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Authentic life and ‘false consciousness’ Towards a review of psychoanalysis as a tool for social critique

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On the occasion of this conference dedicated to the memory of Romano, I found myself – yet again – dealing with an issue which, as an adolescent, had first raised my curiosity about psychoanalysis, namely, the link between psychoanalysis and social critique. I still remember with emotion and self-approval the satisfaction I felt as a Junior High School student when I managed to persuade my teacher of Religion to devote an entire lesson to the discussion of Wilhelm Reich’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. This classical study stresses, in stronger terms than Freud, the role of sex instincts and of social sexuophobia in the genesis of significant social events such as Nazism, racial hatred and the rootedness of religious feelings in the masses (Reich, 1933). It is easy to understand how such topics suited the subversive vehemence connected with the emergence of sex instincts that characterizes the beautiful and challenging stage of our personality development that is adolescence. Wilhelm Reich’s contribution belongs to a critical historical moment – namely, the decade that preceded the mass exodus of European psychoanalysts fleeing Nazism. Those were productive years for psychoanalysis, especially with regard to the observations of the relation between society and psychoanalysis. Far from restricting itself to clinical theory and therapy, at that time psychoanalysis was viewed as aiming at a wider audience, made up not only of physicians and psychologists but also of readers whose interests

went far beyond clinical matters and embraced many different cultural domains. In his *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, Russell Jacoby argues that a good part of Freud’s success and influence may stem from his being able to reach an educated and wider audience through a clear, lucid and direct style (Jacoby, 1983). Although deriving from his clinical work, Freud’s insights immediately transcended it and nurtured a general psychoanalytic theory of culture that went completely lost with the advent of Nazism. In re-reading the Einstein-Freud exchange in *Why War?* (Freud, 1932), what strikes us today is how Freud succeeded in formulating a personal contribution to the question put by Einstein: “Is there any way of delivering humankind from the menace of war?”. Freud’s answer was based on a purely biological and strikingly asocial notion such as Thanatos, the death instinct. Although obviously pessimistic, the perspective underlying such a notion did not prevent him from suggesting to Einstein that some attitudes – i.e., the recourse to Eros as a propelling force of mankind’s emotional ties, and the promotion of emotional ties through an identification process that increases the feeling of solidarity among human beings – might help to avert war through the deflection of aggressive impulses. Nowadays, we are inclined to revise and re-evaluate the work of this generation of psychoanalysts – those who lived before the outbreak of World War II – by focusing, above all, on their contri-



butions to clinical theory. Wilhelm Reich's *Character Analysis* (1933) may be taken here as an example of such a tendency. We have repressed – so to speak – or, at least, forgotten the revolutionary contribution this generation made to the theory of social change. Thus, although our more detached modern reading may be struck by the radical spirit of their thinking, at the same time we tend to view as naive some of their strongly reductionistic psychoanalytic claims about institutions and society. I will certainly not attempt to give a hasty and comprehensive evaluation of that generation of analysts, which Paul Robinson called “The Freudian Left” (Robinson, 1969). What strikes us in their writings is the radical and revolutionary spirit, the hope that psychoanalysis could set free – both on an individual and in a wider social dimension – the creative potential of mankind, by getting in touch with the realm of unconscious drive forces fostered by the analytic situation. Such a liberation could lead to re-establishing collective life on the basis of a stronger authenticity and closeness to the vital roots of human existence.

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the fact that we could still make use of psychoanalysis as a tool for social critique by developing the notion of authenticity and, in broader terms, of authentic life. Mitchell is the author who has most studied this notion at a clinical level (Mitchell, 1993). Fromm had already developed this idea by linking it to the prevention of the human need for idols. Fromm writes: *“The sense of powerlessness, and hence the need for idols, become less intense the more a person succeeds in attributing his existence to his own active efforts; the more he develops his powers of love and reason, the more he acquires a sense of identity, not mediated by his social role but rooted in the authenticity of his self. The more he can give and is delated to others, without losing his freedom and integrity, the more he is aware of his unconscious so that nothing human within himself and in others is alien to him.”* (Fromm, 1990, p. 53.)

