

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE AGGRESSION OF LARGE GROUPS

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The source of aggressive behaviour is again being hotly debated both in student circles and even among young analysts. The question at issue is whether the underlying source of such behaviour is a genetically transmitted part of man's constitution, that is, an instinct. No one is entirely satisfied with the instinct theory as regards the aggressive instinct. The difference is indeed conspicuous: unlike the theory of the death instinct and of aggression, from the outset the libido theory was never seriously questioned. Freud made no secret of the difficulties he had encountered in formulating a theory of aggressive behaviour. Only later, when he was revising the theory of ego instincts, did he ascribe to aggressive behaviour the quality of an independent instinctual drive. As far as one can tell from the literature,¹ aggressivity conceived of as a death instinct was not accepted by the great majority of analysts, while aggressivity as a behavioural manifestation having its own instinctual source is seldom questioned. Nevertheless, a number of working and supplementary hypotheses still remain in dispute: for instance, whether one can speak of aggression in the sense of destructive intent in an infant that has not yet acquired motor control; or whether the relation of aggressivity and activity is one of sublimation, of neutralization, or whether the connections are of a different sort.

The following reflections, however, do not take issue with the gaps and obscurities in the concept of aggression, but are rather concerned with a situation that has received little and only superficial attention in the psychoanalytic literature. To anticipate with a preliminary formulation: the question to be raised is whether a *single* theory can do justice to the whole phenomenon of aggressive feelings, fantasies and, above all,

aggressive behaviour. It might well be that interdisciplinary research and an exchange of observational findings could bring the problem of aggression a significant step closer to solution. Of course, this would entail new obligations for the analyst, namely those of the expert who must recognize the limitations and hence also the potentialities of his subject.

Let us start first of all with the resistance we find in ourselves when we have to admit that we are by nature destructive, and above all that we harbour the urge to harm our fellow beings. One is reminded of the frequently quoted exclamation in the 'New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis':

No, man must be naturally good or at least good-natured. If he occasionally shows himself brutal, violent or cruel, these are only passing disturbances of his emotional life, for the most part provoked, or perhaps only consequences of the inexpedient social regulations which he has hitherto imposed on himself (Freud, 1933, p. 104).

Here the counter-argument to assuming the action of an instinctual drive independent of the environment is formulated very exactly by Freud himself: aggressive destructive behaviour provoked by the frustrations inherent in 'inexpedient social regulations'. When Freud persisted in assigning to aggression the quality of an instinctual drive, he discovered, partly through recognizing his own feelings, that in his rejection 'a strong affective factor is coming into effect' (Freud, 1933, p. 103).

Obviously, the thought that we are at the mercy of the manifestations of a phylogenetically inherited aggressive instinct is still hard for us to bear. Recent public discussion makes it quite clear that this concept was misinterpreted by

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¹ Cf. the survey by R. Brun (1953). Freud himself was extremely cautious in his formulation. In 'Civilization

and Its Discontents' (Freud, 1930) the footnote on page 121 reads: 'Our present point of view can be roughly expressed in the statement that libido has a share in every instinctual manifestation, but that not everything in that manifestation is libido.'

interested parties as being fatalistic. A surprising number of our contemporaries, when confronted unexpectedly with this problem, reject the notion out of hand that the enormous amount of aggression erupting everywhere could actually be the expression of a violently explosive instinctual drive and not the result purely of frustration. There can indeed be no doubt as to the frustrations caused by certain systems of government, which in certain places are absolutely 'inexpedient' (Freud's word was 'unzweckmässig'). But what should catch our attention, as analysts, is this sort of relatively undifferentiated, unilateral thinking; only one alternative is permitted: behaviour is either drive propelled or reactively aroused. In contrast to this, the aim of psychoanalysis is to explore the various walls in which at different times this archaic phylogenetic inheritance is shaped by society. The very vehemence with which the concept of an instinctual drive as the source of aggressivity is rejected and an exclusively reactive cause insisted on, leads one to suspect that here a psychic mechanism of self-defence is at work.

