Marching “Under the Banner of the Superego”: Notes on “the Mania for Reproaching”

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Note: Paper to be presented as part of “The Political Mind” program of the British Psychoanalytic Society, May 30, 2023. The first phrase in my title is drawn from the work of Eli Sagan. The second is a phrase used by Heinrich Racker. This paper is adapted from my forthcoming book, *Guilt: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge, 2023).

Let the “woke“ who are not authoritarian
call out the “woke“ who are.

Like other animals, human beings have an innate aggressive reaction to pain and frustration. In addition to the secondary or “surplus” frustration arising from environmental failure (trauma, abuse, deprivation, etc.), there is the “primary“ frustration

that is part of what Freud (1930, pp. 135-136)) called our “human malaise” and that is nobody’s fault. Even with the most attuned and optimally responsive caretakers imaginable, infants and children will encounter inevitable frustration—we can’t have our cake and eat it too; a sibling will be produced by the “faithless” mother; no one gets out of here alive.

Much of our frustration, pain and suffering is *existential.* It is not mother’s fault, though she may have made it worse. It is not capitalism’s fault, though capitalism has in some ways made it better and in many ways made it worse. All this frustration, both basic and surplus, generates aggression. Much of this will be turned away from the caretakers and back against the self. This self-directed aggression is the core of the superego and

generates punitive or persecutory guilt. Against all attempts to reduce the superego to socially internalized morality, Freud anchored it firmly in id aggression.

Those of us who reject the idea of a death instinct or an innate aggressive drive see *reactive* aggression as the primary layer of the superego, to which socially internalized norms (folkways, mores and laws) are added as a second layer. Inevitably saddled with a superego loaded to varying degrees with reactive aggression, we inflict persecutory guilt and shame upon ourselves and others. It seems we are so constituted that we cannot hate without hating ourselves for our hatefulness.

Regrettably, Freud and his followers mostly associated the superego with the moral and

immorality with the id, often failing to appreciate the immorality of the superego (its racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc.) and the morality of the prosocial (as distinct from the antisocial) id—our biologically based drive toward attachment and the altruistic tendencies we share with other primates.

In Freud's own work and that of his followers, guilt, the unconscious need for punishment, moral masochism and the harsh critical superego were of central concern. But by some point in the late 1950's and early 1960's a general loss of interest in these issues became evident. Writers such as Sandler (1960) in England and Arlow (1982) in America were noticing a turning away from the dynamics of the superego in our literature and our ways of conceptualizing clinical material. In 1973 Karl Menninger was asking *Whatever Became of*

Sin? Some time in the eighties I submitted a paper entitled “Whatever became of the superego?“ to an analytic journal. Receiving no response for a considerable time, I finally inquired and was told the paper had somehow gotten lost!

In much of the revisionist psychoanalysis that emerged over the past half-century, the evasion of guilt and both the superego and the conscience, the psychic regulators that generate it, is evident. These theoretical developments (in my view regressions) in the microcosm of psychoanalysis are paralleled in the socio-political macrocosm by the unrelenting attack on regulation and regulators that characterizes neoliberalism and market fundamentalism.

As we approached the new millennium, Leon Würmser (1998) was referring to the superego as the "sleeping giant" of contemporary psychoanalysis. While the giant slept, having been anaesthetized in both society at large and the psychoanalytic thinking it encouraged, late capitalism had become increasingly unregulated and the stage was set for the economic crisis of 2007–2008. The flight from self-regulation (superego, guilt and conscience) in psychoanalysis paralleled de-regulation in the economy and society.

It was no accident that the forgetting or evasion of guilt in psychoanalytic thought coincided with the shift from productive industrial to consumer capitalism, the emergence of the "culture of narcissism" and the hegemony of neoliberalism. Ironically, the psychoanalytic preoccupation in the

1970s and 1980s with the states of shame and fragmentation suffered by narcissistic characters incapable of bearing reparative guilt coincided with the flight from guilt in psychoanalysis itself.

