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REPORTS AND BRIEF COMMMUNICATIONS

Why war? revisited
A psychoanalyst's reflections

Imre Szecsödy

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Strongly influenced by the current and repetitious devastation of human lives and of humanistic values not only by war, terrorism, and fundamentalism, but also by the trend in Europe to dismantle the social welfare state and build society on the basic assumption of the assumed benevolence and omnipotence of the idealized "market", I started to write these reflections. My point of departure was that the individual and society mutually create each other and that psychoanalytic knowledge about organizations as well about individual development may be of assistance in understanding something of what happens with individuals and societies in times of war.

Notwithstanding the determinism on which psychoanalysis is based, focusing as it does on the fact that in the present we repeat phases of our earlier development, I emphasize our opportunities and ability to make choices. This ability is linked to our capacity to contain within ourselves contradictions, conflicts, assets, and limitations. The courage to choose, to dare to admit mistakes, and the ability to endure a certain measure of shame, anxiety and uncertainty, seem especially urgent at this time. Facing threats requires courage, mental fortitude, understanding, and a continuing effort to maintain dialogue, which can prevent individual or collective destructiveness. Speaking of war from a psychoanalytic perspective seems to be as appropriate and urgent as ever.

Lord Alderdice, a British psychotherapist and politician with many years of experience of working with the conflicts in Northern Ireland, emphasized in a speech he gave at the meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in New York, January 2004, that the tactic of war is to create strong emotions and to destroy our capacity for reflection. There are no right solutions; the solution is to work continuously for a solution, that is, to never, ever give up. He stressed that politicians have a limitless desire to be respected and that they never forget, nor forgive, an attack on their dignity.

As analysts, we are able to reflect on how we are affected when we receive all these impressions of war, destruction, violence, and hate and to draw attention to how the outside world both reflects and shape our inner world. With the help of our own experiences of reflecting on mental life, we, as psychoanalysts, may also investigate how conditions are created for hostility, xenophobia, and the oppression of minorities..

On 30 July 1932, having been requested by the League of Nations to invite a partner of his choice to an honest, open dialogue on the most urgent question facing civilization, "Is there any way to avoid war?", Albert Einstein wrote a letter to Sigmund Freud (Freud & Einstein, 1933). Einstein had himself realized that it was unworkable to create an international judicial agency whose task was to act as an arbiter in all conflicts and whose decisions all parties, nations, and interest groups would follow. The authority of such a supranational body had to be delegated to it and endorsed by all parties – an authority to which they were willing to subordinate themselves. Every ruling class, however, wants to protect and preserve its own privileges and is unwilling to make concessions in matters concerning its own or national sovereignty. Rulers can mobilize for war by arousing strong, unrestrained emotions in the majority of people, even by prevailing on them to sacrifice their lives. Einstein's main question to Freud was: "Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness?" (Freud & Einstein, 1933, p. 201). Freud answered in September:

It is a general principle ... that conflicts of interest between men are settled by the use of violence. This is true of the whole animal kingdom, from which men have no business to exclude themselves .... in a small human horde, it was superior muscular strength which decided who owned things or whose will should prevail .... From the moment at which weapons were introduced, [the winner was the one] who had the better weapons or who used them the more skillfully.

.... There was a path which led from violence to right or law, ... the path which led by way of the fact that the superior strength of a single individual could be rivalled by the union of several weak ones .... Violence could be broken by union, and the power of those who were united now represented law in contrast to the violence of the single individual. Thus, we see that right is the might of a community. It is still violence, ready to be directed against any individual who resists it. The only real difference lies in the fact that what prevails is no longer the violence of an individual but that of a community.

.... From that time forward, there are two factors at work in the community which are sources of unrest over matters of law but tend at the same time to a further growth of law. First, attempts are made by certain of the rulers to set themselves above the prohibitions which apply to everyone – they seek, that is, to go back from a dominion of law to a dominion of violence. Secondly, the oppressed members of the group make constant efforts to obtain more power and press forward, that is, from unequal justice to equal justice for all .... Yet, a glance at the history of the human race reveals an endless series of conflicts between one community and another or several others, between larger and smaller units – between cities, provinces, races, nations, empires – which have almost always been settled by force of arms. Wars of this kind end either in the spoliation or in the complete overthrow and conquest of one of the parties.

