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Freedom and Independence. On the Psychoanalysis of Political Commitment

In his autobiographical novel "Uomini e No", the prominent Italian writer Elio Vittorini describes the leader of a group of anti-fascist resistance fighters operating underground in occupied Milan. Vittorini details how his protagonist owes the brave and successful execution of terrorist actions, serving high political ideals, to his death wish. An unhappy love affair has severely shaken his self-esteem, and he wishes to die. However, as suicide would rob him of the last remnant of his self-respect, he recklessly fights his people's oppressors in the hope that he will be killed by them; thus his active feats will be rewarded by the satisfaction of his passive death wish.

The implication that a heroic freedom fighter could be inspired by motives arising from his personal problems was greeted with great hostility by Vittorini's political friends. Literary criticism found fault with his connection between universal political motives and personal, all too human ones. Critics proclaimed it psychologically inconsistent to ascribe to a man of actions motives that belong to a passive character, moved by weak emotions.

On the other hand, the biographical reality should be pointed out: Vittorini, a literary scholar and poet who was able to express and empathize with the subtlest perceptions and experiences, could in times

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of need be a man of action. Today another example of this quality is Milovan Djilas, the Yugoslavian partisan leader who, imprisoned on account of his independent criticism of Tito, became a humanistic writer and a highly gifted poet.

It would be consistent with psychoanalytic thinking to interpret the belligerent activity and the love of freedom evinced by Vittorini's hero as a reaction formation against passive tendencies. As a consequence of having one's love rejected, the aggression that was directed against the loved,

but now frustrating, person can be deflected by being turned against the self. The death wish can for some time be hidden beneath heroic activity before once again asserting itself .

Disturbing contemporary events and my privileged position as an observer of people who are open to psychoanalytic exploration have made it possible for me to formulate the following: the activation of childhood and early infantile conflicts through political commitment is no rare occurrence, nor one reserved for poets and neurotics. It is a normal process in healthy people, perhaps something that determines whether or not an emotionally invested participation in public affairs - a political commitment - will emerge.

I

In the night of 21 August 1968, the Czechoslovakian republic was, without prior notice, without any agreement, but also without any overt resistance, occupied by the overwhelming power of Soviet and allied forces. This happened after the Czechoslovakian Communist Party and the government of the Czechoslovakian Socialist Republic had permitted several months of political liberalization, pursuing more independence in their economic and political goals and granting greater freedom to writers and the mass media. Not only the Czechoslovakians but also many people from abroad had participated in this process. Although the country only shortly before had been threatened and warned by the Soviet Union and its allies to abandon this course, Czechoslovakia nevertheless, seemingly, had been allowed to follow its relatively independent development and had been released from their tutelage.

The extraordinarily unified passive resistance of the invaded population, its government, its parties, trades, and regions, its press, radio, and television stations -an unmistakably courageous "no" to the suppressing power and the renewed threat of dependence- was, thanks to efficient communications media, directly accessible to interested people in the

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Western world. These observers were able to take an intellectual and emotional part in the events but could anticipate -or, rather, evaluate - the possible outcome at their leisure. The (premature) end of the military-political action could, in all, be a true misfortune only for those interested in freedom and independence.

I have selected four analysts, three men and one woman, out of many more who were seeing different analysts and were strongly affected, both emotionally and intellectually, by the Czechoslovakian drama. The material personal interests of none of them had in any way been threatened by that crisis. All were nonneurotic, experienced, intelligent people who were far

advanced in their analyses. I thus was able to trace the dynamic, economic, and genetic aspects of their commitment during the days and weeks of those events.

II

Mrs. A had for months followed the events in Czechoslovakia with a lively interest. She had been enchanted by the production of Jarry's "Ubu Roi" by the ensemble of the Prague Theater am Geländer. This presentation, making use of new means of expression derived from surrealism, was a consistent performance by a coherent group of actors that evoked an immediate experience. Although the news of the country's occupation provoked both wrath and criticism in Mrs. A, joy and excitement about the demonstrations of the invaded people's solidarity in resistance stood in the foreground. These emotions were associated not only with purely political events, but more so with those which gave evidence of the spirit, the wit, and the direct expression of the will to give up neither independence nor freedom.