Freud and his followers had illuminated the ways in which we are often the unwitting agents of our suffering, unconsciously contriving to refined and perpetuate our childhood pain—clutching defeat from the jaws of victory; fearing success; being wrecked by success; committing crimes in order to be caught and punished (Freud, 1916); finding partners to punish us so we need not do it ourselves; addictions to destructive substances, activities and people; developing painful hysterical and psychosomatic conditions—largely due to our unconscious guilt and the need for punishment for real or imagined sins or crimes.

But by the late 1960s, Herbert Marcuse (1970) claimed the Freudian conception of the structured and conflicted human psyche had become obsolescent in the social reality due to social changes producing the unstructured personality that Christopher Lasch (1979) referred to as “the narcissistic personality of our time.” According to Kohut (1978), “Guilty Man” had been replaced in our culture by”Tragic Man” who suffers not from guilt inflicted by a harsh superego but from shame and the fragmentation and emptiness of the self arising from inadequate provision in infancy and childhood by the early “selfobject” environment.

Over time the classical psychology of conflict and compromise-formation came increasingly to be superseded by a discourse of victimization at the

hands of not-good-enough mothers, absent, authoritarian or abusive fathers, and other varieties of parental and societal failure. There is no denying the reality of trauma, abuse, exploitation and injustice. But trauma induces rage, mostly turned against the self. If we find a crater, we might suspect a bomb. Several classic Westerns open upon a scene of death and devastation: the wagon-train overturned and on fire, one wheel festooned with arrows slowly turning. We see the results of an attack, but not the violence itself.

Rather than emptiness directly reflecting inadequate provision, it is also a result of reactive aggression fuelling what Wilfred Bion (1959, p. 313) called “the ego-destructive superego.” It is for this reason that a simple therapy through provision of what Kohut referred to as “selfobject function” and Bacal (1985)

called “optimal responsiveness” is, although a necessary element of therapeutic technique, ultimately insufficient because it fails to address the key pathogen: the ego-destructive superego that generates the range of persecutory states that characterize the disordered self.

While shame is a manifestation of the self-preoccupation that characterizes the culture of narcissism, depressive or reparative (as distinct from persecutory) guilt is not, for mature guilt involves moving beyond the realm of self-obsession (the paranoid-schizoid position) into the field of recognition and concern for the other (the depressive or reparative position). In several streams of psychoanalytic thought the central role of guilt-evasion in pathological narcissism was obscured—an instance of what Russell Jacoby

(1975) referred to as the “social amnesia” in which “society remembers less and less faster and faster” and in which “the sign of the times is thought that has succumbed to fashion” (p. 1).

But while guilt and the superego are evaded in both the culture of narcissism and the psychoanalysis reflecting it, today we witness both the evasion and the hypertrophy of the superego, both amoral narcissism on one hand, and moral outrage and righteous indignation on the other. Among the many strategies of guilt evasion (including the preference for persecutory guilt and shame as a defence against depressive guilt, concern and reparation) is that in which we inflict guilt upon or induce it in others and manifest what Racker (1957, p. 141) called a “mania for reproaching.” While many evade

the superego in one way or another, some do so by embracing and identifying with it and “marching under the banner of the superego” target the wrongdoers who become their scapegoats.

Ironically, “libertarian“ forces pushing for deregulation on the right have been joined by forces on what I think of as the pseudo-left whose attack on regulation has taken the form not only of demands to “defund the police” but also to “cancel” the careers of suspected wrongdoers, often ignoring due process, and targeting any authority that would presume to defend legally permissible free speech. Just as the unscrupulous narcissist ignores or repudiates limits, so law-enforcement, democratic principles and processes, and even the law itself are flouted on both the (pseudo) left and the right, and even in the highest offices in the land.

A major reason for our moral confusion in both society and psychoanalysis is the failure to recognize the existence of a conscience apart from the moralistic superego (Sagan, 1988; Carveth, 2013). Taught to maintain neutrality and refrain from being judgmental or “superego-ish” with patients, without a concept of a conscience distinct from superego (either a separate mental structure or a prosocial as distinct from the antisocial part of the Id), theory succumbs to the colonization of morality by the superego and clinicians fall victim to moral relativism. Without a conscience separate from the superego we have no judge to judge the judge. If with James Strachey (1934) we feel the patient’s superego ought to be modified, we lack any principled basis for determining in what directions.

