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Analysis of the Arms race: Psychologists' Conception of the Arms Race

As a psychoanalyst I am not in a position to set up a hypothesis concerning the causes of the arms race. Psychoanalysis can only contribute to the discussion and evaluation of such hypotheses. It can investigate the mechanisms by which causal factors make themselves felt in individual and collective opinions, in political options, and in decisions that lead to political or military action. In fact, psychological considerations are indispensible to an understanding of these processes. Concepts such as deterrence, the need for security, a fear of ..., or the hope for... contain basic assumptions concerning human emotions.

Even cursory attention to the arms race reveals irrational political actions. Professor Tsipis has just explained that the interests of a certain group, such as the military-industrial complex, are diametrically opposed to the interests of the nation's citizens, indeed to the interests of the entire world population, and that they entail disproportionately grave danger for everyone, including the members of the group itself. Here psychoanalysis has an advantage. At variance with the psychology of common sense, psychoanalysis proceeds on the assumption that all human opinions and attitudes are primarily irrational. To borrow the words of Theodor Adorno, it expouses the view that "What is normal is the wrong consciousness". It assumes the need for complicated processes, for instance overcoming various inner conflicts, in order for individuals, let alone social groupings such as nations and their governments, to act in a rational fashion.

I shall begin with the title of our topic - the arms race. This designation is misleading. It looked like a race in the beginning. Which side was ahead? Technological innovations in offensive arms led to a situation in which the other side felt it necessary to catch up with and, if possible, to surpass its rival. Ever since it has become clear that the race can never be won because the employment of nuclear weapans would entail the annihilation of both sides (MAD = mutual assured destruction), the principle of the race, or competition between the two sides has given way to anonther motivation -the need perceived by each side to establish and safeguard its own position of strength and power at all costs.

I realize that the metaphor of the race still has its place in the rhetoric concerning our topic, and I admit that the rivalry between the super-powers has not yet come to an end. Tragically, this rivalry has led again and again to so-called proxy wars.

What we are dealing with here is rather a process intended to consolidate the self-confidence of a nation and to assuage fears of another kind.

Psychoanalysis ascribes a biologically useful signalling function to the emotion of fear, but depending upon the nature of the danger perceived and upon the intensification of fear, this function may well have undesirable (or inopportune) consequences. Individuals react with anxiety to a variety of external threats, including their fear of an enemy or rival. Qualitatively different anxieties and similar unbearable emotions are triggered endogenously -a fear of losing one's security, one's control over a situation, feelings of impotence or annihilation.

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In the case of such more or less strictly organized social groups and institutions as governments, an analogous distinction seems warranted, although naturally the origins, mechanisms, and consequences of anxiety cannot be the same as in the psyche of the individual. Yet the comparison is valid. Fears of being threatened by an enemy, of being attacked and vanquished, can be assuaged by superiority in power and in weapons, by occasional tests of strength, or ultimately by an armed victory. "Internal" anxieties, reactions to dangers not attributable to a specific enemy, require other countermeasures. Such anxieties can come from quite different sources, thus may have nothing to do with the danger of a hostile attack. They manifest themselves in a feeling malaise within the community, as political and social tensions, as a loss of trust, as a blow to political institutions and structures, as the fear of a chaotic rending of the fabric of social life.

But back to the arms race. It is my conviction that the arms race is sustained above all by a threat of this second type, by the internal insecurity and the sense of shock of nations. Even superficial observation of the situation offers indications to this effect. First, the potential main enemy is described by the political and military powers that be as far superior -one must catch up, build more and better weapons; then again, sometimes even simultaneously, the emphasis is placed on one's own unassailable military power and impregnable security -which, however, fails to dispel anxiety since everyone is convinced that the enemy is doing his utmost to undermine that security or to destroy it altogether by means of a sudden act of aggression.

A genuine race would be carried out quite differently. Each side would systematically try to achieve a rational evaluation of the enemy. Still another feature of the presently valid principle is the fact that, for a long time now, there has been no political discussion of the real intentions of the "enemy". Instead, the US government seems to assume that, if it were not for the presence of the nuclear deterrent, the USSR would lose no time in attacking the capitalist world, beginning with Western Europe, possibly after having made patently impossible, extortionist demands. And the Soviet Union seems to harbor similar fears as regards the United States. These assumptions are unfounded and improbable, but they lead to a situation in which about the only questions of military strategy. Under these circumstances a revision of the basic assumptions is impossible. This, too, argues for the assertion that the arms race is no longer a mutual contest of strength.