I would like to show, through the clinical example of a psychoanalytic group therapy, how the genuine pursuit of a deep relatedness – even in the presence of destructive tendencies – nurtures and fosters social ties, and how this

special aspect may revalue psychoanalysis as a tool for social critique.

I shall briefly describe the case of a group analysis. The group consisted of candidates still in training within the programme which our Institute offers in Florence. Despite being a training group, it followed the same rules usually applied to therapeutic group analysis, at least according to our model. The group consisted of 10 members, 4 men and 6 women. The sessions took place once a week, always in the same place and at the same time. There were two trainers, one male and one female, who participated alternatively in the group as observer and as participant. The analyst who acted as observer took written notes on what emerged from the group during the hour -and -a -half sessions: significant verbal sequences, free associations, dreams relating specifically to the group; in general, any verbal or nonverbal communication considered by the analyst to be relevant. At the end of the session, the observe would elaborate and report to the group a final comprehensive interpretation of what emerged during the session. The structure of the interpretation usually consisted in making explicit the basic dynamics of the session and in connecting it to the manifest phenomenology. From the point of view of content, the interpretation concerned the resistances the group offered to the awareness of its transference toward itself and/or the therapeutic couple and/or a part of the group and/or subgroups. Interpretations of this sort are possible at a comparatively early stage of the group's life, because, as a rule, a tendency towards regression appears in the group more rapidly than in individual analysis. The participant analyst, on the other hand, may intervene in the group's dialogue mainly as a facilitator. After this necessary methodological introduction, I now turn to an account of the episode which I find most relevant to my topic.

The group was formed two months before the episode and the members had participated in 8/10 sessions. The group itself was made up of subgroups from the very beginning. There were some participants from the previous class who had gone through an intensive year of training with the same trainers, some newly enrolled candidates, and two other units coming



from other groups. Interventions mainly referred to the existence of subgroups, by either symbolic references and narrative displacements, or by reference to real aspects, such as the membership of a previous group and possibly the sharing of the same analysts. In the process of the development of the group as a whole, the role and the meaning of subgroups is often to provide members with partial and temporary identities, during a stage in which the group has physiological trouble in establishing a global identity. Such problems stem from the regressive anxiety that typically characterize this early stage. We might say, borrowing Kleinian terminology, that at the beginning the group is – dynamically speaking – in a schizoparanoïd position. From a symbolic point of view, subgroups often acquire the meaning of partial mother objects. The entire group dynamic aims at integrating subgroups into a global mother object, a process that usually entails the emergence of a great deal of anxiety and related security operations. This is a very delicate stage. In our case, participants expressed resistance to such experiences of anxiety through attacks on both analysts, sometimes in a straightforward manner, but most of the time by means of symbolic derivatives with maternal references which had a strongly negative emotional connotation. The patient understanding of these resistances gradually allows the group to build the relationship with a total object, a development which is usually announced by the appearance of symbols of birth and creativity. These symbols are often personified on a conscious level by utterances such as: “the group is born”, “I can feel the group”, “the group exists”. The stage immediately preceding the group’s birth challenges the emotional holding of the analysts, who must tolerate destructive oral aggressiveness and a strong devaluation, often linked to death anxiety.