By way of definition, we can say that it is characteristic of an instinctual drive and its affects, and thus of drive-produced behaviour, that it is triggered by intra-somatic stimulation. The source of this stimulation, so Freud thinks, flows continuously, which is not to say that it flows evenly. We know that libidinous and aggressive behaviour can be excited by stimuli from the outside. The sources of intra-somatic stimulation of sexual and aggressive behaviour certainly flow at different rates in different individuals. In the same way, the reaction to external stimuli will vary individually, according to the way object relations have affected the developing instinctual drives. There are certain constitutions in which a small stimulus provokes inappropriately strong reactions; just as the reverse may also occur. It is thus wrong to imagine that acknowledging a constitutionally based drive structure and the aggressive potential involved means accepting as an unalterable fate the whole spectrum of aggressive manifestations. Nevertheless, this thesis has recently been advanced, often appearing as an ideological commitment or vouched for by subjective experience.²

A double determination of aggressive be-

haviour—endogenous and cultural—suggests itself as the most likely. This explanation is supported by extensive clinical experience; it should also not be hard to convey to the layman. In fact, however, this latter can often be achieved only with difficulty or not at all; and especially is this true of social scientists interested in psychoanalysis. One suspects with some right the presence of a widespread attachment to the utopian belief in a society free of aggression, for which the course of past history offers no hope of fulfilment. But noble hopes alone do not explain the intensity with which aggressive behaviour is denied as a natural phenomenon and blamed exclusively on social conditions—among which the aggressivity of particular groups is prominently featured. The assumption of an aggression-free man gives one the vague notion of having oneself sinned against this ideal with one's own violent aggressions, fantasied or actual, and of having exchanged them for guilt feelings. Together with the repression of the aggressive instinctual impulses, these guilt feelings also disappeared from consciousness.

Scarcely anyone can be so cynical as to deny that there are certain people who actually bear the 'guilt' for social abuses, and that there are many people who are born into or find themselves in positions from which they have not the strength to extricate themselves and who thus become party to that actual guilt. This is the rational, the front face of guilt that is acceptable to us: namely the guilt of *others*. On the hidden side, where one's own aggression lurks, determinants of guilt are seen on a different level. The process must be formulated with extreme caution, in order not to gloss over its complexity. Thus it is granted that there are objective conditions (such as, for instance, group selfishness) that must be recognized as 'guilt' within the context of society. These conditions are part of social reality and in many of us they awaken a feeling of being threatened, of being endangered in our humanity. Hence they provoke aggression: an aggression born of frustration. The hopes—which we hold to be utopian—of a united mankind free of aggression probably spring from an unconscious need for reparation and so indicate aggressive activity on the unconscious level, and its transformation into feelings of guilt.³ These

² In this connection, Wilhelm Reich is often referred to. With how much justification will remain in this context an open question.

³ Cf. Freud (1930, p. 139): 'When an instinctual trend undergoes repression, its libidinal elements are turned into symptoms, and its aggressive components into a sense of guilt.'

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unconscious guilt feelings seek relief through projection on to outside groups that can be used as scapegoats. In accordance with the mechanics of projection, one then discovers aggressive behaviour in the object and feels justified in responding aggressively—and thus aggressive behaviour comes full circle. It is most interesting to observe in this connection that advocates of an aggression-free future are often intent on securing for themselves a not inconsiderable measure of aggressive activity in the present. This obvious contradiction is protected by the certainties of a two-fold preconception: that the unjust conditions to which they point can be redressed only by the use of force and even, if need be, the annihilation of the adversary; and secondly, that once this has been accomplished, the aggression-free way of life that had been envisaged will come to pass of itself.

Preconceived certainties of this kind always make insight more difficult. This applies to individuals as it does to whole groups. Yet, starting from this fact, we must still keep on asking what we, as analysts, can do in our respective communities; how can we bring reason to bear on these dangerous 'rationalizations' that are being used to justify openly aggressive behaviour. Here too, on the level of collective therapy, the analyst's 'benevolent neutrality' is indispensable to the success of his purpose, even if it is by no means pleasant to find oneself in the cross-fire of an acrimonious controversy.

