

Book review

The Floating Individual. The Solitary Crowd in the Times of Social Networks

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The present study by Professor Pérez Álvarez is a paradigmatic example of the profound significance of the condition of psychology as a science that straddles the natural and social sciences, in which the object of study is also the subject, whether it is the individual, society, or culture, with its inevitable reciprocal influences and interactions in multiple directions, which have repercussions on the research itself and which are clearly manifest in this work. For the author of the book, in accordance with Jaspers, there is no escape from philosophy, and it would be naive blindness not to accept this. Thus, rigorous care is taken in dealing with this dimension, addressing the epistemological, anthropological, political, and ethical implications. This contributes to the excellence and rigor in the results of this intellectual, academic, scientific, and humanistic exercise.

The floating individual is a notion of Gustavo Bueno's, used and updated here as an analytical and critical tool for the social conditions of our time, making it a prototypical figure for understanding a series of current disorders and problems that go back a long way, and which take on new life in relation to social networks, specifically including psychological problems and psychotherapy, although going beyond the biomedical model. (This is dealt with, above all, in the third and last part of the book). The author does not claim that this concept covers all individuals, nor does he intend to erect it as a simplifying label for any psychological problem, not even for people who would have most reason to be identified as floating individuals. On the other hand, he does defend its capacity to bring together a variety of psychosociological diagnoses by different authors (Cushman's empty self; Gergen's saturated self; Lifton's protean self; Giddens' reflexive self; Maffesoli's nomadic and vagabond self; Bauman's liquid self; López Mondéjar's invertebrate self, etc.), which in turn can be seen in literary works (in the characters of Dostoevsky, Pessoa, Kafka, Camus, Wolf, Calvino, etc.). The floating individual is a reflection of a floating society to which he is trying to adapt, subject to a critical contemplation of social levity and his own individual levity, which can only be understood in close connection with the social and cultural history of individuality from the Renaissance to the present day.

The three parts in which the book is structured are interrelated and illuminate each other. The first part presents a journey through the history of the individual from its genesis and development

through unavoidable and illustrative milestones. Growing discomforts and loneliness are evident that precede their contemporary versions, highlighting the fact that "society came before the individual" and the irreducible dialectic between individual and society, contrary to the conception of an "inner self" uncritically assumed as "natural", ignorant of its socio-historical makeup. In this sense, the following cannot be ignored: individualism associated with the humanist tradition; the Lutheran defense of the sentiment of faith and its religious subjectivism (not at all modern, inscribed in solitude before God, and isolated from reason); its secularization in Rousseau and Romanticism, in the alleged autonomous and self-originating natural source of an exalted individual expressiveness; new versions of individualism in the 19th and 20th centuries in contexts such as those linked to various versions of capitalism (classical: thrifty, ascetic, disciplined; or neoliberal: wasteful, consumerist, short-termist).

Marino Pérez urges psychology to fulfill its obligation by recognizing the "sociohistorical nature of the inner self" (shaped by social, material, linguistic, and cultural practices), disavowing its promotion "as something in itself to the detriment of the (outer) world" where people live (not in their inner world), being one "within a world or situation", instead of affirming "a world within one". The author offers a psychological and sociological characterization of the type of individuals that are portrayed as preponderant, heirs to the history that has been described and that led to our era of smartphones, social networks, and selfies, in which neither individualism, nor loneliness, nor the solitary crowd is anything new (Riesman).

Also, authors such as Erich Fromm, Ortega y Gasset, Karen Horney, Goffman, and Putnam sketch the coordinates in which individuals attempt to cope in a path of ever greater buoyancy. For example, Fromm illustrates the tightrope walk between *freedom from* traditional instances of authority and *freedom for* individual self-determination, paying the toll of insecurity and loneliness, and the risk of relapsing into interpersonal or social relations and authoritarian politics of replacement. Or the danger of remaining installed in resentment, destructiveness, or conformism and gregariousness (in a reified, commodified, superficial way, in a consumerist context where people are instrumentalized, weakened as ends in themselves and as others with whom to converse face to face and empathize).

In the second part of the book, the causal relationship between the abuse of social networks and a series of psychological ailments and problems is addressed in a well-founded, sound, and balanced way. A wide range of multidisciplinary scientific research and longitudinal studies are cited, on issues such as "anxiety, depression, gender dysphoria, self-injurious behaviors, suicidal ideas, and eating disorders," and the particular role of loneliness is highlighted as a very common element. The year 2012 was significant in terms of the generalization of the use of social networks (which today reach almost sixty percent of humanity). Without being necessary, they *became* necessary and, in addition to using them ourselves, we are also being transformed by them (our experiences and lifestyles, our ways of relating to others and to ourselves).

