

» Free associations on SP-D and World War 1 «

by Paolo Fonda

100 years ago a warship docked almost in front of this building. She was bringing the coffins of the Archduke Ferdinand and his wife from Sarajevo. A majestic funeral passed through the city. WW1 had started.

All of Europe is commemorating this terrible event. It is even more terrible, if we consider it, like Eric Hobsbawm does, the start of the only world war - the "31 years war" - from Sarajevo to Hiroshima.

Being asked to bring this tragic event into the matters of this seminar, I will share with you some free associations on the dialectic between PS and D and WW1. I will outline a picture, which is mostly a subjective fantasy, just some "free metaphors". But, hopefully, it could stimulate further and more suitable associations and thoughts.

Within the unconscious, drives give some directions to the Brownian motion of free associations, so that though, looking to them from outside, they appear free, **from inside they are determined**. Therefore they are so interesting for analysts, because they may reveal what determines them inside.

There could be different psychic splittings: a "simple" splitting of an object into two parts - good and bad. This creates *persecutory anxieties*. But splitting may provoke more than two fragments. Sometimes it may be generalized up to a disintegration of the self and/or of the object, what provokes *catastrophic anxieties*. These are far more threatening than the persecutory ones. So when there is a **threat of disintegration signalled by catastrophic anxieties, the subject clings desperately to the persecutory situation**. One may suppose that, the more threatening the catastrophe is, the more rigid the PS position and the persecution will be.

In psychoanalytic research at first extreme, pathologic forms of phenomena are usually observed and only later their ubiquitous physiological function is discovered. The same has been true for splittings, which are not just symptoms of severe psychosis and perversions, but play a role, though less evident, also in normal functioning.

We may imagine that in any transition from one developmental phase to another, there should be an aggressive moment, in which established structures and patterns are, to a certain extent, reduced to fragments. Then, split fragments must be integrated into a new, different, coherent and more suitable structure. Some fragments have to be dropped, some have to be found again, while others have to be adapted to the new structure. Let us imagine that, in this activity, a mechanism similar to free associations could be in action. Fragments, which are still felt as useful (or still cathected) may be more easily pushed to the surface, to the preconscious, to be used.

Therefore in analysis one of our aims is to make the associations free, to free the mind so that it may associate and recover the fragments that have to be used.

If there is a free enough atmosphere (let us say in a D position), then the interplay between the fragments of the past and the new emerging needs tend to form a more suitable integration (like playing with a jig saw puzzle until the pieces find their right place to form a new figure). While in a rigid defensive structure (a fixed PS position), such an interplay is very difficult, or not possible at all, so that the development is obstructed, or it may deviate toward a pathological form. In this case the pressure of accumulated and not satisfied new needs may reach dangerous explosive intensities in time.

A new, more or less violent, splitting-fragmentation may then allow the reactivation of the vital mechanism of “free associations”, which before was controlled/ by the rigid paranoid defence.

What I am saying may relate so to development of individuals as to development of groups. We may consider as similar the development of the free association process in the individual, and the *freedom of association*, one of the basic elements of democracy. Both seem connected to the Depressive position. Such a free process allows a continuous interplay between emerging needs and the external world, what guarantees a continuous readjustment and adaptation of the culture and social structures. Therefore democracies could develop, though with recurring crisis and sometimes in a rather stormy way. Continuous adaptation protects against catastrophic explosions-fragmentations-bloody revolutions.

On the contrary, in absolute monarchies and dictatorships, which are based on a rigid PS position, there is no freedom of association, no dimension of time, no end of anything, but an absurd attempt to fix the “Great Achievement” for eternity. (It is amazing to see the similarities in cold monumental architectures of right and left dictatorships!) Usually they cannot develop. When too many emerging needs are repressed, the risk of a crash increases and this threat compels them to be ever more rigidly paranoid, to control the increasing catastrophic anxiety. So they bear in themselves, from the beginning, their unavoidable destruction.

Before WW1 an increasing number of European individuals and groups had accumulated so much dissatisfaction that an aggressive attack against the existing equilibrium, which was no longer adequate, was unavoidable.

We may suppose, that the aggression originally addressed against one’s own group and its institutions (monarchies, feudal systems, wild capitalism) was later redirected, with great relief, against other nations, projected into enemies, making one’s own aggression legitimate and guilt-free.

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We may look at an eminent example of this. The 26 of July 1914, three days after the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to the Serbian Kingdom, and two days before the war was declared, in a letter to Abraham, Sigmund Freud wrote:

“...for the first time in 30 years I feel myself to be an Austrian and would like to try it once again with this not very hopeful Empire. Morale everywhere is excellent. The liberating effect of the courageous action and the secure prop of Germany contribute a great deal to this.—One observes the most genuine symptomatic actions in everyone.”

As we already know, before this moment Freud was rather disappointed by the Austrian monarchy. This is also implicit in his words: “...for the first time” (meaning “never before”) and explicit in the “...not very hopeful Empire”. For sure he felt, not only unconsciously, some aggressiveness against it. But now, suddenly, he “would like to try it once again”. He suddenly becomes a lover of his country: “I feel myself to be an Austrian”. He feels identified with the large group: “Morale everywhere is excellent.” (everywhere means also in himself). He shares the declaration of war, which is “courageous” and has a “liberating effect” ... “in everyone”.

This is the relief felt when one abandons the painful conflicting attempt to keep the Depressive position (what is good and bad in us and what is good and bad in others) and regresses to the PS one, where instantly everything becomes clear: who is good and who is bad, and the subject, with a great relief, feels safe, being merged with the mass of the “goodies” and ready to attack the “baddies”. To defeat them appears a very promising prospective for a better future.

