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Superman Heroes and The North American Ego Ideal

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We who are children of the twentieth century are certainly used to the phenomena of state and societal propaganda. Witness, for example, Germany's use of such means to turn a whole nation against a segment of its own citizenry. What we sometimes innocently forget, particularly in the United States, is that every society uses self justifying propaganda; and it does so not only consciously but unconsciously as well.

In order to better understand this phenomenon I would like to mention some classically popular mass media examples with the intent of asking: is there a latent message beneath their innocent exterior?

SUPERMAN AND THE LONE RANGER

Is not Superman (Clark Kent) as American as apple pie -- even with his emigration from a foreign land -- and is there not something hauntingly familiar in his innocently righteous and purely defensive use of force to defend "the American way?" And if the State wishes to employ industrial colonializing tactics, serving the profit of large corporations, would not a media tale or myth of innocence, in the use of force, be helpful? Human beings want to feel that they are justified in their behavior, consequently they consciously or unconsciously create and celebrate

myths, or media figures, to achieve this. Who can not recall the voice from yesteryear, for example, with all the passion and nostalgia that the William Tell overture evokes, signaling that the Lone Ranger was among us? What may not have been so obvious in this masked man's adventures, however, was his unspoken and pervasive defense of private ownership, with its values of cleanliness, orderliness and obedience. All these "virtues" exemplified in the ordinary "good" citizen that this famous masked man protected. (Nor should we forget Tanto, his obedient Indian and his dedicated and *cooperating* horse, "Silver.") That a techno-industrial capitalistic society benefits from such obsessive compulsive mechanisms is, of course, a point that is both obvious as well as overlooked. One result of this overlooking, this forgetting as it were, is that such consequences as compliance to (corporate) rules, alienating competitiveness, and paranoid defenses of the *economic status quo* become rampant, as they are in our society.¹ I would mention here that we are not implying a conscious sinister motivation on the part of originators of such media figures as Superman or the Lone Ranger. What can be sinister, however, is the lack of understanding of the use which such figures can have on the populace, i.e., how they confirm an unreflective attitude to the pervasive political/economic values of a given society.

PSYCHOANALYTIC OBSERVATIONS

Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly as practiced in America, has focused almost exclusively on intrapsychic phenomena in its reading of mind. With the growing recognition of the English Object Relations school and the American interpersonal schools, however, we broaden the ego psychological perspective to include some of the socio-economic factors which shape human consciousness more elusively than personal *individual* development. Although Freud (1908,1930) was clearly aware of the price that civilization cost the individual and the arbitrariness of sexual mores, he did not specify this in much detail. By speaking of the individual's task as coming to terms with instinctual demands, while recognizing reality options open to satisfaction, under the surveillance of the superego, Freud effectively located repression and defensive maneuvers *within* the individual. That economic/political structures foster repression and the defense of splitting and that such structures are formative of a society's

¹ For some insightful comments on American capitalism note Dorfman's (1983) where he states: "... democracy as it is practiced in industrial societies, but especially in the United States. .. is, above all, to consume, to be completely economic man. To participate in politics is to be a radio, television, or newspaper spectator; to participate is to deposit a vote every few years, certain that we are also voting when we dig into our pockets and wallets every day." p.153.

perceptions are truisms which many analysts, particularly in America, have not spoken to. Noteworthy, however, were some of the early followers of Freud, namely, Otto Fenichel, E. Jacobson, E. Fromm and W. Reich. Note for example what Fenichel (1945) states *Neuroses are the outcome of unfavorable and socially determined educational measures, corresponding to a given and historically developed social milieu and necessary in this milieu. They cannot be changed without a corresponding change in the milieu.*(pg.586)

This is a statement of enormous import; it would take considerable time to discuss its implications. Consequently I will simply take Fenichel's statement at face value, and in doing so I recognize that there is some danger of begging the question. I am assuming that society has a significant normative role in the formation of defenses of individual consciousness and I am consequently opting for a developmental/environmental/societal paradigm over the individual psyche paradigm. Freud, as we have mentioned, was aware not only of the individual's inbuilt propensity for defensive repression but of society's contributions to this. Thus his early concept of the ego-ideal and subsequent elaboration of that concept into the more comprehensive "superego". Freud, however, consistently returns to the individual in his understanding of neurosis; (thus we might add his need to introduce the concept of the death instinct). In this short communication, I am returning to Freud's early concept(s) in an attempt to highlight the crucial role that political/economic/structures have on the formation and deformation of consciousness via the *ego-ideal*.

In asking how the individual succumbs to social conditioning, in such a way that he or she perpetuates collective economic/political defenses, we are immediately brought to the concept of the ego-ideal. This is that part of our internal forum, so to speak, which mediates to the individual via authority figures, the achievement goals not only of a particular family but of the generic society in which that family lives and makes its economic gain. Consequently how a particular society measures success, what goals and aspirations it sets up for its citizens, how an individual evaluates him/herself are all communicated to and personalized by the individual. (In our North American capitalistic system, for example, approval and social status is accomplished primarily by the acquisition of excess, surplus money.) This goal becomes, consequently, an unconscious prototype for a child setting up within him/herself identifications consonant with other members of that society. Such identifications, particularly if we speak about the acquisition of excess money and products, have to do with the means and distribution of power.