In talking to analysts, moreover, one is almost always told that our hands are tied, that our sphere of activity is limited to therapy, i.e. to dissolving the defence mechanisms of the individual; and what is more, that we have tried often enough to elucidate the misconceptions about psychoanalytic thinking, but our attempts were wrecked on the defence mechanisms of society, which are so hard to grasp. This is true, and yet it is not a valid argument; even the great length of individual treatment did not prove the absurdity medical circles first represented it to be. It brought us invaluable insight, which we are now also learning to apply outside the therapeutic situation. Work on the resistances within society should be attempted with corresponding patience and skill. If we managed to fill the gaps in a patient's memory and make him able to recognize that neurotic behaviour is engendered by

infantile experience, then we could see how, in successful cases, the manifestations of aggression began to change in the patient's surroundings. The man in the street is far removed from such recognition. He is afraid of forces that are factual and brutal; he is also unconsciously afraid of his own aggressive impulses; impulses which, in the narrowness of his existence, he can scarcely afford. These fears are not without justification. Wherever he goes, he hears of acts of violence, and he is virtually forced into witnessing them in the mass media. No logical step leads from the assumption that man is by nature peaceful to the fact that never throughout recorded history have people succeeded in devising for themselves a recognizable form of government able to abolish violence, destruction, suppression, or even genocide. Here we are face to face with a piece of reality that makes us feel fatalistic. A strong ego is needed to overcome this feeling, so that what has been warded off can first of all be allowed to become fully conscious. This, too, we know from individual analysis. We then adjust ourselves to the lengthy process of working through. But—and this is our central question—what does working through with a society look like?

Two things are necessary. First, and this is rare, a certain ready willingness on the part of the analyst himself. He is going to have to learn to think in terms of instinctual behaviour within a collective, even when observing a single case. The individual will then be perceived more clearly in the web of his personal object relations. His behaviour there will be correlated with his behaviour in his manifold group relationships and even, possibly, very controversial value-systems.⁴

Secondly, the psychoanalyst must be willing to collaborate with related scientific disciplines. In a society where specialization is so highly developed, this kind of collaboration, in spite of incessant lip-service from all sides, seems to be extremely difficult for everybody—for all scientists. Analysts are certainly no exception. And yet a joint effort with the social sciences can be regarded as offering a promise of success, or at least of progress. For the sociologist can avail himself of facilities and institutions through which to examine and communicate with large groups, and above all through which he may find ways

⁴ Freud (1912, p. 100 ff.) pointed to the institutional element as a sort of 'secondary leader', and also described the aggressive aspect of this: 'The leader or the leading idea might also, so to speak, be negative; hatred against a

particular person or institution might operate in just the same unifying way, and might call up the same kind of emotional ties as positive attachment.'

of bringing influence to bear on their opinions and activities; not so the psychoanalyst, who throughout his life works with individuals or small groups. Even within their own field, it took a long time before analysts were prepared to discuss the application of the psychoanalytic method to group therapy—a reminder which should dispel any illusions as to the rate at which a functioning collaboration might come about. It is important, though, to state the problem over and over again. This corresponds to the responsibility in our own field of working things through.