....You express astonishment at the fact that it is so easy to make men enthusiastic about a war and add your suspicions that there is something at work in them – an instinct for hatred and destruction – which goes halfway to meet the efforts of the warmongers ... we have come to suppose that this instinct is at work in every living creature and is striving to bring it to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter (Freud & Einstein, 1933, p. 204-211).

Nevertheless, Freud concludes his letter with a degree of hope that enlightened and civilized human beings will, in spite of everything, strive for peace and strengthen their opposition to war which exposes everyone to demeaning situations, encourages them to kill, and to extinguish the life, that everyone has a right to live. War threatens to annihilate all: friends and enemies, the attackers and the attacked. The most urgent question, Freud wrote, is whether it would be possible to find durable bonds, universal, generally accepted identities, on the basis of which men and women of good will would be able to build a future together.

Individuals and society mutually create each other. The development of human beings is to a great extent directed by experience based on their very strong early dependency on others, which experience sometimes comprises a split perception of existence, including an easily aroused suspicion that outside forces are trying to hold you back or diminish your importance. This feeling may be balanced by another perception, which can help us in various crises: the sense of solidarity. Under normal, favorable circumstances, the infant's sense of trust and confidence is a soil for the perception of continuity and for the growth of a social instinct that is able to internally combine internal and external reality. There is an ongoing interplay between genetically directed and environmentally stimulated development, between the active search for stimulation and the avoidance of tension, and between the child and his environment. In these interactions, an ever more complex, inner mental structure is created, a "stage" on which the drama of growing and living is performed. Some stages are large and stable and thereby also flexible, allowing for complex and intensive performances, while others are small and unstable, with more limited space for challenges and developments. Every developmental phase has its specific tragedies, that is, challenges that need to be resolved by compromise, and for every phase, a specific capacity for re-organization is required. An aspect of this capacity is borne out by current research, which shows quite clearly that learning, both for the child and the adult, is linked to how they consciously and unconsciously interpret and anticipate information.

A basic hypothesis is that the newborn child experiences anxiety and unease from the very beginning and perceives unpleasure as if it were caused by hostile forces. If the child is comforted by the warmth and a loving attentiveness of a predictable caregiver and its hunger is stilled, the child feels happier. Such comfort is perceived as coming from a good force and facilitates the child's first loving relationship to a person, an "object." At the same time, frustration, discomfort, and pain intrude on this relationship, which may be perceived as persecution. It is against this powerful combination of experiences – of having missed something,

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of feeling split and abandoned – that *basic trust and confidence* must assert itself, from infancy and onward, throughout life (Eriksson, 1950, 1964).

The second necessary function of psychic development phase has to do with *autonomy* and an experience of the worth of one's own will. The experience of autonomy creates a sense of freedom, a balanced relation between being dependent and independent, whereas experiences of having been exploited may have devastating consequences for the individual's social relations on both a small and a large scale. All adults to a degree remain sensitive to the risk of being embarrassed, of losing face, and fear being attacked from behind, which – if these feelings are played out on the arena of international and racial politics – can lead to disastrous consequences for many people.

In the third so called oedipal period of development, the child gains experience by being able to take the initiative, perform tasks, and accomplish things. If he or she suffers too many disappointments, the result may be a sense of general and social inferiority. Guilt feelings, which are a feature of this phase of development, can be expressed by a general inhibition, a non-use of ability and opportunity, by accepting impossible tasks, or by failing in spite of good qualifications.