Although optimistic interpretations of the further development of the situation- which would not have been far fetched during the first days after the occupation- were never believed by Mrs. A, she maintained a cheerful belief in the power of the unified movement of the Czechoslovakian people. This feeling, however, did not cause Mrs. A optimistically to misjudge the hopeless situation of the Czechoslovakian freedom movement and its government; it remained, so to speak, as an irrationally tainted affective complement to her realistic or pessimistic judgment. Bad news about increasingly oppressive measures did not surprise her and were received with anger and the feeling, "Yes, it was inevitable." Good news -for instance, isolated signs of an enduring, often only intellectual, resistance- confirmed and strengthened her lively conviction

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that such a fortunate development in time, space, and reality was possible, whatever its outcome. In puberty and adolescence Mrs. A had experienced the usual revival of oedipal conflicts, but she had a particular psychological and biographical way of resolving them. She rejected the authority of both of her parents, supporting her opposition by strong, satisfying identifications with the masculine *and* feminine members of a brotherhood of young people who were as revolutionary as she was. The strong artistic, scientific, and, finally, political interests they had in common were instrumental in the foundation of her identity. Mrs. A made herself, within the circle of those likeminded people and in part as an emotional (not political) leader, independent of her parental home, which was crumbling anyway. She came to enjoy a freedom of artistic expression, as well as an independence of thought. From then on, she sustained the feeling of her own intellectual mastery of traumatic situations, coupled with the need to belong to a group that was based on

solidarity; she would even fight for freedom and independence if necessary. The confirmation of identity through the events of her own life gave this identificatory participation the feeling of real success.

Of the four people described here, Mrs. A comes closest to the ideal of the true revolutionary personality, because the resolution of her childhood conflicts (which were reactivated in puberty) could be integrated directly into the adult personality- could enter her sense of identity, the real, independent organization of her life, and the possibility of forming adult social identifications.

Mr. B had followed the events that led up to the invasion with a calm, historical, rather than political, interest, which was interrupted by experiences of delight and hope when it seemed that the people might gain their autonomy and freedom. From the moment when the troops marched into the country, it was hardly possible for B to tear himself away from the radio or the television. Depending on the latest news, "extraordinary feelings of hope alternated with paralysing depression." Despite all his intellectual skepticism, it seemed possible, again and again, to B that "it" -complete liberation from the suppressing power - might still succeed. He experienced the suppression as symptomatic of an unreasonable, ruthlessly gruesome authority that would not allow the slightest autonomy.

In his political sympathies B relived feelings he had had toward his father. An only son, he had been, from early childhood on, from the time of the oedipal conflict, continually controlled, suppressed, and squashed under the authority of his strict and compulsively stubborn

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father. Indeed, B's father still tried to make the adult son dependent, in order to impose his will on him.

In his identification with the suppressed Czechoslovakians, B alternately experienced the elating hope of freeing himself from his brutal father's authority (which he had not introjected as superego) and the depressing realization that resistance against a more powerful force would not, after all, prevail. The contemplative historical-abstracting mode, which reigned before the catastrophe, corresponds to B's character. His highly differentiated reaction formation to his father's anal- sadistic attacks had enabled him to develop a capacity for logical analysis in the most varied fields of knowledge, a capacity that was virtually devoid of any feelings.

Common to A 's and B's modes of experience is that the identification with the suppressed resulted in a transference experience. In both cases the powerful suppressor was equated with parents -by A, with parents who did not allow independence; by B, with the father who imposed his will on his son.

The alternation of B's feelings between hope and resignation is more clearly separated from his historical and dispassionate evaluation of the situation than A's hopeful belief in the power of the free spirit is from her judgment of reality. This can be understood in terms of A's later fixation. In both people, however, oedipal fixations contributed substantially to the formation of emotions that constitute the affective cathexis of the political events.

Mr. C followed the events from the beginning with mixed feelings. Alongside a positive interest he could not, despite all the novelties and liberties he heard of, rid himself of the thought, this cannot turn out well.

The aforementioned performance of "Ubi Roi" had impressed him deeply. However, he had experienced it not politically, but, so to speak, purely artistically: he expressed the desire to see more Prague productions; he wanted to compare them with those of other capitals.

The events of the occupation evoked two parallel kinds of feelings in him: first, a sharp, very pessimistic assessment of its development, an analysis based more on general knowledge of human nature and the course of politics in recent decades than on details from the news or a meticulous following of it. At the same time he had a strong compassion for the victims. Second, he felt anxiety, did not want to know anything about what was going on, wanted to withdraw to a place where he could not be reached by these events; he wanted to isolate himself from them, to seek refuge in his profession, his art, his family.

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Anxiety, despair, and, as a remedy, narcissistic regression stemmed from C's unresolved preoedipal problems. Bound to an emotionally overdemanding, yet strict, mother, C experienced the first phallic stirrings of autonomy as hopeless, if he did not retreat into himself. Identificatory participation in aggression provoked anxiety, out of which a kind of confusion resulted; it was no longer clear whether the suppressed or the suppressor was responsible for the aggression. This confusion, which persisted side-by-side with the realistic-pessimistic attitude, corresponded to an insufficient differentiation of the self from the object in situations that were charged with aggression and that centered on dependence or independence.