The demand for research on the collective aggression of *large* groups must not be dismissed since, after all, it is in just such groups that aggressive behaviour assumes its most dangerous forms. If we, as analysts, persist in restricting ourselves to an exclusively medical and clinical position, the research into collective behaviour, for instance research on the psychology of war, would proceed without our participation. Predictably, this would lead to a further plundering of analytic findings and theories without analysts having any effective share in the direction of the research, nor any means of protesting effectively. Moreover, one would have manoeuvred oneself into an isolation of one's own making. For the rest, much will depend in such interdisciplinary research on the circumspection with which analysts make their theoretical views known. Thus the importance of, for instance, unconscious guilt feelings and aggressions is of no small moment in the 'climate' of a society; under certain circumstances these processes will provoke violent frustrations and aggressive reactions. An understanding of these matters—how one's own unconscious aggressions are projected on to some 'guilty party', or how the fearfully awaited aggressions of the partner, the result of one's own aggressive behaviour, are forestalled—can be acquired by the psychoanalyst only on the basis of his therapeutic technique. With training he will learn to discern where his patient's aggressive behaviour is decided by the constellations of his individual life and where by collective excitation; for instance, by a collective reduction of the individual superego. In return, the sociologist, from his knowledge of the workings of society, can describe the objectively frustrating conditions and can indicate to the analyst the significance of institutional constraints for individual character development, where 'character development', except in the case of

pathology, is taken to be a continuing process.

We submit, therefore, that a *monism* of interpretation does not suffice. By this we mean that no single method of interpretation can be called upon to cope with the problems of aggression to which our present-day societies are so obviously more and more exposed. It certainly should be nothing unusual for an analyst to look beyond the confines of individual therapy, particularly not after 'The Future of an Illusion', after 'Civilization and its Discontents', nor after 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', and yet contributions to social psychology still make up only a small fraction of the total psychoanalytic output. An example may show the sort of interdisciplinary communication we have in mind. We hark back here to a controversy of 25 years ago, but which is as timely today as it was then. The work to which I refer is by Otto Fenichel, and was written during the first years of his emigration. Its title is 'On Psychoanalysis, War and Peace' (Fenichel, 1935),⁵ and it takes issue with Edward Glover's then newly published book, *War, Sadism and Pacifism* (1933).

The supplementary science which Fenichel enlists—besides analytically based hypotheses—in judging the phenomena of war and peace is the social theory of Karl Marx. Perhaps it is no accident that Fenichel's study had been virtually forgotten. Adducing Freud, Fenichel warns against an uncritical expansion of psychoanalytic interpretation into areas that are not open to direct psychoanalytic observation and in which the analyst may be insufficiently familiar with the relevant research methods and findings. The consequence is that 'even in areas where psychological inquiry as such would be legitimate, the wrong questions are asked'.

Concerning collective aggressive behaviour, without which war is unthinkable, Fenichel writes:

It may be that without an aggressive instinctual drive of the masses, warfare would be impossible. But the aggressive drive does not specifically aim at war. However, for its activity in a number of people to take the form of warfare, the 'apparatus of society' must be functioning in certain specific ways. The aggressive drive would not lead to war if the realities were different. The single individual does not go to war because he has failed to sublimate his aggressive drive, but because—thanks to existing systems, for instance imperialism—he is forced either directly or by trickery into doing so.

⁵ We are grateful to Helmut Dahmer for bringing this work to our attention.

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The conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that the phenomenon of warfare, which serves here as an example of the aggressive behaviour of a community, must not be taken merely as the expression of an accumulated surplus of aggressive instinct in the individuals involved. But it would also be one-sided to disregard individual aggressive excitement or to underestimate its importance for the conduct and duration of a war, for the way the enemy is treated, etc. The only question to be asked is whether, in a given case, this aggressive excitement *starts* the chain of events whose violence finally affects the whole community. It seems that in the present day the subjective sense of being exposed to enemy aggression is an indispensable prerequisite for going to war. Hence those groups within the body of a nation actually interested that there be war will work to create such a feeling. But this again cannot be achieved without recourse to stimuli that arouse aggression. The following process can then be recognized: decision-making groups in one society feel threatened by identical groups in another society; they seek to counteract this by means of war, and therefore manipulating the populations into identifying with the war aims the respective leaderships have formulated for public consumption. Certainly, the greater the surplus of aggressivity accumulated in a particular community, the more easily this manipulation will succeed. Thus, after the ghastly blood-letting of the second world war, it was not possible to involve the national communities of Europe in any major war enterprises and internal political tensions were also kept within bounds; obviously the world war had to a great extent exhausted the surplus of aggressive instinct.

