

Individual responsibility versus archaic group dynamics in national and international politics

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In the author's experience with small and large therapy and self-experience groups, the sense for responsibility of each member, after narcissistic injuries are reinforced by a dominant or ideologically determined member or demagogic leader, can be submerged by the amplifying effect of the group on the emotions. During economic crisis or after a defeat in war, therefore, neither mature active ego-performances nor free decisions may play a role in a group or a nation, and it may come to a regression to archaic levels of object relations. Through prejudices against people experienced as not belonging to the majority of one's own group or other ethnic groups and nations, these are considered menacing (projective identification), whereas the own group develops a strong cohesion (narcissistic-fusional relationship).

A group or a national trauma that may have happened hundreds of years ago may become through ideological indoctrination of the youth a main marker of identity and always leads again to revivals of ethnic or national conflicts. Dictators often exploit this fact with their suggestive ideology and their tendency to project their own aggressiveness onto other groups or neighbouring nations, which represent in the course of history the „intimate enemies“. For prevention of such developments at least in schools the attempt should be made to offer youths self-experience groups and theoretical social-psychological training.

Key words: group dynamics, social processes, object relations

The dynamics in national and international politics are not much different from those of small and larger groups used for therapy or self-experience. It seems to me, therefore, that we should discuss first the main dynamics observable in politics emerging from the almost experimental conditions of observing therapeutic and psychodynamic group processes.

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Psychotherapy and self-experience groups

In the author's experience with small and large therapy and self-experience groups in psychiatric in- and outpatient facilities beginning in 1953 and constantly since 1955 as well as at group psychotherapy congresses, the sense for responsibility of each member can be submerged by the amplifying effect of the group on emotions [1]. This effect is more pronounced the larger a group is. In this way especially feelings of frustration from intra- or intergroupal conflicts and corresponding narcissistic injuries may be reinforced and stimulated by a dominant and/or ideologically determined member provoking some or all group members to see menacing enemies in a minority of the own group or in members of another group by projective identification [11]. *Thus these phenomena in general originate, on the one hand, in the narcissistic-fusional expectations that form in all people the archaic basic relationship with objects and the following projective identification, if the narcissistic phantasies are not realized.* On the other hand, a person is necessary who takes advantage of the situation suggesting to the others to show their discontent. — *This projective identification corresponds to the next higher level of object relations, which is still an archaic one but represents already an active (unconscious) ego-performance.* It is the projection of — mostly aggressive — ego-parts on objects experienced as close but not equal, and the identification with their supposed aggressiveness which is in reality the own projected one.

Frustrated narcissistic-fusional expectations and projective identification

The mentioned narcissistic-fusional expectations toward objects and, on this basis, projective identification are patterns of relationships which are predominant in individuals with borderline personality disorders and schizophrenias, but are more or less apparent also in normal people. The difference between psychologically healthy individuals and persons with a pathological personality structure or a psychosis is, therefore, only a quantitative one. Projective identification helps normal individuals to gain distance from the objects after having experienced or sought narcissistic-fusional nearness to others and has a regulating function in a group process [3]. In borderlines or psychotics, however, with their fragmentation-prone or fragmented ego and the difficulty or impossibility of delimiting themselves from others and/or to mastering their impulses, the dynamics of projective identification tend to get out of control and lead easily to a fight with or more often to a fight against, people or groups not corresponding to their expectations. The old German saying "If you do not want to be my brother, I shall break your skull" can be applied to these people. Minorities of one's own group or other groups then are experienced as menacing, a fact that leads them to develop at least prejudices against others. As Salvendy [12] formulates: "Prejudice is a pattern of hostility in interpersonal relations which is directed against an entire group or against its individual members." This author also points to the fact that "prejudice is accompanied by stereotyping." Since prejudices in general are not subject to a thorough evaluation of a person or a group, and since they come out of the mentioned two archaic patterns of human possibilities to relate to others, they tend