In our case, the group was actually moving through that stage when it is crucial for the analysts to let themselves be experienced as capable of being destroyed and – at the same time – of being able to survive. In our group this destructiveness towards the analytic couple – which was actually connected to the need for relatedness with a mother figure – was directed by the

group to the therapeutic couple. This attitude persisted for several sessions. At a certain point, during the customary final feedback, one of the analysts interpreted the destructiveness not as an anxiety-hampered quest for relatedness and motherly love but, on the contrary, as the desire to build an alternative couple for the group. This feedback was delivered to the group in an aggressive tone. During the sessions which followed this interpretation, the group manifested – on a conscious level – strong guilt feelings towards both analysts, while simultaneously experiencing – on a dynamically deeper level – that its destructiveness had been successful (destructiveness without symbolic survival). The interpretation was indeed based on a series of erotic symbols with which one part of the group expressed the wish to split the therapeutic couple and pair off with one or the other analyst. The group perceived the failure to understand the affective dynamics linked to its own need for relatedness as a definitive abandonment and a substantial rejection. Death symbols and death-related narratives emerged in several interventions. Both analysts were perceived as insecure and scared to lose the power they had because of their status as analysts. In the transference situation very disparaging attitudes towards the analysts appeared. Very aggressive doubts were expressed as to their ability to analyze and lead the group. In other words, the analysts were perceived as incapable of being a couple generating a good internal family – as Franco Fornari would put it. The anxiety of the participants related to the unconscious perception that the analytic couple, viewed as maternal, was no longer able to ensure an affectively adequate environment within which to express the need for a primary love relationship. What happened, then, was a misunderstanding or, in Levenson’s words, a case of “*fallacy of understanding*”. In this case, mystification stemmed from the failure to recognize a true need for attachment, since it was disguised by incestuous symbols. In *The heart of man*, Fromm describes incestuous ties as the secondary personification of primary maternal love. I shall quote some passages: “*Genetically, the mother is the first personification of the power that protects and guarantees safety, but she is by no means the*



only one. In the course of psychic development mother is supplemented and supplanted by motherly elements such as family, clan, blood, nation, church. (...) Later, when the size of the group increases, the race and the nation, religion or political parties become the mothers, the guarantors of protection and love. In more archaically oriented persons, nature herself, the earth and the sea, become the great representatives of the mother. The transference of the motherly function from the real mother to the family, the nation, the clan, the race has the same advantage which we have already noted with regard to the transformation from personal to group narcissism” (Fromm, 1964, p. 98).

The quotation allows us to introduce the Frommian concept of a possible incestuous meaning of primary attachment, the need and longing for which is abnormally prolonged beyond the appropriate developmental stage. Thus, we may view our clinical group as an example of one of the three orientations which Fromm considered to be at the basis of what he called “*syndrome of decay*”. In his *The heart of man* Fromm defines this syndrome as something that “*prompts men to destroy for the sake of destruction, and to hate for the sake of hate*”. The syndrome of decay has its lethal effect only if its three basic orientations are combined:

Necrophilia
Incestuous Symbiosis
Malignant Narcissisms

Fromm contrasts the syndrome of decay with the syndrome of growth, resulting from:

Biophilia
Independence
Overcoming of Narcissism

As far as our group is concerned, we cannot obviously speak of a syndrome of decay, since we are faced with just one of the three orientations, and a rather mild one at that. Nevertheless, it may prove useful for our present purpose to view it as an instance of destructiveness experienced by the group for its own sake. Fromm refers to this phenomenon as “*symbiotic incestuous fixation*”, a concept Freud had already dealt

with. Fromm writes: “*Freud recognized, more implicitly than explicitly, that the attachment to the mother is common to both sexes as the earliest phase of development and that it can be compared with the matriarchal features of pre-Hellenic culture. But he did not follow up this thought.*” (Fromm, 1964, p. 119.) Moreover, the author makes an important point: “*This pre-Oedipal attachment of boys and girls to their mother, which is qualitatively different from the Oedipal attachment of boys to their mother is in my experience by far the more important phenomenon, in comparison with which the genital incestuous desires of the little boy are quite secondary. I find that the boy’s or girl’s pre-Oedipus attachment to mother is one of the central phenomena in the evolutionary process and one of the main causes of neurosis or psychosis. Rather than call it a manifestation of the libido, I would prefer to describe its quality which, whether we use the term libido or not, is something entirely different from the boy’s genital desires. This wish for incest, in its pre-genital sense, is one of the most basic of urges among men or women, which includes man’s desire for shelter and his satisfaction from narcissism, his yearning to be free of the dangers inherent in responsibility, freedom and awareness, and his longing for unconditional love, which is offered without any expectation of his loving response*” (Fromm, 1964, p. 97).