To the next important phase belongs the task of arriving at and integrating a personal identity. A culmination of this phase occurs in connection with the provocative perception of adolescence that you have reached maturity, at the same time as you sense conflicts with regard to living up to mature, adult ideals in your family and as well as in society at large. Confusion about the adult roles and the status of youth is widespread today; many young people show a tendency to turn away from or against society, or attach themselves passionately to some kind of minority view or a gang; the mixtures of constructive and destructive tendencies in these identifications are often striking. Some young individuals search out a negative identity that may either be self-destructive or reflect a strong and violent repudiation of the norms of the society or their parents. This may be strengthened if the parents, knowingly or not, have exposed the young person with suspicion and negative expectations. There may also be special problems for socially vulnerable groups, for example between the first- and second-generation immigrants. When parents are left behind in the process of accommodating to a new language and culture, the young generation sometimes over-identify with, or sometimes against, the norms, language, and values of the new environment. The young may thus create some a kind of pseudo-identity, idealizing the norms and values either of the new or the old society.

The sense of an inner identity and the anticipation of a meaningful social future can together make it unnecessary to deny or attack oneself or hatefully turn against those who are different. But when historic and social changes seriously bring into question existing or developing identities on a large scale, only an irrational choice may seem to remain: a choice between a vague but unbearable, self-denigrating accusation and a violent, stupid damnation of an external enemy, whose dangerous and threatening sides may be exaggerated. War counts on and exploits this disposition in people.

Psychoanalysis, on the one hand, rests on a deterministic view of man. We have ideas about the impact on adult functioning – how we act and perceive and interpret the world around us – of previous experiences and of bio-psychic instinctual drives and (sometimes limited) capacities of the ego. On the other hand, we recognize the personal and social value of personal autonomy and the freedom to choose how to act. Even if there is repetition in our own development, we make conscious decisions every day about how to implement our own lives. Health is distinguished by this experience, that is, by the ability to interpret the realities of life and act of our own free will. As Robert Knight (1954) has put it: "That man is free who is conscious of being the author of the law that he obeys." (p. 373).

It is nevertheless important to repeat that, however free we may see ourselves in writing our own laws, such directives are always based on complex and idiosyncratic personalities, and once again, that individuals and society mutually create each other. Laws made by man are meant to have a social function. And we know that laws are not always ideal or perfect, nor are they always justly applied. In this imperfect world, many different personalities are formed, individuals with major and minor limitations. The individual internalizes – takes into himself – many aspects of the collective and its history, and projects – externalizes – his or her fantasy world onto or into the collective. Erik H. Erikson wrote:

> Every phase in man's development is in particular harmony with one of the basic elements of society, for the simple reason that man's life cycle and people's institutions have grown up side-by-side. The connection is two-fold: people carry with them to these institutions the remnants of their childishness and their youthful ardor and receive from them a confirmation of the conquests they have made in childhood." (Eriksson, 1964, p. 165).

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Wilfred Bion's (1961) theories are very useful in the study of social institutions, organizations and groups. As a starting point, he describes the ideal *working group*, in which group members are conscious of their shared goals and obligations, and where the organization and structure of the group supports those actively working on the task. Each individual is a member of this kind of group because he or she wants the group's goals to be achieved and has decided to work for them. The members' own interests coincide with that of the group. The working group constantly tests its accomplishments in a scientific spirit, seeking knowledge, learning from experience, and continually questioning the best way to achieve its goal. There is a clear awareness of the passage of time and of the processes which have to do with learning and development.

A different kind of group is the *basic assumption group*, in which participants behave as if certain, illusory conditions existed. For example, when it was thought that the earth was flat and you could fall off if you went over its edge, seafarers didn't dare venture far from the coast. The basis for the behavior of the participants in such groups is often accounted for by unspoken suppositions, whose existence, however, may be traced back to the group's state of mind or basic assumptions. Bion (1961) described three recurring basic assumptions in groups: *dependency*, *fight-flight*, and *pairing*.

The main goal of the *dependency* group is to provide security for its members through an appointed leader, and to be protected by him as if the group had been assembled for this purpose. The members act as if they know nothing and as if they were incompetent and immature. They are united in the conviction that the leader will give them magical powers, solutions to all their problems. The leader in a dependency group is readily idealized as a kind of god or parental figure who takes care of its children. He or she may be corrupted by this rôle and accept the group's basic assumption. A common problem in such groups is jealousy. There is in addition both resentment (criticism of others) and self-criticism over being dependent, but also a desire to persist in this position.