to become always more generalised. Such people, especially if a pathological leader, for example, with a borderline personality disorder, pushes them continually in the direction of their prejudices, may then, like him, feel forced to mobilise all their psychological or — in politics — political weapons and/or armed forces against persons and groups inside or groups and nations outside the own group. The hostility against “foreigners” or “strangers” experienced as “enemies” shows that such people must unconsciously know the presumed aggressiveness of the others very well, because in reality it is their own projected aggressive ego-part which they “see” and “feel” in the others. The German psychologist Gefäller [10] says that people experienced as (menacing) foreigners or strangers correspond to the (projected) inner strange parts against which defence mechanisms are developed. With that definition this author says nothing other than that hostile stereotypes of other people, groups or nations emerge from projective identification.

Mature active ego-performances and free decisions

Naturally, humans have not only the mentioned archaic patterns to use in relating to other individuals and groups at their disposal, but also *higher levels of object-relations*. *The next one with which people normally correspond with each other is that of the more mature active ego-performances*, such as creative accomplishments, delimitation from the objects, mere identification and projection, repression, displacement, etc., the latter of which were seen by Freud [8] and his daughter Anna Freud [7] only as defence mechanisms. I think that these dynamics should be understood in a more comprehensive way, since they can work by realising inner potentialities with the purpose of integration in the social world, or in the sense of the two Freuds as a defence against drive or outside dangers. *The highest level of object-relations is that one of the free decision* for the beginning or the maintenance or ending of a relationship to other individuals or groups.

In politics, the higher levels of relations determine, under normal conditions, the communication between religious and ethnic groups as well as between different countries. If, however, because of historic or actual narcissistic injuries and/or supposed needs — because of some ideology to show power under the influence of a dominating leader — an appeal is made to the emotions, there is the danger that the archaic levels of communication will begin to dominate.

Regression to the archaic levels of object-relations

In emotionally weighted situations, for example, during an economic crisis or after a narcissistic trauma in a group or a nation, such as a defeat in a war represents it, neither mature ego-performances nor free decisions may remain decisive. Especially under the influence of individuals with a tendency toward paranoid projections, people — even the majority of a nation — may regress to the levels of narcissistic fusion and projective identification.

I realised this fact in a therapeutic framework when years ago I began group psycho-

therapy with a ward of approximately 25 women with different psychiatric diagnoses [2]. The patients of the ward which formed from admissions and dismissals a slow-open group according to S. H. Foulkes [6], came weekly together for one hour for a session of group psychotherapy. In this ward was a 38-year-old woman, Mrs. G., who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, which had reacted well to neuroleptic agents. I was glad that she always took actively part in the discussions, since then I did not have to be concerned about activity in the group. But one year after the beginning of this group, I had admitted a 31-year-old woman to the ward, a borderline patient, who was known for her thefts. She continued committing thefts as she did before. I had, therefore, to transfer her to another ward where she could be better controlled. After I had done this, the paranoid patient, Mrs. G., mobilized the whole ward against me, the hospital, and psychiatry as a whole. The corresponding scenes lasted some hours, and only when the director of the hospital (Prof. John E. Staehelin) dismissed Mrs. G. and offered her the opportunity to go on vacation as she had wished to do before, did the other patients calm down. But in the following sessions not only their original problems, but also guilt feelings because of their participation at the upheaval had to be worked through.

What had happened to trigger this process? The relatively large group of women, who had in part participated in the group for one year, were accustomed to the fact that Mrs. G. was a kind of co-leader. Mrs. G.'s position was facilitated by the inexperienced therapist. In an emotionally loaded moment — on occasion of the transfer of Mrs. H. to another ward — Mrs. G. through her leading position succeeded by her suggestive capacities to induce her frustrations to the other participants as well as corresponding projective identification together with her antipsychiatric ideology. She was able to manoeuvre the therapist, the hospital and psychiatry in the experience of the other patients into the position of being enemies. The situation only changed when the leader of the upheaval was dismissed by the director of the hospital.

