



IPA Webinar, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2023

## **Behind the scenes of toxic polarization: consequences of a divided world**

### **Autonomy, mortification and the loss of an anthropological universalism**

*Heribert Blass*

In every group of humans and in each society and country of the world, we are used to the fact that people can have different views and forms of understanding in relation to their ways of living or to personal convictions and beliefs. And due to these differences, conflicts can arise. Nevertheless, a democratic culture is based on a connection between individual freedom and living in a shared community that, despite all differences, is held together by a common ground with other citizens. On a psychic level, especially two aspects seem to me to be very important for the success of a democratic constitution:

First, if there is a sufficiently widespread ability to mentalize, i.e., to be able to read other people's minds and, in the best case, to develop a capacity for empathy – which is not synonymous with agreement.

Secondly, in connection with this, the ability to recognize positions that differ from one's own as legitimate.



And thirdly, to find a balance between the desires of the pleasure-seeking individual and the restrictions imposed by the surrounding culture. As you all know, Freud (1930) dealt with this antagonism in ‘Civilization and its Discontents’.

Another significant psychoanalytical answer to this relationship came from Erich Fromm (1941), who saw the interpersonal relationship of the individual to the world, and not the satisfaction or frustration of individual libidinal desires, as the decisive factor in solving the antinomies of individual freedom in our developed modernity. In my view, the term ‘*freedom in dependency*’, used by two German sociologists (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022), is in line with our psychoanalytical view of a healthy personal and societal development.

The intra-societal and national level must be extended to the international world. Here, too, we can find a remarkable correspondence between psychoanalytical and sociological-philosophical views. As psychoanalysts, we deal with feelings, but it is often claimed that feelings have nothing to do with facts. I think this statement is abbreviated and simplistic. On the contrary, it is very often feelings that create historical political facts, either constructively or destructively (see Frevert 2020). The sociologist Eva Illouz (2023) pointed out that a conception of the state that sees the state as the guarantor of the rights of all and not just individual groups cannot do without the affection of fraternity. And fraternity is also the basis for the possibility of constructive international cooperation. The concept of universalism originating from Kant, with his idea of ‘perpetual peace’ in a republic, includes fraternity, which is defined by Illouz as follows: it is a benevolent emotional orientation towards other people who are not necessarily members of my primary group. The basis is common humanity. Psychoanalytically, H.S. Sullivan (1953, 32) took a similar view when he said: ‘Everyone is much more simply human than otherwise’. It may sound simple, but exactly this attitude enables an *anthropological universalism* that prevents any form of dehumanization, even in the face of differences of all kinds.



My perception of an increasing polarization within our societies and world grew more and more as the Covid19 pandemic started to spread in the year 2020. Not only in the daily life of my country but also amongst my patients, I encountered two antagonistic tendencies – one that followed and respected governmental rules with the aim to reduce the viral danger by means of a solidaric limitation of contact and pleasure. And another one in which personal freedom and autonomy seemed to be defended by means of protest and refusal against any form of personal renunciation. It became a fight between emphasis on solidarity and emphasis on personal autonomy and liberty. The polarization became more and more toxic because a basic understanding of the other position got lost. The return of a widespread fear of death led to a hostile atmosphere and made every other person to a potential enemy. Fraternity was lost, or better, was split into the two opposing groups: one that acknowledged freedom as possible only in shared dependency, and the other in which individuals often aggressively fought for their felt independence from subjectively dictatorial rules of the society. Interestingly, individuals belonging to the latter group very often formed much more militant subgroups in which they pretended to fight for freedom and against an alleged Corona-dictatorship and in which they submitted themselves to the idealization of this collective protest group and some of its leaders – in order to strengthen their ego in a way that Freud (1921) had already described in ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’. They often used – and use – historically significant and emotionally charged slogans, in Germany such as ‘We are the people’ – a slogan that was hugely important when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 in order to collectively celebrate themselves as freedom fighters.

This polarization continued when Russia started the war of aggression against Ukraine and many former corona deniers were now on Russia’s side. Even among my patients, those who vehemently protested the Coronavirus measures showed a strong emotional commitment to Russia. I was particularly struck by their tendency towards denial: everything that did not fit into their one-sided view was supposedly faked. According to them, the danger of the virus was



supposedly invented, the atrocities committed by Russian soldiers were also allegedly invented. And sadly, some of this is now being repeated in the face of Hamas' s terrorist attack on Israel. I have actually heard the conviction that Hamas' s atrocities were invented, or that they were justified by the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. I don' t want to start a political debate, but I find it painful how many people, including many children, in Israel and Palestine have to suffer as victims of violence. And there are much more wars and atrocities in other parts of the world. I cannot name them all here. Rather, I would like to point out the upsetting loss of compassion for the suffering of every victim that can occur in this new polarization.

Coming back to the specific psychodynamic aspects of this polarization, I found in my patients either a traumatic background or a persistent feeling of personal mortification (hurt), often resulting from unfulfilled expectations. For example, one of these patients had an experience of severe emotional neglect in childhood. But especially the latter, the persistent feeling of mortification, is in line with broader research findings (Amlinger and Nachtwey) that late capitalist contemporary society has shifted the balance between the individual and society in favor of optimizing the individual. The focus on optimizing the individual acts as both a promise and a demand. See for instance the meaning of so-called influencers for young people in the West who are aiming at self-optimizing with the explicit or implicit assumption that anything is possible. But the blame for disappointed expectations and illusions is not placed on one' s own self, but on society, 'the state'. At least in Western societies, we find a shift in the balance within the concept or 'freedom in dependency' towards 'I am free without dependence on others', which can, however, be projected onto the regulating democratic institutions in event of subjectively mortifying disappointments. Their democratic legitimacy is denied and they are instead equated with a despotically restrictive power, in the sense 'the state hinders my unfolding'. This is where populist agitators come in, using 'undemocratic emotions' (Il-louz) to make themselves the idealized mouthpiece and leader of the



disillusioned. They are working with *fear, disgust, resentment* and a certain form of *love*. Fear, disgust and resentment exclude others, the enemies, or worse: 'the non-humans', from respect and their right of life. A self-centered 'love' for the own group, the idealized leader of the group, or – in an international context – for the nation are intended to reaffirm one's own self-worth and the legitimacy of one's own actions.

What can we do as psychoanalysts, on an individual and international level? I think we need to start working on the feelings of mortification, because dealing with these feelings can convey a sense of recognition. That doesn't have to mean agreeing – but taking the feeling of mortification seriously and re-establishing an interpersonal relationality. On an international level, the psychoanalytically oriented group 'Partners in Confronting Collective Atrocities' is working similarly. This is the only way we can try to regain the lost anthropological universalism in small steps. In the individual work with my patients, dealing with their feelings of hurt was the decisive factor for transformation.

## References

- Amlinger, C. & Nachtwey, O. (2022). Gekränkte Freiheit. Aspekte des libertären Autoritarismus. Berlin: Suhrkamp
- Freud, S. (1921). Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. S.E. 18:65-144
- Freud, S. (1930). Civilization and its Discontents. S.E. 21:57-146
- Frevert, U. (2020). Mächtige Gefühle. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer
- Fromm, E. (1941). Escape from Freedom.
- Illouz, E. (2023). Undemokratische Emotionen. Berlin: edition suhrkamp
- Sullivan, H.S. (1953). The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry. New York: W W Norton & Co.