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TOWARD A SOCIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

Culture, Character, and
Normative Unconscious
Processes

R.P.

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Attacks on linking

The unconscious pull to dissociate individuals from their social context*

Cultural norms erect barriers to what can be thought, felt, and articulated in speech. Because in certain ways they share the same dominant middle-class culture, therapists and their clients often adhere, consciously and unconsciously, to some of the same cultural norms. These norms not only condition thought, feeling, and behavior, but create dynamic unconscious conflicts as well. Such unconscious conflict, in turn, can generate particular kinds of clinical enactments, ones in which therapist and patient unconsciously collude in upholding the very norms that might in fact contribute to ongoing psychic pain. In this chapter, I want to focus on a particularly dominant norm in U.S. culture: the unlinking of individuals from their social contexts. This unlinking derives from many historical and social sources. Its origins lie in the rise of capitalism in mid-nineteenth-century America, in response to the increasingly sharp separation of the public from the private sphere that was mandated for the middle and upper classes both by urbanization and industrialization's division of labor. White middle-class patriarchal norms split and gendered the two spheres, and the disparate functions of these separate white male public and white female private spheres created the psychic split between agentic capacities and relational capacities that for so long have defined dominant gender positions (even though white women played key roles that melded the private and the public in such historical movements as the fight to prohibit prostitution and alcohol, the right to divorce, own property, work in healthy conditions, and the right to vote). Emotional attachments were only culturally valued in the private sphere, not in the dog eat dog world of capitalism (Lasch, 1977). Indeed, despite today's public rhetoric in favor of family values,

now, as always, if a corporation or the military want to send you and your family to a different part of the country or world every few years, you go – regardless of what clinicians and others know about how significant a prognosticator for psychological difficulties frequent moves can be.

The liberal ideology that legitimizes the public/private split has traditionally idealized an autonomous white male whose subjectivity resides in reason and will. The ideology of the “free individual” is, particularly in the U.S. context, closely connected with self-reliance and an extreme individualism that denies connections of all kinds. As Barthes (1957) and others have written, two of the main tropes by which bourgeois ideology operates are dehistoricization, which involves naturalizing and universalizing what is actually specific to a given historic moment and a given constellation of relations, and what Barthes calls ex-nomination, by which the class that has the most economic and symbolic power refers to itself as “man” or “human,” anything but white or upper-middle-class or owners of the means of production. As Barthes (1957) writes:

practised on a national scale, bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of a natural order – the further the bourgeois class propagates its representations, the more naturalized they become.

(p. 140)

Both dehistoricization and ex-nomination are ideological forms of decontextualization, the unlinking of things that, if experience is to make sense, need to be linked. Indeed, what primarily sustains the ideology of the “free individual” is an active and continuously constructed process of decontextualization, most obvious in the media but clear as well in every one of President Bush’s speeches, in most discussions of corporate wrongdoing, in the medicalization of psychological problems, in discussions of what is wrong with our schools and in most discussions of social policy. Dominant ideology works very diligently on a number of fronts to hide the systemic nature of inequalities of all kinds, to make sure that an individual’s problems seem just that, individual.

As political theorist Wendy Brown (2004) claims, liberal ideology has always been deeply suspicious of groups and their public display of passions such as anger and love. Ardent attachments are deemed dangerous and must remain private and individualized. Many key documents of

liberal ideology view groups as sites where perfectly rational individuals become regressed, primitive, and de-individuated beings. Liberal ideology then draws on such “expert evidence” to relegate group aspects of identity, such as culture and religion, to background status, to a place that is not deemed constitutive of subjectivity.

As entrepreneurial capitalism gave way to consumer capitalism, liberal individualist ideology became ever more entrenched. The autonomous individual, once figured in liberal discourse as public citizen, is now largely figured in the media and elsewhere as private consumer. The continuous subordination of sensuous human existence and morality to the “facts” of the marketplace and technical rationality severs, instrumentalizes, and commodifies connections between individuals and between individuals and their environments. All of these processes unlink individuals from each other, from themselves, and from their social and natural world.

