

Thinking Between Shores: Georges Devereux

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From the margins to which he was confined, Georges Devereux (1908-1985) formulated some of the most original scientific work of his century. In the wake of Freud, whose legacy he firmly defended, Devereux initiated the transcultural practice of psychiatry. François Laplantine, one of his former disciples, reconsiders the legacy of ethnopsychanalysis' founder.

The theatrical release in September 2013 of Arnaud Desplechin's film *Jimmy P: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian*, adapted from a book by Georges Devereux first published in 1951,¹ represents an opportunity to introduce the thought of a major figure of twentieth-century social science to an audience extending beyond psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and anthropologists.

Masters and disciples

Born in Lugós in Hungary in 1908, Georges Devereux immigrated to France at the age of eighteen. He first studied physics and chemistry with Marie Curie. In 1931, he attended lectures at the Paris Ethnological Institute by Marcel Mauss, whom until his death he regarded as his master. As both a psychoanalyst and an anthropologist, like his fellow countrymen Géza Róheim,² he lived first among the Sedang Moi of Vietnam, then among North America's Mohave Indians. He often told me that it was thanks to the latter that he truly came to understand Freud's thought.

Devereux was a professor in several American universities, where he taught anthropology. He was naturalized American in 1941. However, finding himself deeply disappointed by American society, which he reproached for misunderstanding psychoanalysis and embracing the culturalist model (to which he contrasted what he called "cultural universality"), he returned to France in 1963. Claude Lévi-Strauss offered him the opportunity to teach ethnopsychiatry at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Devereux developed an approach that was resolutely interdisciplinary: it claimed to grasp the cultural dimension of mental afflictions and the

¹ Georges Devereux, *Reality and Dream: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian*, New York, International University Press, 1951.

² Géza Róheim (1891-1953) was among the first to apply psychoanalytic concepts to anthropological research. Convinced that "the key to anthropological data must be found in unconscious or primary processes," he studied the dreams, as well as the songs, ceremonies, and the games of many populations, in Europe (he was interested in Hungarian folklore) but also in Africa, America, and Oceania (he made a brief visit to Somalia, and worked on Australian totemism and the Yuma and Navajo Indians). These experiences resulted in a number of foundational works, including *Psycho-Analysis of Primitive Cultural Types* (1932). The rise of Nazism forced Róheim, who belonged to a Jewish family, to go into exile in the United States, where he founded a major journal, *Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences*.

pathological dimension of culture, while avoiding the twofold danger of claiming that all psychiatry is culturally relative, on the one hand, and conceiving of culture as an entirely psychiatric phenomenon, on the other.

By examining the way that psychic processes relate to cultural ones (of all cultures, not only that of the individuals suffering from mental problems), Devereux developed an original form of psychotherapy, one that was not primarily aimed at re-adaptation. He believed that some societies are pathogenic, leading individuals down the road of what he called deculturation.”³

Rather than first explaining this complex theory and practice (which can only develop over time, in relationships that allow for free association, as Desplechin’s film shows), I have chosen to take as my starting point my own encounter with Devereux, who was himself an extremely complex person. What struck me the first time I set foot in his apartment in Antony, the Paris suburb, was the cordial footing upon which he placed our relationship, even as he remained in charge. From the outset, he essentially told me, as I assume he told all his students: “If you want to do your thesis with me, we have to call each other *tu* [i.e., the informal pronoun].” He preferred such closeness and even friendship, despite the fact that there was never any question, if one wanted to work with him, of following a trail other than the one he had blazed. He considered himself an immediate heir to Freud. Between Freud and himself, there probably was only Róheim and Ferenczi.⁴ Devereux did not want a successor. Strictly speaking, only the transcultural clinic established by Marie Rose Moro⁵—who never knew him—was directly inspired by his work.