There is still a third phenomenon which makes it clear that there can be no question of a race, namely the propagation of the Strategic Defense Initiative and the US insistence on continuing its development. As recently as the meeting in Reykjavik it was reported that Ronald Reagan hat been forced to reject the Soviet demand in order to pacify and mobilize his conservative followers in view of the pending Congressional elections, thus for reasons of domestic policy and not within the framework of a contest with the Soviets, whose technology in this field is described as backward and who are even reported to be economically incapable of mounting a comparable program of their own - an assertion that is totally unfounded.

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But even when Reagan first introduced SDI, in his famous speech of 13 March 1983, it was obvious that the project was designed to conjure up imaginary fears and that it had little or nothing to do with practical strategic policy. There is evidence to this effect. When President Reagan announced his plan for an impenetrable shield against nuclear weapons, he called it a dream (earning the applause of most of those present on the occasion!). And to make this dream come true for all mankind, thus for the soviets as well, Reagan promised that the United states would voluntarily keep the Soviet Union informed of technological breakthroughs. The offer was unprecedented; it had never been made, or even envisioned before -not even in connection with far less decisive achievements. In the meantime, SDI has clearly acquired a dual

significance. In the first place, it was to serve as a bargaining chip, to be surrendered at any time, provided the other side made appropriate concessions. But precisely a long range armament program that requires a far-reaching reorientation of the military organization and a considerable share of the resources of the economy can hardly be tossed away like a worthless chip, which loses its value as soon as the game is over. In the second place, SDI was soon on the way to becoming the most important symbol of US might and power. Scientists and armament experts were worried that these two irrational aspects of SDI might blur a realistic evaluation of the program. For these aspects would lead people to disregard the fact that it was technically impossible to realize Reagan's dream, that an absolute shield was not attainable, that SDI would propel armament into a completely new technological and economic dimension, and that it could not be developed otherwise -or perceived otherwise by the enemy -than as a new dimension in strategic weaponry or at least as a weapons system that would make possible an attack resulting in unilateral annihilation of the enemy. In addition, even the construction phase of SDI would automatically render obsolete the last remaining features of any mutual accommodation or bilateral discussion that may so far have become manifest in negotiations arid treaties. To put it in psychological terms, with SDI the United states is abandoning its competitve attitude, which at least leaves open the possibility of adjustment, and adopting an "autistic" position, which is no longer accessible to correction "from without".

Psychologically speaking, with the acknowledgement of mutually assured destruction as the goal of armament efforts, a new phase has begun -characterized by the threat of triggering off the apocalypse. Instead of a race in which each side adjusts its actions to those of its opponent, each side now stresses the hope that no one really wants an apocalypse, no matter how intensively both sides seem to be preparing for it. A policy based on this hope presupposes that both governments and their respective armed forces would react rationally even in case of a conflict, and that their actions would unfailingly be based on common sense. In approaching what is their most important task, the political leaders of both sides are relying on an illusionary misinterpretation of reality. Faulty judgments and accidental errors in crisis management have often led to the outbreak of wars which in retrospect -were recognized as having been unnecessary. What is being totally desregarded in the present strategic situation is the fact that errors and accidents, occurring without the consent or even the knowledge of the governments concerned, are capable of unleashing the apocalypse.

I do not know how a Soviet psychologist would view developments. Probably one would find comparable processes, but certainly not exactly the same ones as in the West. There are indications that in the Soviet Union there exists at least the same linkage between national security policy and the possession and development of nuclear arsenals and their possible employment. In all the

negotiations that have taken place so far, both sides have insisted upon "guaranteed mutual security" with an "adequate" stockpile of nuclear arms as a fundamental condition until such indefinite time as both sides agree to destroy all nuclear weapons. Lately that claim was termed "insurance".

Before I go more deeply into the psychological processes that are manifest in this development, I should like to describe to you an experience that psychoanalysts have almost daily. What is psychologically helpful, is often objectively detrimental. This is not a law, but it does seem to be a rule. Anything which helps the individual to evade or soothe anxiety, anything which seems to give him a feeling of security and to block off intolerable feelings of impotence at the same time often creates a blindness towards genuine dangers. The situation is similar in the lives of nations. Thus, in what I am going to say, I shall take the liberty of postulating as useful psychological processes that are in reality evidently of no use or even injurious. That this peculiarity of the human psyche can be exploited by political or economic interests is obvious.

