

## THE ORACLE OF THE NIGHT: SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE FUTURE

*O ORÁCULO DA NOITE: AUTOCONHECIMENTO E CONSTRUÇÃO DO FUTURO*

*EL ORÁCULO DE LA NOCHE: AUTOCONOCIMIENTO Y CONSTRUCCIÓN DE FUTURO*

Rita BRAGA<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This review intends to present the book "The Oracle of the Night: The History and Science of Dreams" by Sidarta Ribeiro, as a pertinent reading for teacher education, as it approaches relevant topics for integral development and citizen education. The work contributes both through the dense scientific content that it proposes to record and through its stylistic and editorial structure. The story about the challenges to prove Freudian theories - connected to so many others - reveals itself as an accessible example about the rigor and complexity of scientific processes, which today face waves of generalized negationism. The text also has other qualities, above all, for the ethical way in which it conducts its analyses, with distinctions between facts and hypotheses, respectfully confronting various historical, social, and cultural perspectives.

**KEYWORDS:** Science. Brain. Self-knowledge. Psychology. Neuroscience.

**RESUMO:** Esta resenha pretende apresentar o livro de Sidarta Ribeiro, "O oráculo da noite: a história e a ciência do sonho", como uma leitura pertinente para a formação de professores, por abordar tópicos relevantes para o desenvolvimento integral e para formação cidadã. A obra traz contribuições tanto por meio do denso conteúdo científico que propõe registrar quanto por sua estrutura estilística e editorial. O relato sobre os desafios para comprovação de teorias freudianas – conectado a tantos outros – revela-se como um exemplo acessível acerca do rigor e da complexidade dos processos científicos, que enfrentam hoje ondas de negacionismo generalizado. O texto guarda ainda outras qualidades, sobretudo, pelo modo ético como conduz as análises, com distinções entre fatos e hipóteses, confrontando respeitosa e várias perspectivas históricas, sociais e culturais.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ciência. Cérebro. Autoconhecimento. Psicologia. Neurociência.

**RESUMEN:** Esta reseña pretende presentar el libro de Sidarta Ribeiro, "El oráculo de la noche: la historia y la ciencia del sueño", como una lectura pertinente para la formación de profesores, ya que aborda temas relevantes para el desarrollo integral y la formación ciudadana. La obra aporta contribuciones tanto por el denso contenido científico que se propone registrar como por su estructura estilística y editorial. El informe sobre los desafíos

<sup>1</sup> Municipal Secretary of Education of São Paulo (SMESP), São Paulo – SP – Brazil. Teacher in elementary and high school. Master's in Education (USP). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5446-7437>. E-mail: [ritaeducativo@gmail.com](mailto:ritaeducativo@gmail.com)

*para probar las teorías freudianas -conectadas con muchas otras- se revela como un ejemplo accesible sobre el rigor y la complejidad de los procesos científicos, que hoy se enfrentan a oleadas de negacionismo generalizado. El texto tiene también otras cualidades, especialmente por la forma ética en que realiza el análisis, con distinciones entre hechos e hipótesis, confrontando respetuosamente diversas perspectivas históricas, sociales y culturales.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *La ciencia. Cerebro. Autoconocimiento. Psicología. Neurociencia.*

Neuroscientist Sidarta Ribeiro, founder and deputy director of the Brain Institute of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), consolidated an international academic trajectory marked by renowned partnerships and scientific advances recognized worldwide. In his most recent work, *O oráculo da noite: a história e a ciência do sonho* (The oracle of the night: the history and science of the dream) (RIBEIRO, 2019), this journey is narrated in/by challenges, adventures and discoveries. In the tone adopted in the book, it is seen how the humanization of the profession in the reader's imagination favors engagement and listening to what is being enunciated. This reading experience awakens possibilities for approaches to science in education, especially in times of negationism, misinformation and apathy.

The volume is a rigorous and sensitive treatise on a subject whose study has faced many prejudices: the role of dreams in human life. First, it is an invitation to introspection and conscientious cultivation of the habit of dreaming and narrating. A process that unfolds in a closer analysis of reality and in an active posture in the construction of the future.

With generosity, experiments and correlations between scientists, historical figures, animals and even literary characters are presented - which in some passages help in the visualization of concepts.

Among the central objectives of the book is the search for understanding the fundamental mechanisms of the dream and how it “prepares the dreamer for the next day”. For this, the narrative reconstructs the stages of advancing the symbolic space of the dream within various cultures and how scientists achieved the feat of testing theories (Freudian and others) that faced resistance in the academic environment. It should be noted that organizing these elements in an extensive and coherent text is a process as challenging as the research itself, which is why Ribeiro (2019, p. 36, our translation), makes a warning that synthesizes the beauty of the scientific process: “it will be necessary to combine the provisional suspension of disbelief with the commitment to doubt in the end”. He points out that “it is crucial not to try to understand ahead of time, but to let yourself be carried away by the current until you can see in

perspective the set of evidence raised, which is necessarily incomplete, but still illuminating". In fact, it is what it offers.