Dreamed Cultures

Devereux wanted nothing to do with his homeland, Hungary. Nor did religion interest him, other than as a psychotic illusion. I gradually realized that he had significantly modified his background. Despite writing the vast majority of his work in English, he gave one the impression that he had been born in France; at the age of twenty-four, he had changed his name, choosing a French-sounding surname. In fact, he came from a German-Hungarian Jewish family from Transylvania, a region joined to Romania in 1920. But he hid—even replaced—this part of his identity. He thus chose the French language and culture at the expense of the German language and culture; then, he opted for the culture of the Plains Indians over the Judaism and Athenian civilization over Sparta’s militaristic society. The people he identified with were the Mohave Indians, who had developed what he called a “culture of the dream.” When he died, his ashes were spread over the Pacific Ocean, near their homeland, as he had wished.

³ On this notion, as well as that of “acculturation,” see the box below.

⁴ Sandor Ferenczi (1873-1933) met Freud in 1907, while he was working in Hungary as an expert psychiatrist. Having become his disciple, Ferenczi went onto train, in turn, Géza Róheim and Melanie Klein. Following the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918, he was given the first chair of psychoanalysis at the University of Budapest. Freud received *Thalassa* (1924), his major work, the initial subtitle of which was *Outline of a Theory of Genitality*, with some reservations, less because it claimed to cure neurosis than because it proposed therapeutic practices that struck him as debatable (notably the use of frustration and satisfaction).

⁵ http://www.marierosemoro.fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=40&Itemid=54

Devereux had three great enemies: first, religion and drugs, which lead us, he believed, to flee reality. He saw religion as a kind of addiction, despite being a heavy smoker himself (he smoked four packs a day). A third enemy, which infuriated him, was Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The inventor of ethnopsychanalysis was convinced that the experience of what anthropologists call the “field” (which begins when we encounter others through a process of self-decentering) is inseparable from psychoanalytic treatment (in which we encounter the other inside us—the scandal of the unconscious). This is why he expected anyone who undertook fieldwork to undergo analysis, from which no one, he warned, emerged intact. Mine lasted six years. He did not simply encourage one to experience psychoanalysis personally; he required it. He told all his students: “If you want to become anthropologists, you have to undergo psychoanalysis first. If you are not psychoanalyzed, you will project all your fantasies onto other people.” And he was right.

Orthodoxies and marginalities

Georges Devereux had a difficult relationship with the university milieu. While he was on poor terms with most anthropologists, he nonetheless had three friends: the British classicist E. R. Dodds, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roger Bastide. The latter two later helped him to become an adjunct professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.

It is hard to imagine two intellectual oeuvres and personalities more different than Devereux’s and Bastide’s.⁶ The former maintained that encounters between cultures can be traumatic: what he called “antagonistic acculturation” can result in deculturation and a replacement of myths by symptoms. By contrast, Bastide, without neglecting the study of failed acculturation, was far more impressed by successful transculturation, such as intermixing in Brazil. He shared none of Devereux’s disillusioned, pessimistic vision, which one also finds in Freud and Lévi-Strauss. But the two men held each other in high esteem and were close friends. Bastide wrote the preface to Devereux’s *Basic Problems of Ethnopsychiatry*.⁷ And I recall his great sadness when I informed him that Bastide, whom I had known sick, had just died.

⁶ Motivated by curiosity that transcended geographic and disciplinary borders, Roger Bastide (1898-1974) left France, where he cut his teeth teaching high school, to teach sociology at the University of São Paulo. Between 1938 and 1952, he researched the relationship between the unconscious and the social, working on the phenomena of acculturation, social psychiatry, and religious phenomena from an ethnological perspective. He became a doctor in 1957 and returned to France, where he taught social psychiatry at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, before becoming a professor of ethnology and religious sociology, before becoming one of the occupants of the chair of ethnology.

⁷ Georges Devereux, *Basic Problems of Ethnopsychiatry*, Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 1980.

“Acculturation” refers to two distinct types of phenomenon:

1. The processes through which a child raised in a given culture acquires this culture’s behavior, norms, and values. Acculturation, in this sense, is nothing more than socialization.
2. The domination of one culture by another which, in imposing its values, leads the dominated culture to adopt (consciously or unconsciously) the models of the dominant culture. Colonization can be considered the most important form of acculturation.