Fenichel mentions three dangers that may beset those who apply psychoanalytic methods to matters of social science. Since his advance is still pertinent, some of it should be quoted. First, he warns against an 'unwarranted equating of individual and groups'. In false analogy with the intrapsychic conflicts which the analyst knows from his analytic practice, conflicts within a group are treated exactly as though they too were intrapsychic; what is overlooked is the fact that a group consists of diverse individuals who are in reality in conflict with each other because their interests are actually contradictory. This

error is committed wherever—as for instance in war literature—phrases like 'the nation's instinct of survival' are used; the fact that 'the very thing which promotes the survival of one part of a nation may simultaneously be destroying another part of the same nation' is ignored. A second potential danger stems from the 'disregard of the autonomous research done in the areas to which one intends to apply psychoanalysis'. It can then happen that, as a psychoanalyst, one simply fails to see motivations that are essential but that lie outside the scope of psychodynamics—as happened to Glover in *War, Sadism and Pacifism*, who wanted to understand war but to whom it did not even occur to inquire about the nature and genesis of the nations' war machines nor the extent of their military power.

Thirdly, one may be led astray through a 'failure to recognize the differentiation between the phenomena of individual, particularly neurotic, psychology on the one hand and . . . those of group psychology on the other'. Fenichel thinks that the analyst, when investigating phenomena of group psychology, tends to treat them as he would neuroses. In the latter, the patterns of reaction are ritualized from childhood on. But in historically significant manifestations of mass psychology these patterns fade into the background. The field is determined by the emotional reactions of the immediate present, such as the highly charged aggressive behaviour of a great majority. Beyond what Freud taught us to see in 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', many of these collective phenomena demand a different sort of understanding than can be acquired by treating neuroses. The behaviour of the German people during the Nazi rule and its aftermath showed how preshaped character structure and universal aggressive propaganda could dovetail into each other in a quite specific manner to allow the unthinkable to become reality.⁶

In this complex of circumstances, it is essential to find out what actually triggers off collective behaviour. Fenichel makes this very clear:

If the psychoanalytic view is correct that concern with money matters corresponds, psychologically speaking, to a relatively high degree of anal eroticism, then the question is: how does a capitalist ideology produce this heightened anal eroticism—

⁶ In connection with this thought, Eissler (1965) may be quoted. He writes: ' . . . when I had the occasion once to analyse some persons who had grown up in Russia I developed the definite impression that the subject was a

character out of a Russian novel, particularly one by Dostoevski, and I began to wonder to what extent I was confusing what may be called a national trait with a neurotic symptom.'

or an over-emphasis on anal conflicts—in the members of a capitalist society? But not: what sort of heightened eroticism produced capitalism?

Pursuing this thought, one might suggest that the famous paradigm of the surgeon who sublimates his anal-sadistic fixation in his profession is perhaps worth looking at more closely. On no account can it be claimed, as has been done, that 'the institution of the police grew out of the desire of the policeman to kick and of the proletarian to be kicked'. These examples are not intended to question the ubiquity of unconscious and instinctual motivations in our behaviour, but are rather meant as a warning that a monism of interpretation may devalue psychological—and also vice versa, sociological—statements which in themselves are pertinent and accurate.

We mention these possible pitfalls—and here we come back to the aggressive behaviour of large groups—only to show that an expansion of the educational horizon is indispensable for all those involved in the study of human behaviour. As will be recalled, in 'The Question of Lay Analysis' (1926) Freud drew up a proud catalogue of educational requirements for future analysts. In the present era of division of labour and specialization of knowledge, next to nothing of this has been realized. Professionalism in psychoanalysis has developed in a way that is altogether typical of our time. We can therefore expect results only from the integration of insights acquired by the various specialists.

