “Archives of psychiatry, neurology and experimental psychology” (1896) and the “Bulletin of psychology, criminal anthropology and hypnotism” (1904).

Bekhterev was a skilled hypnotist, and had a contact with French schools of hypnosis and suggestion, namely Charcot directly attending his lessons (1884) and also knowing Bernheim’s theory.

The end of the nineteenth century reintroduced the problem of hypnosis, the sleeping beauty of psychology since the scientific rejection of mesmeric fluid and magnetism. The study of these phenomena is linked with the study of hysteria with the authority of Charcot at Salpêtrière. It is here the dilemma between organogenesis and psychogenesis, between neurology, functional and anatomical, and psychiatry or psychology; the birth of psychoanalysis whose method refuses any kind of suggestion. Suggestion and its role in social life (Vnushenie i evo rol’ v obshechestvennoi zhizni) is a book of the moment, the turning of the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

Bekhterev is well acquainted with the main authors, on the matter of suggestion and hypnosis, that we

will mention: Binet, Feré, Bernheim, Charcot, Lefèvre, Sydis, Stoll, Ochorowitz, Vigouroux, Juquelier, Rossi, Michailovski, Forel, Lowenfeld, Wundt and P. Janet. On the question of the so called psychic epidemics (folie à deux, folie à millions...), the author refers Calmeil, Landel, Laségue, Falret, Legrand de Saule, Regnard, Baillarger, Moreau de Tours and Morel. Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde are also mentioned on the psychology of the crowds.

The book is planed in three parts. The first seven chapters are about suggestion in general, an introduction to the subject. He stresses the difference between suggestion and hypnosis. Everyday social suggestion is seen as a normative context for the development of personality. His knowledge follows the school of Liébault-Bernheim. The second part, from the 8th to the 21th chapter, is the illustration of the pathological collective behaviors and ideas produced by suggestion, the mental epidemics, with different forms and contents, and some collective acute behaviors. It is interesting as social psychology, social psychiatry and cultural history. The two last chapters review the subject and the importance of suggestion in social life and its mechanisms.

The problems of suggestion remain as an important subject of investigation for Bekhterev. He published several papers on suggestion on pedagogy and psychotherapy: Suggestion and education (in "Questions of pathological pedagogy"; 1912); Role of suggestion in pedagogic action (Petrograd, 1916); Hypnosis, suggestion and psychotherapy and its curative role (Bulletin of knowledge, 1911); About hypnotic and suggestive influence on the conditioned reflexes; and other papers on the use of hypnosis as a therapeutic method.

In the important work, *Collective Reflexology* (1921), a chapter is about "Mutual Suggestion, mutual imitation and mutual induction". Bekhterev was interested in phenomena of direct mental suggestion and made experiments to influence behavior of dogs at distance. With a cautious consideration on the possibility of this kind of direct suggestion he says:

All the above brings us to the conclusion that experiments on so-called "mental" suggestion, or – more precisely- direct induction, are successful when conducted with excitable people, as well with animals. This convinces us that in a crowd, besides mutual suggestion and the so-called contagion that stimulates direct imitation, there must also exist a special factor in the form of direct impact via the immediate transmission of excitation from the brain centers of one individual to the corresponding centers of another individual. At this point, a detailed discussion of the mode of this transmission would transcend the limits of our present goal (*Collective reflexology*, p. 159).

The importance of this subject of investigation led Bekhterev to the constitution in 1922 of a special Commission for the Study of Mental Suggestion, attached to the Institute of Brain Research (in *Experiments on mental Suggestion*, 2002). This research was pursued mainly by Leonid Vassiliev (1891-1966). Suggestion remained an important art to awaken psychic reserves in a psychotherapeutic direction with Konstantin I. Platonov (Krakhov, Ukraine) and a pedagogical and psychotherapeutic orientation with Georgi Lozanov's *Suggestopedya* (Sofia, Bulgaria).

Close to death Bekhterev synthesized the essence of suggestion in this way:

Differently of persuasion, suggestion penetrates man's consciousness not through the front door, but through the back-door, to avoid the concierge: the insight.(...) Suggestion must be considered as a sort of graft in the psyche of a person, of feelings, emotions and other psychological states, through the word and the gesture, hidden from the attention and the reason of the subject. (Quotation of Bekhterev in "L'hypnose et la suggestion dans la Clinique des maladies internes", P. Boule)

The way social suggestion works nowadays is different in its expression, but not less important with the mass media as a decisive way of control of mind and behavior. The visibility of the means escapes as usual. As a psychological factor, therapeutic or not, it's pervasive and worth consideration.

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