Another basic assumption group is the *fight-flight group*. Here the individual is of lesser importance for preservation of the group; the individual may be abandoned for the benefit of the group's survival. Action in any case requires a forceful leader who is able to mobilize the group for attack or lead it in retreat.

The third basic assumption group is the *pairing* group, which functions as if the group were assembled to bring forth a Messiah, a savior. The group is imbued with a feeling of hope, expressed, to be sure, in clichés or foolish promises for the future: everything will be better by spring, collectivization – or market economy – will bring blessings for all, marriage or, say, Gestalt therapy (or cognitive behavior therapy) will solve every problem. The members of such groups concentrate on the future with a feeling of hope.

An important concept in Bion's thought is *valence*, which denotes a tendency to unite with others in order to create and share basic assumptions and to act in accordance with them. The valence, which may be high or low, refers to a bond between individuals in groups. Everyone has a tendency to enter into the irrational and unconscious aspects of group life. Valence in the basic assumption groups can be compared to cooperation in working groups. While cooperation denotes honoring consideration, maturity and a certain degree of organization and autonomy, valence requires none of these. It appears spontaneously as a function of people's tendency to seek the company of other people. To some extent, society uses its members' valences to serve its own ends. The teacher finds a good outlet for his valence for the basic assumption of dependence. The war leader may effectively use his valence for battle and flight.

When people make use of an organization they belong to in the service of coping with anxiety, this leads to the development of socially structured defense mechanisms appearing as elements in the organization (or group) culture and of its method of functioning. An important aspect of such a development is the effort by the individuals to collectively externalize whatever is bad onto others, outside the group; this phenomenon is a counterpart to individual psychic defense mechanisms. Collective defensive structures develop as a result of silent agreements, often unconscious, between group members. The socially structured defense mechanisms then often become a part of the external reality to which old and new members of the institution have to adapt (Menzies, 1960). A price to be paid for such developments is that they prevent the maturation and integration of the personal defensive structures or character. In some cases, the individual even regresses to a level of functioning that is lower than the one he had achieved before he joined the group or organization.

Success and survival in social institutions are intimately associated with the methods the organization employs to contain the anxiety of its members. Difficulties always arise in social change. Frequently, instructions and plans, which seem highly practical from a rational point of view, are ignored or do not function in practice. Insufficient consideration may be given to the anxiety released when social defenses are

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challenged or dismantled without adequate ways to deal with the situation while the changes are going on. Effective social change generally requires an analysis of the unconscious fantasies that lie behind the collective defensive thought structures or ways of acting.

The most eclectic institution is the social order. Men have always cherished the hope that they can create a society free from tyranny as well as from oppression caused by people's instinctual needs and wishes, and that instead of engaging in conflicts they could devote themselves completely to producing and enjoying wealth. In contrast to this, Freud realized that all civilizations must be enforced: "Every civilization rests on a compulsion to work and a renunciation of instinct and therefore inevitably provokes opposition from those affected by these demands" (Freud 1927, p. 10).

Civilization cannot exist only to create and distribute wealth, since this undertaking is constantly threatened by rebelliousness and destructiveness from its members. Instinctual desires, for example, incestuous wishes, cannibalism, and the wish to murder, are reborn at every child's birth. The development that occurs in our society as well as in every child is that external obligations and limitations are slowly internalized, the superego takeing over their rôle.

We ought, however, to take into consideration the fact that many who have been capable of self-denial, rejecting the wish to murder or commit incest, would not hesitate to injure others by lies and treachery, as long as they can avoid punishment. There are also limitations that apply mainly to certain, dispossessed classes and groups of people, who are prone to turn their envy against those who have obtained and retained privileges. The oppressed are intensely hostile to those who exploit them and it is not to be expected that the conditions in the culture can be fully internalized under such conditions. They cannot fully accept prohibitions and may be prepared to destroy civilization and the whole culture if this means nullifying the axioms on which this culture and civilization are built.