Even to speak of the individual and the social as separate is a distortion, except insofar as that separation is the truth of this society’s dominant culture, and, as such, appears to most of us as “common sense” (see Adorno, 1967, 1968). As Althusser (1971) argued, all the apparatuses of capitalist culture – the family, the education system, the media, religion – function to shore up the notion of a free individual separate from social context. Free individuals, free to succeed or fail on their own, generally have no idea that their freedom is conditioned by the lack of freedom inherent in the wage-labor system (Žižek, 1994). Yet, despite the mystifications of ideology and the way ideologies are enacted consciously and unconsciously, it is clear that social context is woven into one’s psychic fabric in myriad ways, from the ways bodily processes are experienced and tastes developed (see Bourdieu’s 1984 discussion of class, habitus, and taste, discussed in Chapter 9), to the ways one experiences and enacts the most taken for granted psychoanalytic staples, such as dependency and agency. The way the power structure of a culture defines what counts as dependency and what counts as agency, the way it mandates which social classes or strata will be “dependent,” which “independent,” plays a large role in determining the kinds of psychic conflicts inherent to that culture.

Certainly, there are subordinate cultures in the U.S. whose members are painfully aware of the connections between social systems and their own individual struggles. Nonwhite populations, for example, are far less likely to buy into the unlinking norm than are whites of all classes. Nonetheless, all subcultures have to wrangle psychically with dominant ideology; it is

hard to imagine that even the most impoverished black man doesn't on some level feel personally responsible for his failure to be successful. And because dominant ideology is so tied into the one system NO ONE is allowed to question, capitalism, we find that as minority subcultures rise in social status their prominent members sometimes become the most rabid defenders of the unlinking norm: think of the Ward Connerly's and Clarence Thomas's of the world who, once achieving individual privilege, seem to want to close the privilege gate behind them.

By limiting to the family the context in which it views patients' conflicts, psychoanalytic therapy is one of the many practices that enforce the norm that unlinks the psychic from the social. Following Cushman (1995), Altman (1995) and others, I argue that, in so doing, we establish a norm for what counts as mental health that aims far lower than it might. As a consequence, we contribute to constricting the possibilities of our patients, even as we are enhancing them in many other ways. Indeed, if we believe that the individual ought to be a social individual and that his or her happiness should have something to do with connections beyond the self and beyond intimate relations, we should perhaps be troubled by the fact that, too often, our work produces only healthier and happier versions of narcissism.

Although many psychoanalytic theorists have spoken about the relation between the psychic and the social (my notion of normative unconscious processes owes a debt, for example, to Fromm's notion of social character 1941, 1962), Samuels (1993) was perhaps the first to insist that the political development of the person is a proper and necessary topic for inquiry in the clinical setting. In the clinical vignette that I describe next, we can see that the patient's political conflicts are also psychic conflicts. What I want to add to Samuels' observations is (1) an analysis of the way that norms that separate individuals from their "political psyche" generate unconscious conflict and (2) the way this shared conflict plays out in unconscious collusions between therapist and patient.

Clinical vignette: work and love and the passion for civic life

In the spring of 2003, just after the U.S. went to war in Iraq, a patient reported a dream in which she wondered whether or not to tell her state senator her views on what is currently going on politically in American

life. In exploring the dream with her, I found myself struggling throughout the session against the urge to close off this inquiry with an interpretation that would reduce what she was saying to the kind of psychological insight that separates the psychic from the social. Granted, we are living in difficult political times, times in which historical events such as 9/11 force their way into the consulting room. But this experience revealed to me my own resistance to linking the psychic and the social, a resistance of which I had been largely unaware. Fighting my urge to interpret enabled the two of us to discover that there are realms beyond those of work and love that are clinically relevant.

Before reporting the dreams, I want to say something about other ways that the separation of the individual from the social affects this patient's psyche. The patient owns a small business, and like many small businesses these days, hers has not been doing well. But she never understands her failure in that context. She, after all, is part of the Smith family, and Smiths are winners, not losers. She suffers in a special way, one that doesn't seek affinity with other forms of suffering and makes it seem as though to suffer or not depends on her capacity to get it wrong or get it right. She is failing, she thinks, because she isn't organized enough, isn't getting enough done during the day. In the childhood scenes to which she associated one day as we discussed this, she was a very special person by virtue of being a Smith, but there was always a particular way to be a Smith if you wanted love, and that way included wearing your hair and your shirt collars a certain way, not reading when you're supposed to be out playing with friends, in short, figuring out what it entailed to be the right kind of person. The psychic cost of living the ideology of the free individual is precisely in living this paradox: self-reliant, what common sense calls independent, but always unsure of oneself and therefore utterly dependent on the outside for clues as to how to be (a dependency consumerism is only too happy to manipulate).

