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BOOK REVIEW

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Book review

The sociological interpretation of dreams

By Bernard Lahire

Oxford, UK: Polity Press, 2020. Hardback, USD 42.82, ISBN 9781509537945

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Throughout history and in every civilization, dreams have been an inexhaustible source of fascination and inspiration for all of humankind, whereby the precise causes, meanings and relevance of human oneiric life continue to provoke fierce debate between neuroscientists, philosophers and psychoanalysts. The highly peculiar and endlessly varied phantasmagoria of the dream, in which fantasy mixes with reason to create enigmatic imagery, puzzling story-lines, and occasionally disturbing affect, not only raises the question as to what uncontrollable powers we, as human beings, seem to be in possession of, but also as to what it means for us to be self-conscious, whether sleeping or awake. If *homo sapiens* dreams, but never appears to dream of being asleep, how can we be so sure that wakefulness is not another form of dreaming, in which we also dream of being awake, yet from which we never fully wake up? The British philosopher Bertrand Russell famously stated: “[I]t is obviously possible that what we call waking life may be only an unusually persistent and recurrent nightmare . . . This *may* be true, since it cannot shown to be false, yet no one can really believe it” (Russell, 1914, pp. 101-102). With Edgar Allan Poe, we may even wonder whether “All that we see or seem/Is but a dream within a dream (Poe, 1969, p. 450).

Since the late 1970s, researchers interested in the study of dreams and dreaming have found themselves torn between two competing, seemingly incompatible paradigms. On the one hand, there is the classic Freudian approach, which regards the manifest content of the dream (the dream as it is remembered by the dreamer) as a distorted representation of unconscious thoughts, which contain a repressed wish that strives to be fulfilled and that can be recovered through the dreamer’s free associations. On the other hand, there is the activation-synthesis model, first adduced by Hobson and McCarley (1977), which proposes that dreams are merely epi-phenomena of the neural activation during REM-sleep—a physiological process that affects both the visual cortex, the limbic system, and the prefrontal cortex—whose miscellaneous firings then become synthesized in the sensory-cognitive phenomenon of the dream. In this view, which has been substantiated by Hobson in countless books and papers, the dream is adaptive and restorative, but only has ‘functional’ meaning, which implies that the Freudian approach is fundamentally misguided and irrelevant. In recent years, Hobson’s own model has been criticized by Mark Solms (2000) and other researchers adhering to a neuro-psychoanalytic framework for failing to ascertain that dreaming is not uniquely conditioned by REM-sleep. Solms’ main observation is that the neural correlates of dreams are to be situated primarily in the dopaminergic motivational intentionality system, which is also known as the ‘meaning making’ system, so that Freud seems to have been right all along in attributing subjective meaning to dreams.

Even though these two conflicting paradigms have occasionally been integrated into broader models that also draw on phenomenology and the philosophy of mind (Thompson, 2015), it is fair to say that contemporary psychological dream research remains polarized and partisan. It is therefore refreshing to encounter a radically different perspective in Bernard Lahire’s recently translated *The Sociological Interpretation of Dreams*, which was originally published in French in 2018. Lahire

may not be as well-known internationally as some other French social and cultural theorists, such as Bruno Latour, Bernard Stiegler and Loïc Wacquant, yet he is undoubtedly one of the most important academic sociologists writing today. In France, he is mainly known for his empirical research on the social construction of educational success (and failure) amongst children from deprived backgrounds within the public-school system, yet he has also written innovative studies on sociological theory, literary creation, and art appreciation. The twenty-odd books he has published since the early 1990s are invariably of an extremely high standard—sophisticated yet lucid, wide-ranging yet focused, and exceptionally well-informed yet broadly appealing. In this new volume on dreams, Lahire shows himself again to be an excellent scholar and researcher, who develops his arguments based on a thorough engagement with the literature, including many studies that have been published outside France, which is quite rare for French academics, and who advances his ideas consistently and coherently, in accordance with the highest standards of scholarship. Reading through this weighty tome, which is the first volume of a diptych—the second instalment, which comes in at more than 1,200 pages, was published in French in January 2021 and includes an application of the theoretical model to specific dream-specimens (Lahire, 2021)—I sometimes felt that the numerous diagrams were unnecessary, yet this is a relatively minor point considering the overall quality of the exposition.

The main thesis of this book is that dreams can be interpreted sociologically by taking the manifest dream content as a nocturnal message from the dreamer to him- or herself, whose meaning can be elucidated in terms of the dreamer's social world, which is situated as much outside the psychic sphere as it resides within it. Lahire agrees with Freud, whose model he takes as a starting point for the elaboration of his own thesis, on two points: dreams have meaning and this meaning cannot be accessed without paying attention to the dreamer. However, he disagrees with the founder of psychoanalysis insofar as he refuses to see the manifest dream content as the outcome of a process of censorship. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Labov and others, Lahire argues that if we approach the dream as a type of private, indeed as perhaps *the* most intimate form of self-communication, we have good reasons to believe that censorship must be reduced, much like it is far less likely to affect a mainstream dialogue when it takes places in a close circle of friends rather than in a formal, public context. Hence, in his view, the dream is not a mental phenomenon that requires deciphering, but a message which can be clarified and rendered coherent when taking the social world of the dreamer into account. Lahire also avers that this sociological study of the dream has important repercussions for research into human social relations. On the one hand, it notably re-directs sociological enquiry away from the collective towards the individual, who represents a singular locus of incorporated and embodied social forces. On the other hand, the individual re-emerges as a social agent who is not fully in control of him- or herself, but whose consciousness and voluntary actions are driven by unconscious mechanisms that are in themselves socially constructed. Overall, this book offers an original perspective on dreams and dreaming, which is compelling and persuasive, and which is likely to generate heated debate within the social sciences and further afield. If nothing else, it definitely deserves to be studied carefully, irrespective of the reader's preconceived ideas about the bio-psycho-social status of dreams and dreaming.

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