C did not lose interest in the course of events, did not limit himself to his possibilities of narcissistic gratification, an option that he, given the high level of pain he had suffered, could easily have chosen. This can be explained by the fact that his longing for independence remained a highly cathected goal and that C's need for autonomous expression of his personality, differentiating him fundamentally from anyone else, had become one of the cornerstones of his ideal self. Such activities and accomplishments, through which he became independent of objects, guaranteed C's well-being and laid the foundations for his ability to enter into object relationships.

He had to bear anxiety-provoking, aggressive fantasies, because he could not distance himself from the pursuit of his own goals .

For D the events leading to the occupation of the country were a source of intellectual and affective gratification. His skepticism about the unexpectedly autonomous and liberal political developments was accompanied by a deep satisfaction that had a lot to do with a good conscience: politics fulfilled the expectations of his superego, of his personal and political morality, while the "rational" application of the Marxist tradition was regarded as an ideal, and not as a rational judgment of the reality of the Czechs -with whom D was hardly concerned.

The occupation of the country made D become intensely emotionally involved. He was eager to get hold of every available bit of news and could hardly free himself from thoughts and fantasies revolving around the events. His predominant feeling was impotent rage; it was replaced in the case of good news-that is, some demonstration of the oppressed's coping in a practical or solely intellectual way with their situation -by a sigh of relief, a sort of melancholic, skeptically toned euphoria. His impotent rage was accompanied by the feeling that he could neither do

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nor achieve anything, not even tackle his daily routine satisfactorily. This self-perception, though continually reexperienced, was not backed up by any external evidence, since D showed no impairment of his mental and practical abilities during these days. His feelings of impotence disappeared immediately when he gave in to his fantasies of how he would respond and behave were he in the place of one of the affected people, for example, afflicted Czechoslovakian politicians or persecuted intellectuals.

Neither the imagined outcome (good or bad) nor the people, who were anyway only vaguely represented, played a role in the emotionally releasing effect of these fantasies. The oppressors remained completely anonymous and impersonal. Gradually the emotional involvement faded away, the feeling of impotent rage gave way to an intense, somewhat contemplative pleasure in the political analysis of the situation; this pleasure was accompanied by feelings that fluctuated between hope and resignation.

During his childhood, between the ages of one and three quarters and three and a half, D had had to be in a plaster cast, which immobilized his entire body with the exception of his arms and head. This experience of physical helplessness did not have a very disturbing effect on either his object relationships or his ego development, probably because of the particular attention that his mother and other caring people gave him. The delayed but adequate acquisition of mobility, mental agility, and his perception of the real environment were determined by a reaction formation

against his physically dependent helplessness and later by the framework of a disciplinary environment- at first imposed from with- out, but soon taken up by the superego and internalized. While for D the first phase of political developments was governed entirely by the demand for freedom and independence (with which he could well identify, without being overwhelmed by strong emotions), from the moment of the country's occupation, his involvement was determined by the repetition compulsion of early childhood, predominantly narcissistic, experiences. Only the memory of his own helplessness led to a real affective cathexis of the whole situation. The feeling of helpless rage and physical paralysis entered his consciousness in unmodified form. The initial phase, the weakening of his strong involvement, and, still more, the entangled fantasies point to a successful defense against underlying childhood conflicts (between active-phallic wishes, on one hand; paralysis and dependent-passive strivings, on the other).

In C's and D's experience the dangerous objects are indeterminate; the

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affects are anxiety and narcissistic withdrawal with a tendency toward resignation or impotent rage, and a cautious attempt at an active working-through: both correspond to typical preoedipal modes of experience.

III

The four people whom I have described had already taken part in political events before arriving at their intense emotive commitment, and neither habituation nor the lack of new information affected the strength of their involvement. They all had a certain knowledge of politics, which they had gained through personal experience and theoretical studies; consequently they were able to think about and understand processes. The cognitive processes that were the prerequisite for political commitment were often set against emotional reactions, which here have been explained by identifications of various sorts.

It is not, however, isolated empirico-logical thought operations alone that give the cognitive processes their coherence and emotional 'truth.' Preconscious operations, associations, fantasies, emotional cathexes, and discharges accompany the intellectual process. We assume that the preconscious foundations or phenomena accompanying political commitment follow idiosyncratic laws, deriving from the unconscious, that are similar to those governing phenomena of the overt political commitment itself. It is possible to detect how all four analysands reacted to the not yet, or no longer, current political situation according to their personal formulae: not in the same way with regard to the dramatic events themselves, but similarly influenced by their early acquired drive and defense-against-drive constellations.