Freud spoke of the use of power internally, that is, the moral and ethical strictures (conscience) operative within the individual which grant or withhold permission for actions. This experience of power, combined with his notion of instinctual needs and dissatisfactions, focused most of his attention on personal struggles and conflicts. That a particular society's economic/political structures have their own goals, separate from the individuals' instinctual vicissitudes, was acknowledged but left undeveloped in subsequent psychoanalytic discussions.

One of the functions, as Freud reminds us, of setting up idealized goals and figures to emulate is to compensate the individual for the lost feelings of narcissistic specialness, i.e., the personal self-centeredness and over-self-valuation of early childhood. This standard psychoanalytic understanding is certainly perceptive; there is, as we have indicated, more to the story. Namely, one way of "distributing" power-promulgating-ideologies is via the emulated goals in a given society. These goals are conveyed to both parent and child effectively through multi-faceted media. One of these media, as mentioned above, is the use of industrialized literature, such as comic books and/or serialized adventures particularly through television, portraying the exploits of heroes. In the sixties and seventies the T.V. show *Bonanza* echoed many of the themes of the previously popular radio show, *The Lone Ranger*. The Lone Ranger won many exploits and in the winning unconsciously perpetuated the values of the existent economic power structure. The unquestioned assumptions that private property is sacred, and/or that the distribution of power has been and always will be fair, e.g., that individuals may be scoundrels but not the system of American justice and economics, are two such values.

That our particular capitalistic economic system fosters and thrives on such anal compulsive mechanisms as discipline, renunciation, punctuality and acquisitiveness is not particularly new, although it is worth remembering. Equally clear is that the ego ideal of many of our middle class patients may be classified as that of the liberal bourgeoisie is obvious, at least upon reflection. What we seem to have forgotten, however, and, as alluded to above, is that individual psychology and social consciousness cannot be separated, except by the institutionalization of private clinical practice with its predominantly intra-psychic presumptions. Freud predicted that psychoanalysis, in America, would become a private business rather than a social/intellectual movement -- how well he read us. The emphasis on private clinical practice

today reflects accurately the present state of psychoanalysis in America today.² A study of psychoanalytic training institutes will, for example, confirm this point. Few of the courses these schools offer attempt a critique of the underlying assumptions operative in our present economic/political system. Most analysts exhibit extreme reluctance, under the rubric of damaging the patient's perceptions of them, (transference) to become involved publicly with social or political causes.

THERAPY AND THE POWER STRUCTURE

Is it possible that clinicians have little choice but to support society's understanding of private ownership, the power use of money, with the need to bow to the god ananke (necessity), i.e., the power structure always perpetuating itself and using force to do so?³ Perhaps. To do otherwise, it could be argued, could turn analysts into political activists; "neutral" therapists into political/philosophical teachers. In recognizing the alienation among individuals and groups caused by the aggravation of "consumer" consciousness, clinicians should, however, recognize the relativity of any given economic/political system and not confuse it, particularly when focusing on

a patient's adaptive functions, with the *reality principle*.

There is, of course, a paradox here, namely, psychoanalysts who are members of a particular power structure are called upon to treat the products (casualties?) of that power structure. Could this be one of the unconscious reasons why analysts have inevitably emphasized the individual and his *private* neurosis? We can balance the possible negative effects of this paradoxical position by recognizing that the auto-plastic goals of strengthening a patient's ego functions can be complemented by the allo-plastic goal of enabling the patient to join instinctual forces to the conscious perception of reality in order to understand and possibly affect the existent power structure. Put another way, we could say that because analysts have cooperated with, and within, the existent power system does not mean that such a system is the norm for health. Social activism need not be oedipally grounded or motivated. (Liberal consciousness, as we know, has its own investment in the status quo. In Marxist theory it is regarded as a defense

² For a comprehensive introduction to the early socialist/Freudian movement, particularly as exemplified by Otto Fenichel I would recommend Jacoby (1986). This text is not only sensibly written it is a good source of information for anyone interested in understanding the early psychoanalytic movement.

³ Cf. Schneider's (1975) for an insightful discussion of these issues.

against revolutionary alloplastic activity necessary for social change.) Focusing analytic attention on such popular and "innocent" media figures as Superman and/or the Lone Ranger can help in understanding the need to carefully examine a patient's ego ideals; ego ideals which are not conscious and which a particular society has an investment in keeping that way. If the ego-ideal is the conduit for the unconscious defenses of a particular economic/political power structure, - - its spokesman in the individual citizen, - - then to analyze the ego-ideal entails questioning the unspoken value-premises hidden beneath the deceptive mantle called (social-economic) reality. It means, in effect, that we unmask the Lone Ranger in an attempt to set Tanto free from the unconscious exploitation that comes from obsessive loyalty to the existent structure.⁴

Is not Tanto, the subsevant companion, a metaphor for the Indians our American system vanquished, the Black man enslaved, the southern European mocked, the Asian isolated, until, that is, it turns them into good American consumers? Alternately is Tanto not, perhaps, in his native persona, a warning call to lessen capitalistic consumerism that makes the depletion of natural resources ever more risky for human beings and for the planet? Human beings, as Erik Fromm reminds us, have greater defenses against the experience of freedom than they do against ideological enslavement. Societies promise, via its ego-ideals, love and approval through accepting their ideological assumptions. As this phenomenon becomes less puzzling to understand, it becomes more necessary to address.

⁴ For a provocative and incisive study of the theme of comic book heroes and economic consciousness I would recommend Dorfman's (1983) . I am greatly indebted to Dorfman for many of the points I have discussed; anyone wishing to study industrialized literature and political propaganda should read this text.

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