To this thorny task another is linked. Where evidence indicates the presence of an instinctual element in aggressive behaviour, this knowledge may not simply be offered up on the altar of impartial science. In line with the change towards 'fundamental democratization'—to use Karl Mannheim's phrase—such findings, that are of concern to practically everybody, should also reach a wide public. Nothing remains of the élite position of the researcher. Rather, he has incurred new obligations in making the results of his research known to the public. The first who were made to feel this were the nuclear physicists. But in point of fact, any science that can be used by human aggression as a tool for destructive purposes has need of such 'follow-up care'.

We now return to the proposition mentioned at the outset: to assume that aggressive behaviour is, amongst other motivations, an outgrowth of instinctual drives too would be to cripple the opposition against factual injustice and would

promote a passive and submissive adjustment. In our opinion it is not enough to show where this may actually have happened, nor where a misunderstanding was involved. It is, on the contrary, the proper province of psychoanalytic *research* to examine the consequences of collectively experienced conditions and stressful situations. We must attempt to discover what supra-personal, collective experiences make the individual decide to turn his back on social and political problems—or the opposite. Because the feelings engendered by such experiences—feelings of one's own helplessness and the hopelessness of being able to effect any change—have also to be dealt with intrapsychically. Apathetic indifference to decisions of state or community serves as a protective device against violent affects—against rage, hate, envy—arising from the sense of impotence experienced. The influence exercised by collective events on the maturation or stagnation of a specific person varies widely from case to case. Favourable instinctual development may counteract many unfavourable conditions of life within society; on the other hand, unfavourable social conditions may intensify the development of neurotic symptoms or characteristics. To make a precise diagnosis possible, both aspects must be explored with equal subtlety: the vicissitudes of the individual life, as seen in the early object relations, and the vicissitudes of the social life, based on the objective conditions of a community. It follows that neither psychoanalytical nor psychosocial research can be pursued in isolation from each other.

We believe that the work of elucidating and interpreting motives cannot be carried out by the analyst alone. He must allow empirical sociological research to inform him of the degree and significance of certain factors in the formation of intrapsychic conflict. The cooperation the humanistic sciences would procure for the individual specialized researcher familiarity with matters that his own approach had perhaps led him to overlook or misinterpret. Warfare, with its rational objectives and its unconscious motivations, cannot be comprehended as a collective activity if the function of the institutions of society is left out of account. It is through them that not only the rational aims and regulatory tasks but also the aggressive needs of a leadership group can be transmitted to the whole population. This is a supra-individual process that has its beginnings in individual needs. Furthermore, these institutions can topple the individual's whole constellation of values. The moment war

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is declared, the value-scale of the individual who is adjusted and integrated into his society, is turned upside down. New situations of compulsory adaptation come into being. What in peacetime would be considered the behaviour of a severely disturbed, violent criminal becomes, when political or economic interests are being pursued by means of war, a virtue—and, what is more, one that earns visible reward (Eissler, 1960).

Rebels who intend to overthrow the political or social order arrogate to themselves the right to kill their adversaries and arouse thereby the aggressive opposition of the 'establishment'. Psychoanalysis can make a specific contribution to the examination of these aggressive and destructive acts—for instance, what part the projection of one's own unconscious aggressions plays in the outbreak of a conflict—which promises to throw considerable light on these recurrent anti-social outbursts, be they politically desirable or

not. But this can happen only if each of these contributions—from whichever side it comes, psychoanalytical or sociological—is conceived in full awareness of the insights of the respective neighbour discipline.

There are numerous problems that come to light when lines of communication are kept open to mutual questioning, interim results and tested insights; many of them we were unable to mention; some of them may have not so much as crossed the horizon of the scientists concerned. These preliminary suggestions still seemed to us worthwhile. One might gain the impression that while in the past two decades the metapsychological positions of psychoanalysis have been refined, they have also to some degree become ossified. In opening our theory to the questions and answers of the related sciences, we might be able to counteract this. But that is not a problem of aggression, rather it is one of engagement, of libido.

(Translated from the German by Beverley R. Placzek)

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