Deculturation, which is often a consequence of acculturation in this second sense, is a process whereby identity is lost. The subject retreats not only from the culture in which she was socialized, but from all culture. The corollary of deculturation is desymbolization and desublimation.

To complete this brief overview of the relationship between the founder of ethnopsychiatry and the anthropological thought of his era, it should be mentioned that he hated (which may be too strong a word) or was at least wary of (which may be too weak) North American cultural anthropology, particularly the work of Margaret Mead. He had no toleration for cultural relativism, which led him to embrace a universalistic position that strikes me today as extremely strained. Devereux thus professed absolute faithfulness to Freud and a form of positivistic conservatism, while accepting the marginal position to which the academy confined him: his position in the university remained precarious, and only in 1964 did the Paris Psychoanalytic Society acknowledge him—and then, simply as a member.

An Original—But Compartmentalized—Thought

Devereux thus had a surprising personality, mixing boldness and conservatism, gentleness and rigidity—which, at times, could be dogmatic. Yet in the social sciences, he invented an exceptionally rigorous and fruitful method. I developed gradually in relation to Devereux. I was an unfaithful disciple, but a disciple all the same. What must, in my view, be called into question is the solidity of the boundaries he created. He distinguished between neurotic and psychotic structures that could be individual and social, asserted that shamans were mentally ill, and he embraced a firm conception of Freud’s “reality principle.”⁸ He was also very indebted to the structuralism of the fifties and sixties, which was based on invariables. Finally, he diagnosed so-called “Western” societies as increasingly schizophrenic, whereas since, in my opinion, our age is of depression.

Despite these reservations, I see two of his intellectual contributions as invaluable:

1. Devereux was the founder of a theory of knowledge: the “epistemology of complementarity” that he developed using Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle (1927), drawing on all the latter’s implications for studying the relationship between psychic and cultural life. Heisenberg demonstrated that there was no way to observe an electron without creating a situation that would modify it, that one could not *simultaneously* determine an electron’s position and speed with the same precision, or, put differently, that one could not perceive a particle’s characteristics as a wave and particle under a microscope at the same time.

⁸ For Devereux, transgressing Freud’s “reality principle” was almost synonymous with a denial of reality, which could result in psychotic hallucination.

Drawing on this principle from quantum physics, Devereux in 1938 created his epistemology of complementarity, which he explained as follows: while every phenomenon lends itself to at least *two explanations*, a psychological explanation and an anthropological one, both *cannot be pursued simultaneously*. Conscious of the fact that, as Robert Bresson once said, drawing on his filmmaking experience, “one cannot show all sides at once,” Devereux argued that one cannot simultaneously hold a cultural discourse and a psychological discourse. Consequently, he developed an ethnopsychiatric method that was firmly opposed to a jumbled, hodgepodge, or syncretic attitude, which he regarded as a sign of laziness on the part of intellectuals—or, at the very least, of intelligence.

In these circumstances, one must maintain a methodological *disjunction* between a psychoanalytic and an analytic approach, while at the same time acknowledging their epistemological *inclusion*, as the psyche is internalized culture (or “introjected,”⁹ as psychoanalysts say) and culture a projection of the psyche.

2. Devereux drew a second implication from Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle: the need to reintegrate the researcher into the field of observation. Just as Heisenberg showed that one could not observe an electron without creating a situation that modifies it, Devereux notes that the presence of an observer disturbs the observed and creates a new phenomenon, which would not have occurred without the observer or that would have been different if it were someone else being observed. The point is to put the physicist back into the experience of physical observations (Einstein, Heisenberg), the painter into the painting (Velásquez, Frida Khalo), the director into the film (from Jean Renoir to Agnès Jaoui), the therapist into the therapy, and, with Devereux, the observer and her affectivities in the social sciences.