Aggression emerges, but guilt is projected in others. The aggression is now fully legitimated by the group. All Austrians agreed that it was right to declare war on Serbia. But a question arises: was Freud’s aggressiveness against that world – against his own environment - so threatening (connected with catastrophic anxieties) and guilty, that it was necessary for him to redirect it toward others? Serbians, Russians, British and French for sure were not the reason for disappointments and frustrations accumulated by Freud during his life! But it is too limiting to look at this only through an individual dynamic. Group dynamics were playing the main role in those moments. Let us not forget, how at that time, surprisingly, the same regression happened massively also in many socialist parties, which just a few months earlier were strongly against any war (or more interested in a possible revolution): “Workers will not kill each other for capitalists’ profit!” But then they did it! Such a regression is extremely evident in wars and usually so strong, that very few people may resist it. So Freud himself didn’t resist, though then in a few years he realised the trap in which he and all of Europe had fallen.

But already in March 1915 Freud was writing: “Not only is it more bloody and more destructive than any war of other days, [...] it is at least as cruel, as embittered, as implacable as any that has preceded it. It disregards all the restrictions known as International Law, which in peace-time the states had bound themselves to observe; it ignores the prerogatives of the wounded and the medical service, the distinction between civil and military sections of the population.”

The whole of humankind was discovering the terrible destructiveness released by this war. Freud, perhaps, tried then to mentalize this, elaborating the Death instinct theory.

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People, politicians, even military leaders, tragically underestimated the lethal effectiveness of new weapons and of the new way of fighting, which involved many millions of soldiers, which had never happened before. There was no quick conclusion, as expected by everybody. Nobody imagined such catastrophic results: 10 million deaths!

Millions were killed, other millions passed the rest of their lives bearing the terrible secret, that they killed. There were millions of orphans and widows, further millions died at the end of the war for the flu pandemic. It was the Apocalypse!

Such enormous traumas couldn't be elaborated. Groups, as containers, couldn't contain and neutralize such pervading and unbearable pains. The group-containers themselves were intoxicated and progressively deformed.

We may look at **WW1 also as a great disintegration followed by integration with a pathological result**, where fragments of the explosion were put together into a "wrong monstrous integrations". Actually, after 1918 extremely aggressive and cruel totalitarian dictatorships (Fascism, Nazism and Communism) seized power almost all over the world. All shared, though in rather different ideological contexts, the idea that millions of deaths may be a good price to reach paradise on Earth for the survivors. Democracy in Europe almost disappeared. It remained only in France and UK. Nevertheless both of these already declining empires could dislocate a large part of their aggressiveness to their colonies.

But these "wrong integrations", grown out of an enormous sea of blood, were so full of persecutory and catastrophic anxieties, psychotic content and uncontrolled destructiveness, that their disintegration couldn't be delayed long.

Again the paranoid idea that "war will purify the nation" appeared, what we may interpret, as an unconscious awareness, that such monstrous constructions should be destroyed. Individuals, pushed by heavy emotions and anxieties, felt an increasing attraction to merge with their groups, in a narcissistic PS position. This weakened their possibility to think and to evaluate appropriately reality. In such a position fantasies of omnipotence dominated and the fear of death diminished. Everything was setting the stage for a new war.

The "wrong monstrous integration" in Europe demanded another destruction, what actually happened with WW2 (and to a certain extend also in 1990), during the second part of Hobsbawm's "short century". Self-destruction seems to have been built in these dominating ideologies from their beginning: the paranoid "all or nothing" - only total victory or defeat and self-destruction (what was especially evident in the Nazis). No intermediate position (D) was possible. Also Communism seems to have grown up with a time bomb inside.

Everything ended in a new disintegration – WW2 – followed by a new integration, in which there were different elements: a total destructive perspective - nuclear war, but also an expansion of democracy (D position), where individuals, more aware of themselves and of the preciousness of their lives, are less eager to sacrifice themselves for, more or less, unrealistic ideas.

Though the integration after WW2 includes ever more traumas and psychotic destructiveness, a sort of a miracle seems to have happened: total destruction reached its apex and was frozen into a relatively peaceful “cold war”. The threatening nuclear destruction paralysed itself and gave, up to now, 70 years of a relatively peaceful time. Perhaps humankind, through the shock of the catastrophes of WW1 and WW2, became more aware of its destructive capacity and put it under a certain control? Anyhow this gives us the precious chance to elaborate and reflect upon what has happened in the last century.

Considering the increasing speed of development in our time, 70 years is a very long period – an unexpected gift, perhaps a product of an attempt of reparation, after decades of destruction? Nobody knows how long it will last, before new stormy needs will start further disintegrations, to clear the ground for new, more suitable forms of integration. Perhaps it could be worthwhile to use this time for thinking and elaborating, while it is still possible.

Indeed some disintegrations are continuously happening, but in a relatively less catastrophic way, as local wars and economic crisis. A big new integration seems to be on the way to be realized, based on extraordinary and completely new elements (computer, internet, globalization, new economies, emerging new powers etc.). What will it be? History is going on and, despite our omnipotent illusion that we have discovered some of its mechanisms; it doesn't cease to surprise us with unexpected turns and completely new scenarios.

Let me interrupt this fantasizing and this improper application of psychoanalytic concepts to a non-analytic social context. Let us take these thoughts as an incentive for further discussions.

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