On the particular day in which the enactment I report on next took place, she entered saying that she was feeling very good about certain things at work; for the first time in memory, she said, she feels that she is instituting changes that are making her small business function more the way *she* wants it to. She also reported that as she has become more hands-on in her workplace, she feels more connected to her staff. A primary focus of treatment has been analyzing her desire to feel connected to people and her

equally strong defenses against that desire. Then she reported two dreams that she had written out in a dream journal:

Dream #1: She is in the backseat of a car with someone else. John Kerry is outside the car and he's in a wheelchair. She lets him into the car and wonders if she should use the opportunity to tell him what she thinks about what's going on politically.

Dream #2: She's with a group of people and they have to flee. She's supposed to make a fire by rubbing things together and it works. She's very surprised that it worked and feels good about herself. But the fire is going to burn everything up and she's anxious that it will all burn before she and the others figure out what they need to take with them to start over.

I asked for her associations to the first dream and asked her what she would want to tell the senator, who had recently declared his interest in running for President. She began to talk about her political opinions, that she doesn't like what's going on and that she's been annoyed with Kerry because he wasn't sufficiently critical of the Iraq war. Her wondering about whether or not she should say something to him made me associate to what we'd recently been talking about: that it is difficult for her to make herself accountable for things. A psychic dilemma we've long looked at involves her tendency either to give everything over to another, to make that other all powerful, or to take it all on herself and be unable to ask for help. Often she feels that she's not accountable for things such as the upkeep of her house or her business; she puts herself in a child position, hoping the adults will get the job done. I said something about this dilemma, but I also thought to myself that I'd like to hear more about what she wants to tell Kerry, and when I allowed for that she began to go more deeply into what she feels about the state of the country, evincing a level of passion and a state of conviction that I rarely have glimpsed in her.

Passionlessness, an un-lived life, has been her chief complaint. As she began to get more passionate, she pulled her legs up on the couch and sat cross-legged. She looked at me and hesitantly asked: can I really talk about this? I asked her why not. She wasn't sure if it was a proper therapy topic. I assured her that it is certainly a legitimate topic. I told her that I want to know what she's passionate about, and I could see that she feels

deeply about this. As I said that, I realized I should just let her talk without jumping in with psychological interpretations, that jumping in and interrupting her experience of passion would in fact repeat her original wounds. For, in childhood, her spontaneous passions of all kinds were often found wanting and even mocked. But also, I realized that I in fact was struggling with the same question she asked: is this a therapy topic? At the moment, I didn't think that we could have explored her question further, which might have enabled us to understand more about her doubt. At that moment, I was wondering more about my own doubt. I know her politics are left of center, as are mine, and it is perhaps knowing this that made me mistakenly feel that what she was going to say was known territory, that I was just indulging my own wish to hear her bash the Bush regime and the Iraq War. She broke into my reverie when she asked if it was alright to have her feet up on the couch like that – she said she was thinking about that on the way over: is there a couch etiquette? I wasn't sure what to make of this sudden concern, but in retrospect I wonder about the meaning of the associative sequence. Does speaking about one's political convictions in therapy carry the same kind of taboo of impurity or of being uncivilized as does putting one's feet on the furniture? Was there a connection between her child-like attitude toward political responsibility and her child-like feelings about putting her feet on mommy's couch? Was she simply doing all in her power to interrupt her *own* experience of passion?

She went on to say that she would tell Kerry that she feels that everything she grew up believing about America was being taken away from her, all the values she learned, like doing unto others. She began to cry and I asked what was upsetting her. Crying more intensely, she wailed that she feels betrayed. This is a woman who rarely is able to cry in another's presence, who, in fact, has spoken many times about her longing to be able to express feelings while with me in the room.