The modification of the phenomenon being studied, resulting from the presence of the observer (in anthropology) or the therapist (in psychoanalysis), does not only, for the author of *From Anxiety to Method*,¹⁰ lead to a deformation, the effects of which must be neutralized by an objectifying process (notably through quantitative distancing), but, to the contrary, a source of extremely valuable information that must be made use of by considering the observer, and specifically by analyzing the nature of the *countertransference disturbance* occurring in her.

Transference is the process whereby the patients’ feelings are projected onto the analyst. Countertransference is the analyst’s reactions to what the patient says (and doesn’t say). The transference and countertransference situation is far, however, from being confined to psychotherapy. It also exists in the relationship that anthropology establishes with people in the societies it studies. Devereux realized that he felt no affinity for the Sedang Moi culture, to the point that he even developed towards it what psychoanalysts call “negative countertransference,” even as he literally fell in love with the culture of the Mohave Indians, who triggered in him a “positive countertransference.” This is something I personally experienced in studying,

⁹ The psyche is formed through contact with the outside world, by assimilating the culture in which the child was raised.

¹⁰ Georges Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, Paris, Mouton, 1967.

respectively, the *hajba* (the traditional marriage rite on Djerba Island) and possession cults in Brazil.

In these ways, Devereux places psychoanalysis at the very heart of anthropology. He believed that analyzing the disturbance caused by the researcher's unconscious is an integral part of the form of knowledge inherent to the social sciences. We learn a great deal from the way others react to our presence. We learn even more by becoming conscious of our own reactions to their reactions. In short, we can only achieve objectivity (which, as Bachelard puts it, can only be "approached") by analyzing what is at play in subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

A few short pages is far too little to present such a demanding and complex body of thought¹¹: that of a cosmopolitan scholar who moved methodically from language to language and culture to culture (Malay, Vietnamese, Greek, North American), that of a man of erudition who spoke eight languages: English, Sedang, Mohave, Malay, Magyar, Romanian, German, and French—the latter four being languages he had known since childhood. It is also worth mentioning his contribution to Greek philology and mythology, which is all the more remarkable, given that he was five-five when he began learning ancient Greek.¹²

One should also add that Devereux published many stories and poems between the age of sixteen and twenty-four, during a period when he knew Eugène Ionesco and Klaus Mann in Paris. But this is not all. It is impossible to speak of Devereux without mentioning his great passion for music (particularly Mozart and Schubert), which he shared with his contemporary Vladimir Jankélévitch. Devereux, like Jankélévitch, was himself a pianist. What one noticed, upon entering the little apartment in Antony, other than the mess and the thousands of books, which were piled rather than shelved, was the piano. The last years of his life—he died in 1985 at the age seventy-seven—were divided between research, teaching at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, students, and music (until his death, Devereux, who was prevented from becoming a concert pianist by a hand injury, composed works for the piano).

Yet his many interests and his insatiable curiosity never seemed eclectic (an attitude he detested). He scrupulously distinguished, in a rather Bachelardian way, scientific rationality from aesthetic emotion. What Desplechin's film shows very well, through the interactions between Amalric/Devereux and Benicio del Toro/Jimmy Picard is the solidarity implicit in the ethnopsychanalytic relationship, in which knowledge cannot be separated from recognition. Such is my impression of Devereux the individual, the writer, and the thinker: he was a warm man, who was deeply involved in his relationships with others, and an intransigent scholar.

¹¹ I take the liberty of mentioning my book, *Ethnopsychiatrie psychanalytique*, Paris, Beauchesne, 2007 and particularly recommend, relating to developments in ethnopsychiatry, reading Tobie Nathan, *La Folie des autres. Traité d'ethnopsychiatrie clinique*, Paris, Dunod, 1986 and Marie Rose Moro, *Psychothérapie transculturelle des enfants et des adolescents*, Paris, Dunod, 2000.

¹² The Greek component of Devereux's work is to be found primarily in *Dreams in Greek Tragedy: An Ethno-Psycho-Analytical Study*, Berkeley: University of California, 1976.

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