During the subsequent sessions, the analysts were able to acknowledge the consequences of the misunderstanding mentioned above. A new set of interpretations was put forward, with the intention of recognizing the group’s need for primary relatedness. The analysts thus regained the possibility of their own fruitful relatedness to the group. They received the participants’ destructive aggressiveness with renewed affective availability, offering the group the chance to see the desire for relatedness in this destructiveness. More specifically, the analysts acknowledged this desire by tracing back the traumatic misunderstanding to two basic factors: on the one hand, the unconscious fear of the analysts of losing their status of leading couple and, on the other hand, the group’s equally deadly wish to prove itself unable to be born as a group, a feeling which was symbolically and affectively ex-



perienced as the impossibility of obtaining mother love.

Subsequently, one of the participants reported a dream, which signalled the beginning of the group's creative processing of the situation. This was the dream: "*A windmill on the banks of a swollen river. The female members of the group stand in front of it. The face of one of the analysts has been painted on the mill. The vanes turn, and now and then stop, pointing at one of the female participants, who then falls into the water. At the same time a boat called "Hope" is seen sailing down the river*". The dream was interpreted as the first symbol indicating the group's perception of itself as a global, and not a partial, container. It contains symbols both of life (the boat called "Hope") and of death (the mill throwing its daughters into the deadly turmoil of the river). These symbols coexist within an integrative tendency aimed at finding a unitary identity mirroring the group's affective components. The dream was also a form of social bond for the group. It thus became a myth. The relation between a mythical dream and the emergence of a social bond within groups has been widely investigated in the relevant literature (Marinelli S. – Vasta F.N., 2004). I have chosen to report this case because it allows me to highlight – despite the limits of that small social laboratory which is the dynamically oriented group – the link between the process of human growth and the notion of life/death dualism. Fromm used this theme to explore the possibility of using psychoanalysis as a tool for social critique. It is not my purpose to examine here the link between the death-life dualism and Fromm's analytic social psychology, not least because I am afraid I lack the necessary philosophical knowledge. Yet, I would like to offer some thoughts about this issue, suggested by this small group. One of the basic principles of Fromm's cultural plan of a critical psychoanalysis was to go back to Freud's initial revolutionary thrust. He did so by going back to Marx's antinomy between life and death, with man being viewed as a system of natural possibilities aiming at expressing themselves in the external world (life), in opposition to the view of man exploiting the world in order to satisfy his own needs, desires and demands (death). Ac-

ording to Fromm, "false consciousness" (Marx) is the outcome of the mediation between these two tendencies and is necessary since it gives an apparent rationality to a life which is self-alienated, to man who neglects vital portions of his own Self. As a consequence of Fromm's outstanding work, there arises the possibility that psychoanalysis may be used as a tool for social critique. The fundamental idea which Fromm takes from Marx (especially his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844) is that the process of dis-alienation – with the retrieval of man's creative potential – is possible if the social system – the capitalist system, which promotes an alienating system of relationships – is modified. The capitalistic mode of production leads to man's alienation and enslavement through the development of special forms of social character such as the marketing orientation, as opposed to the productive orientation. In *The sane society* Fromm wrote: "*What is modern man's relationship to his fellow man? It is one between two abstractions, two living machines who use each other. The employer uses the ones whom he employs; the salesman uses his customers. Everybody is to everybody a commodity, always to be treated with certain friendliness, because if he is not of use now he may be later. There is not much love or hate to be found in human relations of our days. There is, rather, a superficial friendliness, and a more than superficial fairness, but behind that surface is distance and indifference*" (Fromm, 1955, p.137). In this book Fromm suggested some concrete measures to produce a modification of social living, a change – he claimed – that is essential for the growth of human potential. In *The heart of a man* he seems to trace man's potential for authentic self-expression back to more psychological dimensions, such as the dialectical contrast between biophilic and necrophilic character orientations, a dualism no longer connected to specific social systems such as capitalism. More specifically, Fromm believed that the biophilic orientation is grounded in man's sense of freedom, viewed as "*the possibility to be an active and responsible member of society*" (Fromm, 1964, p. 57.) Again, he claimed that "*man's actions are always caused by inclinations rooted in (usually unconscious) forces operating in his per-*