Although the current psychological ailments are neither caused solely by social networks (we emphasize the historical perspective of the ills that afflict the individual), nor by their non-abusive use, we point out a series of addictive aspects, typical of social networks due to having been deliberately designed as such by a series of engineers, not only facilitating addiction in vulnerable people but also making other people become vulnerable. We list these aspects: immersive fluid use (offering endless content); continuous feedback (with intermittent reinforcers of a pecking behavior, like Skinner's pigeons); algorithmization of the self (showing the user things they like to see); suspense effect (inciting them to see what is happening and stimulating the fear of missing something); social pressure (to attend, watch, and respond quickly, encouraging frequent connection); envious social comparison (promoting a spiral of "self-promotion-envy" and a canon of apparent happiness, propagandistic and self-interested, conveyed by *influencers* and generating discomfort, due to not living up to the image of others, or because the fabricated or biased and exhibited image itself does not correspond to one's own reality beyond the momentary and virtual).

One of the virtues of the book is that, despite devoting less space and development to the possible alternative paths, it deals with the difficult task of offering decisive clues to facilitate taking action, assuming the irreversibility of the hybridization of the real and everyday world with the virtual world and social networks. A non-addictive use is suggested, which would involve the following: organizing and limiting the time spent using them; carrying out different activities that are as far as possible incompatible with them (such as sports); clarifying and prioritizing one's own values, determining what is most important to us and what is being diminished or not cultivated while abusing the time spent on the networks; accepting discomforts such as the fear of not being continuously present or up-to-date on what is happening online.

The notion of the floating individual is accompanied by that of the "salvific community", also used by Bueno, the use of the term "salvation" not being unprecedented in psychotherapy. It is associated with therapeutic communities that are "salvific" not in a collective or political way, but in relation to the floating individual, being recognized as a person, having his sufferings attended to, being helped in the elucidation of his values and the recovery of his life goals. It is a challenge when hyper-reflexivity and intensified self-consciousness are interposed between the self and the world, and the horizon of the meaning of life has been lost. In these circumstances, one is not floating due to emptiness but due to an

overabundance of experiences, feelings, expectations, meanings, goals, possibilities of ways of life, etc., with the consequent difficulty in orienting oneself and deciding, and the danger of hypertrophy and paralysis in reflexive rumination, to the detriment of the active search and the accomplishment of means to reach the goals.

At the end of this work, the author includes his proposal in favor of a liberal society, inspired by its classic version, corrected and updated, promoting community life, regenerating politics and the trust in the political system and in the institutions, and avoiding the perversions of liberalism, both by the neo-liberal economic right of accentuated deregulation, and by the identitarian left that appeals to feelings. Its core themes are freedom of expression, the individual person as a priority, the moral and legal equality of all, and personal and social improvement, mediated institutionally in the political, educational, legal, and economic dimensions.

Education is also considered to be a primordial and nuclear aspect in the training for life and the exercise of citizenship, in which the beliefs and ideologies unmasked in the book should be banished. Examples include the promotion of the romantic expressiveness associated with the desires of children and adolescents, in reality molded (like those of adults) by the market and its consumerist propaganda; the evacuation of responsibilities to the extent that they are attributed to the brain and genes; the considering of students as clients who are "always right"; the excessive emphasis on the inner self, coddling, consenting, and happiness at all costs, to the detriment of the acceptance of the difficulties of life and the future or the cultivation of other concerns. Instead of the idea of a childhood considered too vulnerable (and in this sense fragilized), and as a better alternative to the ideal of resilience, the aspiration to "antifragility" (Taleb) is proposed. This is considered rather than robustness or recovery, as the capacity to assume uncertainties and mistakes, "exposure to contingencies" and "it prepares people better for life than flattery, self-esteem, and navel-gazing" with the principle of reality coming before the principle of pleasure.

The reading of *The Floating Individual* is presented as an excellent opportunity to understand and take charge of a significant part of what is going on and what is happening to us today. It is carried out under the banner of the irreplaceable role of the social sciences, humanities, arts, and philosophy, "to rethink the present world", in opposition to those who try to hide, under the label of the naturally bestowed, what is the result of social, cultural, and historical processes that could and can develop in another way. ("There is nothing better for the interests of governments and large supra-state corporations" than to ignore it). In coherence with the questioning of a dominant biomedical model in psychology and psychiatry, which naturalizes and privatizes psychological distress and problems, understood as supposed biological or internal "breakdowns", better understood before the hegemony of this model "as reactions to the adversities of life", Professor Pérez Álvarez invites the reader to "consider that the current 'mental health crisis' is actually a symptom of the society we live in, which can be improved at least by starting with the reconversion of the consumer into a citizen".

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