There are eighteen dense chapters, but with language accessible to the lay reader, and an index of almost thirty pages - very useful to retrieve details and connections that become more interesting with each paragraph. The author thoroughly contextualizes historical records, discoveries about the biochemical processes of sleep and dreaming, including explaining how technological developments interfere in the transformations of dreaming, in daily behaviors and in the scientific capacity to analyze them.

The text goes beyond explaining the reasons, because the dream was considered divinatory in so many cultures and civilizations. Reflections pervade, for example, the manipulation of dream reports for political uses and the way in which the ethical (re)appropriation of this symbolic framework can be fruitful for the construction of a healthier society. These are expensive demands on education and other areas of knowledge, even more so at a time when excess stimulus obscures the ability to distinguish overlapping (and manipulated to exhaustion) facts and discourses.

According to the author, there is an unconscious consideration in the dream about the possibilities of the future, based on the experiences and impressions of the past. "Dreams do not reveal the fate of the dreamer tomorrow, but only his course today" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 300, our translation). Some of his statements about this functionality emerge as aphorisms, analogies and metaphors with a significant philosophical content:

The dream expresses the destination, but does not guarantee the arrival, as someone who travels in the right direction but can stop before, accelerate or follow alternative routes. Destination is where we are going, but not necessarily where we go. Well dreamed dreams envision our destination through simulations of possible paths and outcomes. Dreaming is like groping the dark room with a sliver of light, when the walls are the future itself (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 352, our translation).

Confronting cultural perspectives at different times, the reader is encouraged to leave the conditioned and ethnocentric look, so often reproduced in social bubbles. Archaeological records on the first ritual burials, for example, allow for hypotheses about how the dream about a deceased close person may have caused an uproar and initiated this divinatory field, as a position of listening and respect. What would awaken that kind of respectful uproar today? If the slow changes that led the human being from nomadism to sedentary lifestyle, in millennia, brought important symbolic news, the avalanche of transformations of the last decades has also moved more than world economies. Based on considerations about these and other records,

Ribeiro (2019) recalls that the phenomenon of introspection (the ability to imagine and listen to oneself, without “listening to the gods”) is a recent phenomenon and that the human mentality has changed radically in the last few 3 thousand years. In fact, commenting on the work carried out by various researchers on the Axial Era, he finds evidence of this paradigm shift - by the way, associated with the invention of writing and the advancement of literature, which begins to displace the source of actions, taking it from the gods for self-conscious protagonists. This is demonstrated by the author in the comparison between the heroes Achilles and Ulysses (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 68-70).

Situations are also commented with indications that the dream story was valued to the point of being politically manipulated, as in the decision of Emperor Constantine before Christianity (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 295).

It is seen later that this same Christianity will start to consider the oracle of the dream as an indication of heretical influences, leading to the execution of Giordano Bruno in 1600. "The discredit of dreams deepened in the 18th century, with the rationalism that is at the origin of both science and capitalism" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 80-81, our translation).

The scientist aligned these perspectives so that we could understand the reductionisms and clashes that intensified until the 20th century (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 256).

Criticisms of the Freudian tradition, "by insisting that dreams are attempts to fulfill desires", are remembered, contextualized and refuted with scientific experiments.

Ribeiro (2019) comments that dream plots became more complex, as the culture itself became more complex. This happened, for example, with the increase of free time and the multiplication of stimuli (cinema, TV, internet, among others) that generated a combinatorial explosion of the plots:

If the Pantanal jaguar dreams a thousand different ways of killing the capybara, they are still all hunting dreams, very similar to each other. Not with us. The multiple needs of the human species created conditions for dreams to become disordered collections of images, patchwork quilts of wants. The typical dream of our time is a blender of senses, a kaleidoscope of wills, fragmented by the multiplicity of desires of our age (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 293, our translation).

In the comings and goings between reports and analyzes, many aspects related to the theme are addressed. Among them: the history of the discoveries about the dream and the physiology of sleep; the relationship between dream and religion; the relationships between sleep, memory and learning; the therapeutic experiences and processes (including the use of

some substances and biochemical stimuli assisted with the aim of treating trauma, depression and schizophrenia) and other nuances of the link between imagination and health.