sonality (...) In those cases where contradictory inclinations effectively operate within the personality there is freedom of choice. This freedom is limited by the real existing possibilities (...)” (Fromm, 1964, p. 148). Fromm pointed out that the biophilic character orientation is possible on condition that one has experienced “warm, loving relationships with others” (Fromm, 1964, p. 55). All in all, I perceive a development in Fromm’s thinking about the life-death dichotomy. He progressively gets free from Marx’s concept according to which – once released from the shackles of the capitalist system – man would develop a natural inclination toward good. In Marx’s opinion, human nature is filled with Eros and love for life, and these drives can appear only in social situations that allow man to be what he really is. In a somewhat paradoxical way, Marx claimed that man’s freedom to be himself depends on the removal of negative conditions and obstacles outside him. Fromm developed this Marxian view of freedom by bringing it back within human beings. He argued that “If the essence of man is neither the good nor the evil, neither love nor hate but a contradiction which demands the search of new solutions which, in turn, creates new contradictions, then indeed man can answer his dilemma, either in a regressive or in a progressive way” (Fromm, 1964, p. 153).

Let us go back to our clinical case. The episode of the group’s psychic life which I reported is particularly suitable to show how the love/hate dyad and the creation of a social bond are strongly connected to the maintenance of a genuine affective relatedness to these inner tendencies. In fact, denying the need for primary love and relatedness led to a necrophilic orientation which, in turn, led to a psychological split that might have been – at least, within our group – irreparable. The dream pointed out how the group handled this split through the symbol of a mill-mother which acted by chance, without structured thought. Through random actions, the mill-mother threw her children into the deadly river. This is the opposite of the mother with whom the group was longing to get in touch, a mother able to offer herself as a secure bank to which the group-child could attach itself. What were the dynamic movements

which led the group to produce the symbol of the boat called “Hope”? The analysts promptly recognized their mistake, which was discussed after the session. With this awareness, the analysts dealt with the aggressive and destructive movements of the group, whose members – as I said – tended to communicate symbols of helplessness and devaluation. The perceived impossibility of renewing a trusting relationship was, however, counterbalanced by a constant pursuit of such a relationship. We may say that the therapeutic activity which led the group to develop the boat symbol was the commitment of the analysts to find an authentic way to involve the group once more in the analytic work. Within this genuine relatedness, the biophilic orientation was able to develop. This led to the subsequent emergence of the mill dream, a mythical dream, the creator of a social bond within the group viewed as a whole. This dynamic movement led to the increase of the inner sense of freedom inside the group and its individual members. This shows a further possibility for psychoanalysis to become a tool for social critique through the notion of authenticity, of an authentic life. The co-existence of several different levels of reality within the group-analytic experience – where it is more apparent than in individual analysis – and the co-existence of both biophilic and necrophilic orientations, show that the unitary growth of the group goes hand in hand with the increasing sense of inner freedom of individual members. This sense of freedom stems from a more authentic relationship with both the biophilic and necrophilic orientations, which, in turn, nurture and foster the relationship.

The dynamic group which I have reported may be considered a small social laboratory. It shows the close link between authenticity, inner freedom and the genesis of social bonds. Psychoanalysis can be a tool for social critique, along with other creative insights of the psychoanalytic tradition. If man has a more authentic contact also with destructive tendencies, a sense of belonging and a social bond emerge. This contributes to the identification of, and the fight against, the equally social tendencies towards alienation and “false consciousness”.



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