Culture also includes prescriptions for what is most socially desirable. Cultural ideals usually concern what already exists, and generally have a narcissistic character, resting on the pride people feel over achievements gained. In order to make their pride more complete, people also measure their culture against other cultures; the value of what you have accomplished may be felt to be strengthened if you can look down with contempt on others. Thus, cultural ideals, however lofty they may be, can also easily become a source of hostility between different cultures or between subcultures within a society. The gratification of oppressing or despising others derives from imagining that, in spite of everything, *ours* is a more valuable culture than is the other, different one. In addition, what contributes to the fact that so many people allow themselves to be oppressed is that the oppressed frequently look up to their oppressors, seeing them as ideal.

If we ridded ourselves of civilization, we would encounter nature, which demands nothing morally, but which does not make any allowances for us either. Nature can destroy us, icily and cruelly without any kind of reflection or consideration. Man formed groups and created civilization in order to cope with natural perils. In the development of every person and every society, there is a period of animism during which objects in the exterior world are regarded as personified: the world is inhabited by something metaphysical, something supreme, something which may be loving but also unfriendly, hypersensitive and vengeful; before these powers you feel helpless, restricted, a subject or even a victim. According to this magical, supernatural determinism, which is also reflected in Greek mythology, man perceives himself as controlled and without freedom to choose.

Gods have three duties. They shall somehow protect us from the dangers of nature; they shall reconcile us to the cruelty of our fate, especially to death itself; and they shall compensate us for all the hardship and suffering civilization has caused us. The more the gods have retreated from nature, the more morality has become the most important domain of religion. It became "the task of the gods ... to watch over the fulfillments of the precepts of civilization, which men obey so imperfectly" (Freud, 1927, p. 340). This may, however, create an illusion of a right way, if we can only find it and are wise enough to learn the right skills and techniques. If we do not do so, we will surely not survive; we will be cast into outer darkness by powerful forces, in Freud's analysis, ultimately by a demanding father.

The thought that it is our own actions, or lack of action, that will destroy everything is frightening. The anxiety associated with this thought may be more numbing than that concerning authority. The fear of being caught by life, of being drawn into and violated by it in pain and desire, binds many people to repetition of the wishes and fantasies associated with childhood figures. Instead of testing and learning something new, we stage situations, assigning various rôles to each other, which frequently confirm and strengthen earlier, good, bad, satisfactory, or frightening experiences and expectations. How we choose to act today is bound up with how we perceive and understand the past, how we see the connection with

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what exists, which very probably will be repeated in the future.

I don't know of any way out, nor do I wish to point out any right way. As a psychoanalyst, however, I have experience with the implications of being able and willing to own one's own history. This includes recognizing the composite whole of good and evil, of assets and liabilities, of internal and external connections, and having an ability to contain ambiguity and conflicting emotions. We have a chance to live with the anxiety that is left behind when fear of authority has been worked through, and we are confronted with lingering uncertainty about which lines of conduct are the right ones and which consequences they may have for us and our world. Freud expressed his hope that enlightened and civilized people would, after all, strive for peace and strengthen their opposition to war and that they would be able to cooperate to achieve that goal. We know, however, that people all too easily form rabble-rousing mobs to lynch others, that groups can worship fanatic leaders and in this process submerge into orgiastic experiences or into the warm glow of the sense of belonging. It is difficult to form groups that seriously, consistently, and without fanaticism devote themselves to an important task. In our eyes, it is often repugnant to admit a mistake, phase out a losing business, or change a course of action.

We can, however, remind ourselves that we are not the sport of fortune, nor defenseless victims of the whims of the Homeric gods. Both as individuals and leaders we have some degree of freedom to change or refrain from an unproductive policy, assuming that we have the moral courage this requires. We can also support and elect leaders who are clear-headed enough to realize that a fixed policy does more harm than good, and are courageous and wise enough to act accordingly. The noble art of losing face will one day save the human race.

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