



# PSYCHOANALYSIS AND POLITICS

## RHETORICS OF POWER AND FREEDOM OF THOUGHT – VOICES OF THE IT AND THE OVER-I<sup>1</sup>

Call for papers – spring symposium in Budapest May 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> 2014

We are pleased to announce that AGNES HELLER will be joining us for this symposium.

Authority, wrote Said, "is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive" – it "can, indeed must, be analysed" ([1978] 2003). "There is no alternative" is the phrase Thatcher often repeated with reference to economic liberalism. It can be taken as symbolic of the language of power or the rhetorics of oppressive persuasion, more generally.

We are told that there is no alternative to protecting ourselves against 'others' who are after stealing scarce jobs and welfare goods, or who pose a threat to security. Hence, it is argued, borders need to be closed, minorities kept at a distance or in a state of submission, and techniques of surveillance are called for. Fear is stirred up and utilised to produce obedience to these demands, presented as fundamental and thus overriding concerns for human rights. In Moïsi's words "the culture of fear is reducing the qualitative gap that once existed between democratic and nondemocratic regimes, for fear pushes the countries to violate their own moral principles" (2010).

The rhetorics of power may be seen to take on the part-object voice of a persecutory 'over-I'. Melanie Klein described the 'I' as feeling "oppressed and paralysed by the influences of the super-ego". No other voice or counterdiscourse can be heard for the 'I' distrusts "accepting the influences of real objects, often because they are felt to be in complete opposition to the demands of the super-ego, but more often because they are too closely identified with the dreaded internal ones" (Klein, 1931). Right-wing populist discourse, historically as well as today, combines the function of voicing a revolt against authorities with a highly authoritarian stance. Thus it echoes both the voice of the 'it' and that of the 'over-I', allowing for, or demanding aggression against people posited as 'other' or 'weaker' than those the listener is impelled to identify with. We might liken this process to identification with the aggressor, leaving behind a mind "which consists only of the id and super-ego" (Ferenczi, 1933), and question whether traumatised societies are more susceptible to such rhetorics of power.

Rhetorics of power employ figures of speech which aim to conceal, distort or even reverse meanings and associations to the presented material. Thus a way of approaching this topic would be to analyse the relevant metaphors and their political implications; what meaning is 'carried over' (Gr. *metapherein*) from where to where, and what is forgotten as a result of this transfer? Think, for instance, of the figure of 'the parasite' in recent political discourse. Questions about the use of social and political manipulation can also be raised in terms of 'master suppression techniques' (Ås, 2004). These are used by a dominant group to maintain a hierarchy; making invisible/silencing, appeal to ridicule, withholding of information, double bind, and to heap blame on or put someone to shame. One might interrogate the psychic effects of these techniques and potential remedies for them.

Rhetorics of power can become mainstream political discourses and shape people's ideology by totalising and impeding freedom of thought. This is visible in the current economic, religious and ideological fundamentalisms. Pervasive totalitarian elements efface the distinction between fiction and reality, making ideology true and stifling the imagination. They do not just label thoughts as forbidden but aim to render one unable to think or imagine them. Freud wrote to Ernest Jones in 1933 on the occasion of a mass book burning in Berlin: "What progress we are making! In the Middle Ages they would have burnt me; nowadays they are content with burning my books" (Jones, 1957, 182) not foreseeing the escalation of events yet to come.

"We live in an age that pays lip service to history, yet which continually undermines the ties we have to the past", wrote Darian Leader (2013). This statement, which relates to manic depression and the healthcare system's denial and attempted erasure of the meaning of personal history, can be given a wider reading in the context of the present investigation. Undermining history, memory and the ties with the past serves a totalising hegemonic purpose. Historical consciousness, on the other hand, can introduce alternative discourses that challenge the dominating voices of the 'it' and the 'over-I'. The present, as well as hegemonic historical discourses can be put into question in the light of the past. Walter Benjamin calls for a questioning of the pillars of history and culture "for there is no testimony of culture that it is not also a testimony of barbarism". By means of the figure of the "ragman" Benjamin highlights the importance and unsettling power of what mainstream discourses scorn. Benjamin calls for the historian to "brush history against the grain" (Benjamin, 1942, 433) as a way of countering the totalising historical discourse by re-introducing what hitherto had been excluded, perhaps feared and deemed abject.