When archaic levels of object-relations dominate in national and international politics

Taking as an example the dynamics that have characterised the last years of the political scene of former Yugoslavia, we can say that nations and ethnic entities that, in spite of many tensions between them, lived more or less peacefully together since World War I and after the death of the dictator Tito drifted more and more into a splitting process. Pathological personalities such as Milosevic and Karacic on the side of the Serbs, and Tudjman and his circle of followers on the side of the Croats, both parts with a nationalistic-communistic ideology, in the early 1990s seized on the opportunity to facilitate, on the one hand, the development towards a strong cohesiveness of their own people and, on the other hand, towards projective identification and labelling the other national and ethnic group as the enemy. These leaders were eager to activate old prejudices concerning the other group and succeeded through their ideology and demagogy to create a broad and deep resonance in their populations. This movement went so far that a great percentage of Serbs and Croats were prepared to follow their leaders without reflection, to bring war to Bosnia and Herzegovina, to violate women

of the other ethnic group, to kill without any reflection numerous “enemies” and to destroy and/or burn their houses.

Croatian and Serbian soldiers and civilians have been ready to act in this way because under the suggestive influence of their leaders they have passed through a process of regression to the level of narcissistic fusion in their fantasy with people of their own group and to the level of projective identification concerning people of the other ethnic groups. Different histories and different Christian denominations in the two groups of people and the surrounding Balkan nations had already led to the two Balkan wars (1912/13) and had triggered World War I through the murder of the Austrian-Hungarian successor to the throne, Franz Ferdinand, by Serbian nationalists on June 28th, 1914 in Sarajevo. With that divergent behavior of the two populations in World War II was prepared and laid the foundation for the archaic relationship patterns.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina and later, toward the end of the 1990s in Kosovo, the prejudices especially of the Serbs toward a relatively large Muslim population was becoming even more intensified. This was partly due to the fact that their defeat in 1389 on the “plain of the blackbirds” and the following Turkish occupation had never been forgotten and still represented a painful narcissistic injury, but partly also because of their long-lasting frustrated wish to reconquer lost territories and to “cleanse” them of people who believe in an “alien” religion.

“Group trauma” and totalitarianism

As Volkan [13] stresses, such a “group trauma“ may “become a marker of the large-group identity” which is transmitted from generation to generation. In this way the Serbs remained, according to this author, linked to their national defeat, which happened more than 600 years ago. As Volkan formulates, it became their “chosen trauma”, reactivated in an actual crisis-situation.

With their totalitarian ideology and their well-organised Communist Party Serbian leaders exploited the situation after Tito’s death to build up their own dictatorial position. The renowned political economist Bernholz [4] characterizes the conditions for the development of totalitarianism mainly by five points:

1. A world view (Weltanschauung) containing supreme values founded or revived by a political leader or leadership,
2. A world view that has an appeal to many people and seemingly solves the problems perceived by them,
3. An ideology that contains promises for a better life in this or the world to come,
4. A strong leadership that has the monopoly right to interpret the “creed”, and a strong organisation,
5. The chances of obtaining control of a political situation become favorable if an economic or political crisis causes deep frustrations and/or anxieties in broad segments of the population.

A conflict emerging from a group or national trauma suffered in the past frequently contributes to the identity of a group or a nation in all parts of the world. I shall name

only a few countries where such conflicts between religious and ethnic groups have been active for many years: Northern Ireland, Turkey, Cashmere, Sri Lanka, Ruanda, Zaire, etc. This fact shows that human beings who are all organized in groups and nations try to survive in situations of economic or political crises and/or after a defeat in a war by a corrective ideology which, on the one hand, prevents them from forgetting their narcissistic trauma and, on the other hand, keeps the option of revenge open. At home and in school children are indoctrinated with the corresponding ideas from which such a world view results as Bernholz [4] described it, or, psychologically formulated, a common identity. This process in the minds of the concerned people furthers the splitting in good (one's own group or nation) and bad (the other group or nation) objects [11]. Thus, if a group or a nation was traumatised in its history by another one, and if dominating pathological personalities push the population to revive the trauma of the past, it comes easily to a state of mind where people look upon the members of the other religious and/or ethnic group or the citizens of an other state as enemies.