For all four of them it was undoubtedly processes of identification that called forth such powerful feelings. The high narcissistic gratification that one derives from seeing one's own ideals realized in the external world contributed to an identification with those tragically affected. However, the identifications were not undone when gratification could no longer be expected. I have described these as partial identifications, often with an isolated feature or event, and of the kind that affected the different agencies (ego, superego, ideal self, id strivings) of the committed people.

However, I would like to propose that cognitive processes, and the emotionally highly cathected events that are identified with them, are not

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differentiated by the former's being free of conflict while the latter is determined by early conflicts. Rather, both are organized according to common laws of individual conflicts, which arise in the course of psychic development. That is, people can respond to events in the external world only with their own idiosyncratic ego organization.

And yet, the answers to the questions that arise out of these considerations lead to assumptions that seem to contradict commonly held metapsychological theories and those of political psychology:

1. Is the ego free of conflict in its sublimated achievements, or does the fixation of libido and aggression endow the ego with the enduring heritage of early conflicts (experienced during its development)?
2. Is the expression "residual neurosis" justified when a healthy person who underwent analysis reacts in such a way that earlier conflicts are reexperienced ?
3. To what extent is individual neurosis related to political commitment, or where is the boundary between "normal" and "neurotic" when a person identifies with the events in his or her own social environment or when these events are highly emotionally cathected ?

IV

One can say that the political participation of the people discussed here went hand in hand with the sublimation of their libido and with countless autonomous achievements of their ego. Yet the revival of childhood and early infantile conflicts was obvious: in the first two instances, they were predominantly object relational; in the second, predominantly narcissistic.

The claim that neutralized drive energy is at the disposal of autonomous ego functions led to the assumption that the ego functions concerned became free of conflict. I do not believe that this

assumption, which excludes other possibilities, can be derived from the cautious formulations of Hartmann and his co-workers (Hartmann, 1939, 1955, 1964; Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein, 1946, 1949). Many analysts, however, employ this simplified hypothesis; they equate ego performances that have become free of conflict with normal behavior, and those derived from a drive fixation and its ensuing repetition compulsion, with neurotic symptoms.

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In contrast, I would like to propose autonomous ego accomplishments equipped with sublimated libido and aggression, but that nonetheless repeat earlier conflicts. A weak affective cathexis might appear to be free of conflict or to be endowed with freely available neutralized energy. When the affective cathexis increases (because of a heightened danger or a strengthening of empathic identification), the reactivation of old conflicts becomes obvious.

In ego psychology terms, this would mean that when there is a deep inner involvement in events in the external world, there can be no really conflict-free ego function equipped with libidinal or aggressive energy. Rather, there can be only a greater or lesser capacity of the ego to adapt (flexibility) to various demands (of the external world, of the id, and of the superego), to assert itself autonomously in spite of that, to differentiate to integrate, to establish boundaries with which to identify (elasticity).

I do not think that the assumption of conflict-free ego functions must be dropped. Particular functions- such as differentiation, integration, establishment of boundaries -can proceed without mobilization of early conflicts. However, the theoretical equation of sublimated accomplishments of the ego with its conflict-free functions, or the hypothesis that the ego strivings that are deflected onto social goals are or must be endowed with neutralized drive energy, would not be in line with our interpretations of the above-mentioned experiences.

The change in the functions of the defense mechanisms does not affect the conflict itself. The defense continues to be directed against the same demands of the drives as it was in childhood. The conflict between ego and id is not "resolved" but continues to exist. The economy of the defensive organization, however, is altered. The mechanisms of defense no longer claim as much energy as before for the anticathexis of the drive demands. Because of this, a desired gratification can be deflected, delayed (aim inhibited), transferred onto other object representations (displaced), and can serve the adaptation to the external world (reality). The commitment of the four analysts to the revolt against domination is an example of this kind of adaptation. One should speak of a regression only when the ego is primarily preoccupied with the management of childhood conflicts; this regression would become evident when other functions -for example, reality testing- fail.

In other words, the commitment has reactivated the old conflict. The conflict is not, however, repeated unmodified. Its course is not confined to the ideational contents and aims of early childhood; it can be adapted to the ideas and aims of the adult.