Foucault's thinking on 'speaking truth to power', or *parrhesia*, is relevant in this respect. It involves; "the risk of offending or provoking the other person; it is truth subject to risk of violence". The truth spoken challenges the bond between the speaker and the addressee, at the risk of ending the relationship. *Parrhesia* means telling all, saying everything, without withholding or concealment. It can be understood in two senses, however, saying anything "that comes to mind, anything that serves the cause one is defending, anything that serves the passion or interest driving the person who is speaking" – or in a more positive sense, of "telling the truth without concealment, reserve, [or] empty manner of speech". In the positive sense of the term the truth must be the personal opinion of the speaker – one personally signs the truth stated, binds oneself to it, and is thus bound to and by it ([1984]2011, 9-11).

We might ask how the practice of psychoanalysis, and free association, stand in relation to this, and about its political implications. With reference to the protected and confidential space of the clinical setting, Thompson writes; "Most of us either speak impulsively without awareness of what we say or think through everything we are about to disclose before speaking". By contrast, "speaking unreservedly while remaining attentive to what is being disclosed" (2001, 75) appears radical, emphasising the significance of the *promise* to free associate, rather than the activity as such. In Freud's words; "You must never give in to these criticisms" – which could be conceived of as related to the power of the analyst, figures from one's past, socially more or less conscious restrictions combined with one's own – "indeed, you must say it precisely *because* you feel an aversion to doing so. [...] Finally, never forget that you have promised to be absolutely honest, and never leave anything out because, for some reason or other, it is unpleasant to tell it" (1913c, 135). What social or political conditions or frameworks are presupposed in or challenged by these ideas? We invite contributions on these and related questions.

This is an interdisciplinary conference – we invite theoretical contributions and historical, literary or clinical case studies on these and related themes from philosophers, sociologists, psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, group analysts, literary theorists, historians and others. Perspectives from different psychoanalytic schools will be most welcome. We promote discussion among the presenters and participants, for the symposium series creates a space where representatives of different perspectives come together, engage with one another's contributions and participate in a community of thought. Therefore, attendance to the whole symposium is encouraged and priority will be given to those who plan to do so. Due to the nature of the forum audio recording is not permitted.

Presentations are expected to take half an hour. Another 20 minutes is set aside for discussion. There is a 10 min break in between each paper. Please send an abstract of 200 to 300 words, attached in a word-document, to [psychoanalysis.politics@gmail.com](mailto:psychoanalysis.politics@gmail.com) by **December 10<sup>th</sup> 2013**. We will respond by, and present a preliminary programme on **December 20<sup>th</sup> 2013**. If you would like to sign up to participate without presenting a paper, please contact us after this date.

This is a relatively small symposium where active participation is encouraged and an enjoyable social atmosphere sought. A participation fee, which includes two shared dinners, of £150 (or € 178) before February 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 – £180 (or € 214) after February 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 is to be paid before the symposium. Fees must be covered by a bank transfer/international bank transfer. Your place is only confirmed once we have received

your completed registration form as well as your payment. Additional information will be given after your abstract has been accepted or after the conference programme has been finalized.

Unfortunately, we are unable to offer travel grants or other forms of financial assistance for this event, though we will be able to assist you in finding affordable accommodation after January 1<sup>st</sup> 2014. Please contact us if you wish to make a donation towards the conference. We thank all donors in advance!

Note 1. The use of the terms 'it' and 'over-I' draws on Bettelheim's critique of the standard English translation of Freud in *Freud and Man's Soul*.

#### NON-EXCLUSIVE LIST OF RELEVANT LITERATURE:

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