In connection with fear, which is primarily a signal of impending danger, as individuals we have the option of unconsciously substituting one cause of anxiety for another. This is termed a substitute for displaceable energy. When the individual succeeds in his illusion in exchanging one source of intolerable anxiety for another source for which there is -or seems to be -a remedy, he experiences a sense of relief. In the lives of nations this process plays a significant role. Feelings of insecurity, uneasiness, fear of a social threat, and especially the intolerable feeling of being helplessly at the mercy of a stronger power can be countered by constructing an enemy who can be made responsible for all the threats concerned. Combat, particularly if victorious, promises escape. The vast majority of the Western peoples have owed their mental equilibrium to such shared protective fantasies during the last few years. On the one side - thanks in great part to the efficiency of the media -enormous anxieties and other types of malaise are being mobilized -fears of nuclear

radiation in connection with the peaceful use of nuclear energy and even more in connection with the military employment of nuclear arms; fears of economic ruin -as an individual or as a nation - as a result of impoverishment, indebtedness, or the incalculable tensions between the industrial nations and the peoples of the Third World, who are growing poorer and poorer; fears of the destruction of our natural environment; impotence in the face of an increasingly more rigidly organized and institutionalized world.

A dual substitute for displacable energy presents itself. First, a remote and - if possible - unfamiliar enemy as the source of all evil, against. whom all available energies and aggressive emotions can and must be directed. Second, more or less weak or innocuous, but known enemies, whom one can fight with some prospect. of success, so that victories are possible. But it soon

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becomes clear that a victory of this kind does not bring lasting relief, so that the enemy who has been vanquished or who has been recognized as harmless in the meantime is immediately replaced by another. This is no problem considering the crucial situation prevailing in many parts of the world.

Propaganda alone is often sufficient to combat and banish minor threats, which in the last analysis are interchangeable. The threat of drug abuse is replaced by the threat of AIDS, and the threat of AIDS by the threat of terrorism. All of these threats contain a genuine core of danger. Victories and defeats, however, bring with them national triumphs and catastrophes that are totally out of proportion to the real danger. The occupation of Grenada had no effect whatsoever on the security or lack of security of the United States, yet was applauded as a national triumph. The murder of a single American citizen by Middle East terrorists may become a national catastrophe, while the murder of a dozen or more may be a triumph when it occurs during an armed action against the terrorists. Real and symbolic successes and failures are interchangeable. Thanks to these more or less mobile and readily manipulable threats, we are able to process anxiety and malaise on a collective basis.

The arms race is a different substitute for displaceable energy. For a long time now, the political and ideological traditions of the Western nations have implied the

possibility of one single source for all threats, namely Communism, in its center in the Soviet Union and in all its potential, genuine, or imagined effects or emanation. Psychoanalysis uses the term "shared projective fantasy". This does not mean that reality is not perceived, but simply that

it is interpreted in terms of illusions. Psychoanalysis traces back the "projective fantasy" of communist menace to the mechanism of projective identification, at variance with the plain projection.

The meaning of projection is our own urges, anxieties, aggressions, wishes are displaced outside, into an other individual. The mechanism is metaphorically compared with an optical device: There outside is to be seen only that what is going on in our mind, the picture on our own slide. The screen is blank. The properties of the screen are of no concern. But there will be no picture without a screen. This mechanism is relatively mobile, easily to revert. As soon our mind changes the projected image is changing too. For instance, a Western people is prone to distrust the Soviets; projectively they assume the Soviets are distrusting as well. If distrust is reduced within the Western people -for any reason -they would assume the Soviets harbour less distrust

Projective identification is bound to have a screen too; without a screen there is no image. But the stress lays upon perception of the protagonist. His properties and attitudes, the structure of the screen are incorporated in the image we have projected outside. In other words projective identification is more selective, it does not occur with any antagonist. It works only if he is really suitable to mould a new picture out for our perception of his properties and our own projected tendencies. Correspondingly the image forged by that kind of projection is more stable. It seems to have a proper life though we have widely contributed creating just his image. It can hardly be corrected by a changing attitude of the antagonist or a change in our proper mind. Whether a new perception or a swing of our own mind: both

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will be interpreted in accordance with the once formed image. Distrust f. i.: We know "The Soviets are cheating". The stricter they observe an agreement the more difficult to detect the hidden tendency to cheat which is undoubtedly there. On the other hand:

A Western nation may tend to feel less menace from the Soviets. The voice of any renowned politician will easily strengthen the fading projective identification. It may

be said: The major danger is just to take easy the (projected) menace. You should not forget sane distrust, which alone could protect you from dangerous aggression.