Extreme situations, for example, economic crises under a totalitarian regime can lead to a revival of old prejudices and deep-rooted hatred against, for example, another religious group. Thus, in difficult economic situations in the past, antisemitic tendencies often came into the foreground and drove, for example, in Nazi Germany, the dominating people to try to exterminate the Jews.

Ethnic and religious groups who have been persecuted develop a "group trauma", but it would be inhuman to see it always as a "chosen trauma", as Volkan [13] classified it, since groups that have been subjected to genocide are not likely to forget this trauma and experience it as a permanent danger in present life. The concerned groups and people do not however, intend to dominate other ethnic groups by remembering their history, but rather to remind their own people that similar movements towards destructive forms of aggression [9] are always possible in powerful nations.

The intimate enemy

In a crisis situation under a demagogic leader or leadership with a suggestive ideology and a tendency toward projective identification, there is always the possibility that some religious or ethnic group in one's own people or a neighbouring nation will be stamped and seen as bad object, as the enemy. In this respect we recall the known fact that many groups and nations seemed and still seem not to be able to live without some inner or outer enemy. In this way, for example, the Palestinians were long neglected by the other Arab national states and became conscious of themselves as a nation only through their enemy Israel. But also Israel's cohesiveness is at least partly due to the hostility of the Palestinians. The relationship between these two peoples is marked by reciprocal projective identification. Amongst other peace-hindering factors it can be presumed that the fear of losing one's intimate enemy by a political agreement plays an enormous role. Both peoples would have enough values to find their identity in their history and religion, but also by their more recent achievements. They will have, however, to reduce their projective identification and to recognize their own potencies and to see that both nations would have more economical, political, and spiritual

strength if they worked together.

Is the splitting into good and bad groups or nations only a phenomenon of the past?

What has been said so far shows that, in situations in which people feel their security threatened, they may activate old group and nation traumata. This implies in the minds of the concerned people a trend towards archaic patterns of object relations, that is, of a narcissistic-fusional relationship with one's own group or nation and of projective identification with a subgroup, a group or a nation held to be an enemy.

Is prevention possible?

Prevention of the described development is difficult. Nevertheless, in the schools the attempt should be made to offer self-experience groups and theoretical social-psychological training as well as the necessary practical and theoretical knowledge they need to recognise such developments toward the archaic patterns of object-relations at an early stage which are unconsciously present in all human beings, and which can, by the accompanying loss of individual responsibility lead to death and destruction on a large scale. The hope that the United Nations would succeed in preventing wars and genocide due to the mentioned psychodynamics was not fulfilled to the present day, as the war of Russia against the Republic of Chechnya again shows. For some years, however, many individuals, groups and even governments have begun to talk about human rights, but if a country is powerful enough and declares its fight against an ethnic group or a nation to be an inner-political matter, the other nations remain mostly silent without thinking of their own responsibility — they do not even dare to bring the case to the Security Council of the United Nations.

But, we cannot pretend that we psychiatrists or group psychotherapists would be good counsellors for the politicians as long as we ourselves uphold the known sectarianism between the different (group) psychotherapy schools, which is obviously not based only on theoretical divergences and individual responsibility for maintaining the own aspect of the psychological functioning, but is also due to a power struggle characterized by the same archaic patterns of object-relations I have tried to characterize as typical for the interrelations between nations and different ethnic groups.

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COMMENTARY

The article “Individual responsibility versus archaic group dynamics in national and international politics” seems interesting for two, in some way contradictory, reasons. The first one is the importance of the discussed topics, and I don’t mean here only the problem of ethnic conflicts, groups playing the role of the scapegoat or the hatred of the strangers. This problem — of dramatic importance — is very often discussed, but unfortunately usually the only result of this discussion is the expression of justified moral indignation.