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II

The aforementioned proposition, that the definitely "sublimated accomplishments" can be brought about only with the mobilization of conflicts that have undergone a fixation, coincides well with Rapaport's (1957) theory of relative autonomy. The demands of the id would, in accordance with their fixation, themselves be the carrier of a conflict and call forth the once active, yet still existing, defense. One might even say that the more ego organization has been activated by early conflicts, the more adequately cathected and treated would be the demands of the external world; only an extremely successful defense or its breakdown would endanger the autonomy of the ego, abandoning it completely to external or internal demands.

The explanation that the political events had both triggered off the "residual neurosis" and had set into motion and actualized the fixated conflicts of the above-mentioned people is in line with the history of psychoanalytic theory. I shall discuss this assumption only briefly. First, we long ago stopped focusing clinically on "residual neurosis." The habit of including normal behavior, character traits, and activities in analytical work in just the same way as one would other symptoms or obviously pathological phenomena has long since proved its value. When in our clinical practice we come up against "incurable symptoms," we nowadays tend to attribute them to faulty ego development, to the conflict-prone ego, rather than to consider them an illness, a "residual neurosis" that exists beside the normal, "cured" part of the personality.

Rapaport's ideas permit us to do without the notion of a residual neurosis in relation to our cases. For this theory, it is not only understandable but absolutely necessary that when the ego is subjected to the greatest stress (drive demands, anxiety), the most important childhood conflicts are mobilized. Since they arose in response to the heaviest drive demands and generated the most complete defense organization, they are in conflicts whose resolution promises, in the case of an "emergency," the best possible management of new obstacles. In this case, the new demands of the external world and the emotive identifications mobilize conflicts and their resolution, which in A and B stemmed from childhood, in C and D from the preoedipal period. The affects corresponded, as soon as they were sufficiently powerful, to those of the original childhood experiences.

Perhaps many will not be surprised if the result of these considerations is expressed in a simple formula, though one that is paradoxical for the psychology of consciousness: where normal people take part most

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intensively in the fate of their environment, where they are most selflessly committed to social and political events, where they tremble, hope, and fight for freedom and independence, there the fundamental conflicts of their psyche are most powerfully at work and their most personal individual fate is repeated.

VI

We have come so far in our discussion of the third question (relating personal neurosis to the involvement in political events) as to ascertain that there is no difference between the normal and the neurotic. In this we follow Freud's (1940) warning (pp. 183ff) not to overestimate the differences between the normal and the neurotically ill.

One should add that people who are caught up in a defensive struggle against their unbearable drives and who have not been able to resolve that struggle in a way that is acceptable to their self-image or to their libidinal economy are not, as a rule, inclined to interest themselves in an environment that does not directly affect their lives. Their battle often takes place on the internal front. Yet there are exceptions to this rule. Some people, entangled in deep conflicts, expect the external world to provide them with relief from their internal tensions (acting-out type). They are not different from the four analysands described earlier in reliving their personal conflicts through the events in the external world and their identification with them. The poet who shows the politically committed as striving for the solution of a personal conflict is right. He has not, however, explained how the affected person has resolved the conflict in his life and whether he should be considered healthy or neurotic.

It often seems that freedom and independence, as ideal values, as wishful fantasies related to personal fate and to the immediate and distant environment, ought to be most significant for precisely those people who have worked through their childhood conflicts best. These values are associated with those very character traits that have led to a relatively successful mastery of the most important childhood conflicts (the achievement of independence from the mother and the anxiety-free completion of the phallic phase). The psychoanalytic model of a "good" and "strong" ego seems, from the standpoint of a nonjudgmental psychology, to lend to these ideals a further pragmatic dimension.

The early formation of an autonomous superego, which is relatively independent from the wider vicissitudes of the ego; the multiplicity of fixations in one and the same person; the capacity permanently to isolate

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ideal demands, with which one is identified and which are highly emotionally cathected, from other goals and strivings; and many other factors are responsible for the fact that in no way will only those people who have realized these ideals in their individual development in fact pursue them. Both the greatest need for dependence and the longing for independence can appear simultaneously; the love of freedom can coexist with the tendency for submission.

VII

The important childhood conflicts in the four subjects discussed in this paper contributed significantly to their commitment to "freedom" and "independence." Psychological constellations of conflicts stemming from childhood are constitutive of any commitment. From this kind of psychoanalytic analysis we cannot, however, infer and predict what sort of political event or which political movement a person will take part in. A comprehensive analysis of the biography, including the unconscious consequences of the social relations within which a person grew up and lives, would be necessary if one wished to indicate what he or she could become involved in, what form his or her commitment would take -or why he or she eschews such commitment. The claim that a political commitment is *nothing other* than an attempt to solve personal conflicts is just as nonsensical as the other -that there could be an involvement in a political movement that is purely objectively or rationally motivated, without the mobilization of individual internal conflicts.

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