In the history of many European nations antisemitism is the example of such stable projective identification. Any antisemitic person acquainted with a "good" jew knows that this individual is

an exception from the rule. Antisemitic groups and crowds can easily be convinced. Any real inoffensiveness or impotence of the jews they perceive is the result of dire selfdeception. They argue our image, the projected fantasy born of our own mind, is the only true the jews are evil, dangerous and dispose of hidden power.

The so-called Cold War had revived the older nation of communist menace. And it was at that time that nuclear armament began. What lends the phenomenon the character of permanency, however, is not only its projective component, which under certain circumstances might be corrected through experience. It is the protective fantasy to be found in adequate armament, in technological and strategic superiority, a fantasy which has become inextricably linked with the danger we face, that makes the arms race wellnigh irreversible. I am justified in speaking of a protective fantasy, for "mutal assured destruction" cannot promise any real escape -either from the nuclear threat or, even less in fact,

from the economic, ecological and all the other dangers that threaten life today. What is banished, though, is the fear of these dangers, leaving the conviction that extraordinary efforts and achievements will ultimately bring security. This challenge, indeed the very prospect of useful action, soothes anxiety and precludes a feeling of impotence.

I can say very little about the protective fantasy through "nuclear armament" as it is motivated and justified in discussions in the Eastern Block, because I have almost no data on which to base socio-psychological conclusions. My impression is that the horror of war, and especially of a nuclear catastrophe, is greater, that it is emotionally deeper and more intense among the population of the European part of the Soviet Union than among the majority of American citizens. This is explained by the experiences of World War II -and the fact that official Soviet information policy ensures that these experiences will not be forgotten. In contrast to the West, however, it seems to me that in the Soviet Union there is only one politically and ideologically

practicable way in which anxieties of the kind I have described can be processed, namely to trust the Party, the government, in short the power structure (which is also largely responsible for the formation of public opinion) to represent the

interests of the citizens in the best possible way.

Individuals are best able to ward off life-threatening helplessness, extreme anxiety, and impotence by means of projection. In other words, the threat is attributed to an opponent, an external agency. Recognizing the source does not banish the feeling of

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helplessness, but it does mitigate the anxiety. The authority of a government that succeeds in providing relief is acknowledged all the more readily because the feeling of helplessness usually entails a regression to childhood forms of experience. Since the political leaders ostensibly recognize the source of the threat, it is logical to leave it up to them to find a remedy, thus endowing them with paternal/nuturing authority. As long as one follows their lead, security and freedom from anxiety are guaranteed. It is all too easy to forget that these same leaders are themselves partly responsible for the gravest dangers.

The projective transfer of a danger to an external enemy succeeds best when it is the same agencies that conjured up the danger in the first place that offer relief. The government offers us symbols of national invincibility through "superior" weapons as a reward for our unconditional belief that it knows exactly where the danger comes from and that it knows how to ward off all danger.

In this situation, attempts to make the public aware of the real danger are a problem. In most citizens, a certain modicum of anxiety induces a kind of paralysis, a state of mental obtuseness, of intellectual immobility. Criticism and protest only serve to reawaken feelings of anxiety and malaise that had been lulled into quiescence. These conditions are systematically produced by unscrupulous dictators in that they deliberately create anxiety and fear, thus effectively silencing criticism, protest, and opposition.

Another socio-psychological factor that hinders political criticism is the tendency to tacitly accept the prevailing opinion. Those who attempt to question the seriousness

of the horrors successfully warded off, to inform the public, or to bring about a change automatically isolate themselves. They are branded as Cassandras. Not because they create anxiety, but because they vitiate the defense against existing anxieties they are perceived as enemies, ostracized, and sometimes even unmasked as agents of the presumptive external enemy. This process, too, is all too common in dictatorial regimes. During the Third Reich it was known as "Gleichschaltung" (regimentation). There is no doubt that this mechanism also becomes

effective in broad sectors of the population when the threat is not engendered intentionally by a totalitarian regime, but -like nuclear annihilation -represents a development which potentially endangers the entire world.