Instead, the author of the analysed text is trying to understand those phenomena and to interpret them with instruments derived from the theory of object relations. We can see it as an attempt to introduce the heritage of psychoanalysis to the broad sphere of humanities, arts and social sciences. This seems to be one of the most interesting topics of today’s philosophical anthropology.

I am consciously choosing the notion “heritage of psychoanalysis” and I pass over others’ branches of psychology. The challenge is not only to enrich the corpus of empirical research with techniques and results of some spheres of psychological empirical practice, as do social psychology or cognitive psychology. As they most often accept the language of positive sciences, they are not apt to discuss the anthropological paradigm lying in the foundations of this language. That is why, even if they can be interesting for theoreticians of humanities, arts and of social sciences, rarely they will lead to a reinterpretation of the fundamental paradigms of those domains.

The situation of psychoanalysis is different. It proposes an original and independent anthropological project, different on many levels from the one dominant in modernity. From its beginning, psychoanalysis provokes major thinkers into discussion. Mainly, as I think, because psychoanalysis succeeded in creating its own language, with its own categories, founded on its own theoretical assumptions. This hundred years old attainments constitute an enormous richness, a treasury of ideas and propositions, permitting a new and different understanding of man, his attitude toward himself, to the others and to the world. We can presume that today's humanities need this richness very much, as the discussion became — as prone many of thinkers — rather barren.

Nevertheless, the assimilation of the attainments of psychoanalysis and of schools dependent to it, to the main stream of the social thought, represents major difficulties. Their source is in some way the same to the source of the strength of "deep psychology". I am speaking here about the very hermetic character of language and of the system of ideas, on which psychoanalysis is founded. The biggest thinkers, who tried to deal with social and cultural reality using psychoanalytical categories had to face this obstacle, with ambiguous results. Even Sigmund Freud himself expressed in his social and cultural texts many rather naive judgements, as for example in "Totem and taboo", permitting till our days malicious remarks of art and social sciences students. Erich Fromm, even if his work seems to be the most important achievement of the task of the assimilation of psychoanalytical thought to the modern social sciences, faced the same obstacles. The statement, that Hitler represents "a clinical case of necrophily [1] troubles in a social analysis. It seems that the dissonance is due to the confrontation of two orders of thinking, which are difficult to connect: the clinical diagnosis and the socio-political critics. The other difficulty lies in the lack of mediatization between the explanatory order of unconscious motives connected with the pulsions and trauma's on one hand and the trials to determine individual responsibility and — last but not least — the normative evaluation of described phenomenon.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur [2] provided us with the probably the most penetrating analysis of problems appearing at the point of meeting between the traditional humanities and the psychoanalytical thought. The concrete consequences of those theoretical difficulties are clearly present in the text which we have to analyse. Precisely those difficulties convince us to read this article in a very meticulous way, as it can be a good ferment for an indispensable discussion.

Let us enumerate those difficulties.

The first sentence of the article makes evident the most important one. The author claims that „The dynamics in national and international politics are not much different from those of small and larger groups used for therapy or self experience". Rather disputable. First of all, a sentence of such a weight should be substantiate, there should be a reasoning showing in what the presumed identity consists and why we are permitted to make this jump from the individual and clinical level to the social and political one. But, as far as I know, such an argumentation simply doesn't exist. Even Fromm performed an "intuitive" jump from the language of individual psychology to the description of social structures. The modern social psychology is trying to fill up this gap, but, in my opinion, it is condemned to stay closed in limits imposed by

its positivist methodology. Also the French school of “Annales...” is searching for the junction between the two fields, socio-political and individual. Nevertheless, in some way, they are moving “from the other side”, as their starting point is in history and they make use of categories rooted in sociological and historical sciences.