She then brought in the second dream, associating to what she called a Jewish theme, "maybe like there was a pogrom." Her association to the fire burning was that something very bad was happening and it will be too late by the time we realize what it is. Again, I thought about what was happening to her business, which was falling apart, and felt pulled to interject something about that; but I had the sense that while her passion about what is happening politically may have had multiple psychic sources and motivations, it would be a mistake to understand what she was saying as mere displacement. In part, I did not interpret in this other frame because

I share her feelings that what the country stands for is being rapidly dismantled; her passionate feelings of betrayal are clearly valid in their own right. I also just wanted to see where she would go next.

Still crying, she repeated, with more intensity, that everything she feels America stands for is being betrayed and she feels helpless to do anything about it. I asked her to say more about her feelings of helplessness. She said that she supposes she could write letters but she doesn't. I asked her why not. She answered: last night she got home and her partner wanted to watch the Red Sox game and she didn't. She wanted to sit outside and read the newspaper (the day before she told me she had stopped reading the newspaper because it was too depressing). And then she talked about her partner, who is very left-wing and very voluble about it. Apparently *she's* been writing letters. At this point, a link between the psychic and the social became clearer – in the face of her partner's very big passion, my patient's passion drains away and she detaches, letting the partner carry the political feelings and political activity. My patient doesn't feel quite the same as her partner on these issues, but her feeling of helplessness seems to come from a sense that the partner owns this realm because her passion and anger are so much bigger. I thought about Bush's 70 percent approval rating (in that period) and wondered if she might be allowing the other side to own civic life because the other side is louder and so deaf to dissent. Again, a part of me was thinking that, like all other roads, this political road led us back to a particular psychic conflict, the one that gets in the way of her feeling like an autonomous and passionate being. Her parents were also louder, and also deaf to dissent. My first association, the one about accountability, fits into this larger repetition scenario, for she long ago had made a conscious and unconscious pact with her parents that went something like this: "I'll do as you say but then you're in charge: I refuse to take any responsibility myself for my life." And yet, again, I felt that we were both discovering something new that day, which I stated at the end: that her passion for a certain kind of America is not a lesser passion than the ones we had been exploring, the passion to work well and to love well. Indeed, the parental interference with her autonomy and passion had led to a kind of isolationist machoism, which coexisted with a smolderingly resentful feeling of helpless passivity. All too frequently the resentment issued in acts of passive aggression. Her character style well illustrates one typical way that American ideology's unlinking of the individual and the social is psychically enacted.

The session ended with what I consider to be an enactment worth thinking about, one I'm a bit embarrassed to admit to: I told her about some political letter-writing activities on the Internet that I was aware of. She smiled and left. I think that through the session she was consistently inviting me to be larger and louder, as when she asked me about whether it was okay to talk about this, okay to put her feet up on the couch. Each time I resisted making an interpretation, I think I was resisting that pull to be larger – although I *did* give permission rather than ask why she sought it. And then at the end, in suggesting something she might do, I went large, and I am not sure why.

The next day she told me how good the day before had felt to her. She was quite surprised and a little embarrassed that her political feelings had made her cry – she doesn't think that most people take these political things so personally. She'd have to describe herself as in some way an innocent, she said, and that is embarrassing. And when I asked what about the session had made her feel so good, she told me that it was because she allowed herself to follow my questions without resistance, that there was something about my encouraging her to keep speaking about it that had put her in touch with her feelings and enabled her to go on expressing them without shame. My sense is that what enabled the passion to emerge, enabled her resistance to recede, was precisely my capacity to put a muzzle on my interpretive impulse. Here was the anti-enactment: shutting up made me less large which enabled her to come forward.