On the one hand, the grouping of this information detailed in the book, provides the reader with the basis for understanding the roots of Freudian theories and the roots of resistance to these theories due to the impossibility of testing them at the time. On the other hand, the book also sows new questions and reflects how exciting this field of research has become with technological advancement. Ribeiro's text (2019) is based on pioneering experiments that identified the main phases of sleep: called "slow wave sleep" and "rapid eye movement sleep" (REM sleep).

Slow wave sleep dominates the first half of the night and is marked by little generation of electrical activity inside the brain, reverberating memories without vividness. In this phase, normal thoughts coexist with the absence of sensory images. In contrast, in REM sleep, there is a great brain activation, which reverberates memories with great intensity. According to the author, "this reverberation is the very material from which dreams are made" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 33-34, our translation).

The consolidation of research on REM sleep led to the confrontation of the ideological debate and proved the distinction between REM sleep and dreams, identifying the latter through a dopamine index. In other words, what Freud observed from the analysis of his patients was proven: "dream 'is' desire because both are dopamine" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 261, our translation).

Along the way of this long scientific journey, the most recurring types of dreams are commented (traumatic, political, comfortable, challenging, grieving dreams, among others), and how they differ, according to age and other characteristics. It is noted, for example, that between 5- and 7-years old children present dream narratives in which they are not protagonists. There are stories with people or animals, with boys reporting more unknown male characters than girls (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 112).

Only after 7 years of age do the narratives of the "I" begin to appear, and at 9, there is a significant advance in the ability to remember sensory details. From 11 to 13 years old, the family universe begins to be extrapolated in the narratives. From this stage, more elements of character, intellectual repertoire and social skill are perceived, in addition to a greater balance in the dreamed emotions, with an equivalent occurrence of positive and negative effects. The complexity varies, according to the intellectual and emotional development of each person and how "the brain that dreams is the same that lives during waking, the more complex the mental tissue, the more complex the dream" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 114, our translation). In this sense,

these nuances can reveal something about the present moment of each dreamer (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 104-118).

The studies brought discoveries relevant to several areas of knowledge - with emphasis on education, since learning is linked to healthy memory optimization. After all, REM sleep and dream are the main agents in the selection and organization of what is sedimented or forgotten (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 104-105).

When carrying out measurements and analyzes of sleep to identify the relevance of factors such as "error" and "novelty", research often brings conclusions that, at first, could be seen as counterintuitive to a learning process, such as the intervals for "super-naps" for orthographic learning (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 177-179). In one of the experiments, the author shows us or the author underlines that "sleep seems to prevent the system from settling into a suboptimal solution" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 243-244, our translation).

Another aspect of interest to education is the reports of the innumerable stages of research as a complex and rigorous process, as it raises challenging questions inherent to the phenomenon of language itself, whether within the scope of general communication or psychotherapeutic lines (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 312-335).

Sidarta Ribeiro's (2019) work surfaces the need to strengthen the values expected in a Democratic Rule of Law, especially at a time when waves of negationism in different fields have multiplied the world's problems. After all, "is necessary to ask: equipped with so much technology, will we know how to survive ourselves?" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 376, our translation). This same reflection is implicit in the considerations about "the massive and automatic boosting of false memes that infect people until they think that the lying narratives were woven by themselves". And points out:

[...] It is natural that the monkey gets hurt with the new toys it invents. Teen monkeys raise false alarms all the time and are ignored. Talking to thousands of people at the same time is an incalculable power that we have not yet learned to use properly (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 378-379, our translation).

Throughout the book, there is an argument about "the benign potential of awareness made possible in dreams, which presents itself as an opportunity to prospect the unconscious itself" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 331). There are indications about how different cultures developed techniques to develop this process, going through what became known as a "lucid dream" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 364-365). It is important to note that this argument is balanced by warnings against "the hedonistic use of lucid dreaming" (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 374), as well as against univocal interpretations, which do not take into account "the frankest multiplicity of meanings

possible, derived from so many phonetic and semantic associations, including intra and interlinguistic polysemias” (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 335, our translation). That said, the invitation to read oneself is tempting. It is repeated every morning, and everyone can start their “dreamy record” at any time.

The real challenge is to allow introspection to resize the look or our looks towards ourselves and in relation to the other. As the author says, "the mental space is not infinite, just vast." (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 335, our translation).

## REFERENCES

RIBEIRO, S. **O oráculo da noite: a história e a ciência do sonho**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019. 459 p.

### How to reference this article

BRAGA, R. The oracle of the night: self-knowledge and construction of the future. **Doxa: Rev. Bras. Psico. e Educ.**, Araraquara, v. 22, n. 00, p. e021005, 2021. e-ISSN: 2594-8385. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30715/doxa.v22i00.14656>

**Submitted:** 21/01/2021

**Required revisions:** 19/03/2021

**Accepted:** 05/04/2020

**Published:** 20/04/2021