Another major difficulty shows itself when the author tries to explain a concrete social phenomenon — for instance the hatred to another ethnic group — with one single psychological mechanism — in our case the projective identification. It is hard to understand, why such a complicated behaviour of a group of people shouldn't be conditioned by a sum of different superposing psychological mechanisms. Although the author postulates some explanation of his concept — through the idea of regression, that should eliminate mechanisms from the upper stages of individual development — this seems to be again an arbitrary use of rules, that are not evident even for individuals, on the social level.

Another source of confusion lies in the use of the notions of the individual and social unconscious. In our case this notions have to explain the role of the trauma in the origins of national myths, as the lost battle in the “Plain of blackbirds” had for the Serbs. In an ethnic group the shared and stored memory of a misfortune can constitute the fundament of the identity. But this kind of memory is usually understood as conscious — it resides in epic songs, ceremonies, history books. According to the psychoanalytic theory, in the individual life the memory of the major traumas is driven out to the unconscious and is never explicit. This is essential to their importance. So it seems difficult to built a simple analogy between these two notions of unconscious.

An absolutely different, but maybe even more important problem lies in the use of different hierarchies of value. Here the difficulty consists in the meeting of different normative paradigms. The author accepts without any critique a mixture of values, connected on one hand with the liberal model of a society, and on the other, with the psychotherapeutic practice.

The first affinity expresses itself for example in the statement that “The highest level of object-relations is that one of the free decision for the beginning or the maintenance or ending of a relationship to other individuals or groups”. In the case of many relations — i.e. love — it is at least disputable. But it is also very close to the corps of liberal values, with the free choice of an individual as the highest point. It is evident that every thinker can choose his own hierarchy of values and — even if he denies it — he has got one. But it is also a truism — quite easily forgotten — that he shall be aware of it and shall not accept it as a revealed truth.

The lack of the proposed discussion exposes itself in the “suspension” of the clinical analysis when its' results are coming into conflict with the supposed values. So, the author claims that the notion of a „chosen trauma” should not be applied to groups that have been subjected to genocide. “The concerned groups and peoples do, however, not intend to dominate other ethnic groups by remembering their history,...” Another questionable statement. Why shouldn't they? Does the victim of a trauma beyond our imagination — the genocide — loose it's human emotional structure? Can't it feel hatred, fear and a permanent tendency to dominate, only to protect itself? And why shouldn't this group rationalise this tendency with the described mechanism of a

“chosen trauma”? Even if it would be the most terrible trauma we know?

In a matter of fact the unresolved problem of interfering normative and descriptive statements is strongly connected with the transference of clinical categories of “health” and „illness” to the social discourse as a fundament of a new hierarchy of values. If we maintain, that the pathological leader is dangerous mainly because he is ill, we suggest also, that universal mental health could prevent us from the danger of violence and hatred. It seems rather a utopia again. This kind of social projects don’t take into account many other elements, that can provoke conflicts. First of all, the simple conflict of important interests and strong differences in capacities of different social groups. The discussed case of a “revolt” in the therapeutic group is an excellent illustration of the specific violence, that can be administrated in the name of „common health”. Even if such a violence can represent itself as necessary, the use of clinical categories tends to mask its brutal and crude character. Michel Foucault gave us the fundamental descriptions of this phenomenon.

According to, between others, Frederick Nietzsche, the categories of “health” and “illness” really started to push out from the discourse of the contemporary culture the traditional hierarchy of values based on the opposition of “good” and „bad”. This process tends to a deep „cultural revolution” and that is why any use of clinical language in the social analysis requires from the author an explicit position on the questions discussed above.

The problem is, that it is very difficult to hold such an explicit position on this and other discussed topics. It seems, that the difficulties evident in the analysed article are rooted in essential and today still unresolved apories, connected with the structural incompatibility of the hermetic language of psychoanalysis and the traditional language of humanities and social sciences. Those apories are easily detectable in writings of the major thinkers, who tried to work in between these two linguistic fields. They lay down the direction of future reflection. So their presence could not justify a fully negative evaluation of the effort of the author of the article “Individual responsibility versus archaic group dynamics in national and international politics”

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