Again, what was striking to me about this hour was how hard I had to struggle to stay out of her way and simply let her feelings develop. I do not generally find myself having irresistible urges to cut in and interpret in my sessions with her. My guess is that this urgency reflected at least two things: (1) my anxiety that because I did not explore what Samuels (1993) calls the symbolic/intrapsychic/transferential aspects of my patient's speech, I wasn't being a proper analyst. Had I expressed the doubts I had at the point when the patient asked if it was a proper therapy topic, we might both have unconsciously colluded with the social norm that keeps the psychic and the social separate; and (2) the sense of urgency about jumping in may well have come from an unconscious pull (hers? mine? ours?) to re-enact this patient's repetition compulsion – to quash her spontaneous gestures by finding them not quite right, to play the larger one and make her small. This illustrates a paradox of the American version of

autonomy – we are encouraged to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps – by experts who tell us how to do it (Lasch, 1979). How many of our patients come in wanting the therapist to provide the “Ten Easy Steps to Thinking For Yourself”?

In more recent work, this patient has confronted on a deeper level her tendency to see the world and its rules as adversaries that endanger her individual autonomy. She has become aware of how she passively aggressively breaks rules, simple ones such as not paying bills on time or trying to send a package 5 minutes after the post office closes. When the other refuses to “cut her slack,” she self-righteously positions herself as a victim. She has also confronted the way that her sense of being an individual has been based on a refusal to be part of ANY group, again because she experiences others as intruders on her autonomy. As she has become more able to feel that she can remain a self while engaged with others, as she has had less fear that she will be taken over by others, she has tentatively begun to sustain connections to others. And, most interestingly, some months after the reported vignette, this patient, who is gay, became terrifically excited by politics and made the first political gesture of her life: she sent out an email to friends and acquaintances with a copy of an article a straight woman had written about gay marriage. The writer, who was about to be married, had a gay brother, and the article revolved around her conflicted feelings about her own right to marry and the state’s attempts to limit the rights of her brother. My patient noted that in the past she might have sent the article around with an introduction such as, “Here’s an article you might find interesting.” But this time she wrote a preamble in which she urged people to call their representatives and senators or just to intervene when they hear homophobic conversations. She spoke in that session of feeling alive, and ended the session with the statement, “I’m pumped.”

Several things strike me about both this vignette and another enactment I experienced with a patient, one concerning talk about class privilege. Most striking is that at the end of each session this patient shamefully admitted, “I’m not politically active.” Hollander and Gutwill (2006), from an object relations perspective, and Althusser (1971) and Žižek (for example, 1989), from a Lacanian perspective, see psychoanalysis as uniquely suited to shed light on how and why people attach to the very social forms that oppress them. In this patient’s history, and in the histories of so many of my patients, a choice was made to constrict spontaneity in the face of

parents who were certain they were right. This was the only way to preserve some autonomy, even if it was a form of autonomy that doomed the patients to a sense of ineptitude and helplessness. These phenomena open up two areas for further investigation concerning the relation between the psychic and the social: (1) how that sense of helplessness is transferred from the familial to the relational and then to the political realm; and (2) what it is about the society that makes so many parents absolutely certain about how things ought to be done, that makes them frightened of the otherness of their children. This is more than just a question of generational difference; I am questioning a particular way that generational difference is lived. In this form, children are mere extensions of their parents, props the parents need to accomplish psychically and socially whatever it is they feel they have failed to accomplish (Kovel, 1988). The child's response of submission, on the other hand, brings about a form of "autonomy," if we can call it that, that results in attacks on the self and a conviction that failure is individual and not systemic. The continuous enactment of this unlinking norm produces narcissistic personalities, defined both by the difficulty regulating self-esteem that Kohut (1971, 1977) theorized, and by the difficulty establishing relations of mutuality that Benjamin (1988) theorized. In splitting the individual from the social, bourgeois ideology brings about an impoverishment of individuality in which dependence is repudiated and difference not tolerated. This dynamic leaves so many of us vulnerable to manipulation by media, government, advertising, and public relations – even as we desperately try to assert our individuality and autonomy. Rather than enable people to live happier lives as "free individuals," I feel strongly that clinical theory and practice have to figure out how to re-establish the links between the psychic and the social that dominant ideologies work tirelessly to unlink. Somehow we have to find a way to allow the passion for civic life to take its rightful place beside work and love in the clinic.

Note

- * Used with permission. Layton, L. (2006) Attacks on linking: The unconscious pull to dissociate individuals from their social context. In: Layton, L., Hollander, N.C. and Gutwill, S. (eds.) *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics: Encounters in the Clinical Setting*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 107–117.