Ladies and gentleman, our purpose here is to advance the process of unbiased information. We want do describe realistically dangers which, because they not yet been experienced in their full scope and intensity, tend to elude the human imagination. We want to unmask the continuation of the arms race as a dangerous illusion, and -if possible -we want to contribute to the formulation of more rational solutions.

As a psychologist I must admit that hopes for a more reasonable policy will not be entirely justified even if our campaign succeeds. Anxieties which so far have been successfully evaded will suddenly increase. What happens in such cases? We have no clear and definite answer. It would take far too long to report on the well researched consequences of increasing anxiety for the individual psyche and to derive prognoses regarding collective behavior. Instead, I would remind you of two historically fairly recent situations

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characterized by the threat of a national catastrophe.

The first example, the Vietnam War, has certain features in common with the present situation. The necessity of containing the Communist threat was the declared reason for the war in the United States. When the public realized that the threat of a national disintegration was totally out of proportion to possible military success it was the work of active protest movements, which could not have come about in the same form without the cooperation of respected, though officially disavowed critics such as ourselves. The growing horror of the nation at the disasters already experienced and those foreseen for the future brought about a reversal in policy.

The second example is the history of the National Socialist Third Reich. After unprecedented initial successes in both the political and military fields, signs of a turn for the worse began to become apparent. The awareness of impending catastrophe was substantiated by obvious military defeats. The main enemy responsible for the threat -not in reality, but according to the propagated and prevailing doctrine -was the Jewish world conspiracy. The intensification of anxiety and insecurity did not bring about a change in policy. Instead, the projective system reinforced its effect -leading on the one hand to the physical annihilation of the Jews and on the other to incalculable damage to the nation itself, which resorted to all available aggressive means to realize the illusionary dreams of its Führer.

I cannot conclude my remarks without posing the question of just what contribution psychoanalysis can make to a solution of the problem. I have no sure recipe to offer, not even any reliable advice. But the experience gained in the movement that brought about the end of the war in Viet Nam seems worthy of emulation.

There is one detail that I might mention. In case disarmament negotiations should be resumed, they can succeed only if both sides refrain from consulting their military experts. The role identification of the soldier, the assumption of the social role of someone who strengthens and improves military might, and the rewards and punishments which such a rigidly structured professional role inevitably involves make it utterly impossible for the experienced military man to even think of acting in contradiction to the purpose of his role. If he did so act, he would lose the basis of his identity and of the stability of his ego. Quite apart from this, the military of every nation belong to an international caste whose members are all to the same ideology. Anyone who questions the fundamental values of this caste, either at the command of a superior or in the service of higher values, is almost bound to become a traitor not only in the eyes of his comrades, but also in his own image of self. This would be almost impossible for him to accept.

I shall conclude with mention of the two phenomena that cause me the greatest concern; I am unable to offer a way out. The first is the delegation of human activities to machines, to computer systems and similar automated devices. Today it is a platitude to state that this relieves the conscience of responsible leaders; in any case it can lead to ethically not acceptable decisions or actions. But in addition, human capabilities that have little or nothing to do with conscience but which include the

capacity for rational action and for specific skills, are prevented from taking the steps that determine the fate of mankind. Reason and skills were indispensible in the construction and programming of

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the machines; they can no longer intervene in their functioning.

The second danger is a psychological one. The concept of Armageddon, the last battle, has been handed down in the Christian religion. It has been referred to in connection with the danger of nuclear war on several occasions, at least by Ronald Reagan and Caspar Weinberger. The end of humankind ordained by God -brings with it the end of all sin and eternal life for the virtuous. No one can foretell when this may happen. The faithful are convinced, however, that the virtuous will

survive -not physical, of course, but spiritually. Those who have combatted the forces of evil have already atoned for their vaguely felt guilt at having pursued such an aggressive policy and, in anticipation of Divine judgment, may count themselves among those to whom will be granted the mercy of survival. This conviction is not restricted to a handful of fanatically religious individuals. All Western religions and many others as well, in short probably the majority of mankind follow a doctrine which promises to assuage men's fear of the inevitable end of life and in fact frequently succeeds in doing so -with the idea of spiritual survival after death. This religious notion is cruelly reversed by our present insight into the dangers of global nuclear destruction. If our guilt at what we are doing and our fear of what awaits us can no longer be assuaged, we take comfort in the fantasy of our own immortality, which will survive the extinction of man.

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