Without the distinction between the superego and conscience, authoritative demands or mandates (such as for vaccination against Covid-19) may become unconscionably authoritarian. “Woke” liberals rightly deploring racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., may not only themselves succumb to authoritarianism in their opposition to these social evils, but find themselves paralyzed in the face of less subtle authoritarians who, while marching under the same banner, attack free speech, due process, or the law itself. Liberal authorities frequently become impotent in this situation, not only because of their own disowned authoritarianism, but because they know no higher moral principle (conscience) from which to call out the extremists. It is well to recall in this connection that memorable moment when Joe McCarthy’s superegoic attacks on the left were denounced as

unconscionable by Joseph Welch: "Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency?" (U.S. Senate Archive , June 9, 1954).

Although Erich Fromm (1950), Carl Jung (1958) and Neville Symington (1998) all tended to differentiate conscience from the superego, mainstream psychoanalysis continues to conflate them. Freud himself did not differentiate persecutory guilt and shame inflicted by the superego from the reparative guilt or concern mediated by conscience. These were subsequently sorted out by Melanie Klein (1948), Leon Grinberg (1960) and Donald Winnicott (1963). In deploring the build-up of guilt in civilization, Freud 1930) had only punitive guilt in mind, failing to recognize that while in civilization we need less persecutory (paranoid-schizoid) guilt, we

need much more reparative (depressive position) guilt and concern.

Beyond this confusion as to the nature of guilt, in psychoanalysis, social science, and society in general, there is widespread confusion regarding the nature of evil. Freud himself mistakenly blamed it on the "beast" in man, when human destructiveness clearly derives not primarily from our animal inheritance but from our uniquely human symbolic functioning: the superego ideologies that motivate and the ego functions that implement mass destruction.

Except for the seriously psychopathic, in order to act most people have to convince themselves that what they are about to do is, for the most part, good or at least harmless. In order to feel guilt evil-doers

first have to change their minds about what they have done, seeing it not as good but as wrong, bad, or evil. Without such a revised definition of the situation people are unable to feel guilt, remorse, regret or contrition and, hence, unable to repent, seek to make reparation and mourn their destructiveness.

In seeking to understand evil Kennedy (2023) emphasizes the role of an “evil moral climate,” or an “evil imagination.” He points out that “people in early modern England sincerely believed that the civilizing mission was a moral obligation, and that it was good to bring people from a state of barbarism to a civilized way of life” (ch. 5). In his study of “The Nazi Doctors” Robert Lifton (1986) found that they were, for the most part, not psychopaths but dedicated physicians working hard to root out the

cancer that, in their racist ideology, they associated with the Jews.

Because in psychoanalysis we have associated the antisocial with the id and the prosocial with the superego it has been difficult for us to see evil as superego-driven, or goodness as arising from the id. The point I want to emphasize is that the greater part of human evil is done by “do-gooders.” Those who planned and carried out the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not psychopaths but people who believed in the righteousness of their cause—as were those who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center. Most evil-doers have good intentions. While the superego sometimes defends against barbarism, as Freud (1930) thought (at least in his sociological as distinct from his clinical

writings), it frequently encourages and gives barbarism its blessing.

But not all of the guilt from which we suffer is our own. Some is, in Freud's (1923, p. 50n.) misleading term, "borrowed" from others who, as Fernando (2000) explains, induce in others the guilt they themselves find unbearable. But in this connection we have failed to notice the obvious: the child did not ask to "borrow" the guilt that was induced, nor does the parent want it back! The induction of guilt and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority through projectivevidentification is at the core of the master/ slave dialectic. It needs to be remembered that it works both ways: former victims may enjoy revenge by inducing guilt in those they identify with their former exploiters.

In addition to the patterns of self-damage that Freud called “moral masochism” that entail the deployment of reactive rage against the self, there is the “immoral sadism” in which such rage is discharged against others who are substituted for the self as the target of the sadistic superego. in order to escape its attacks, some “identify with the aggressor” (Anna Freud,1936) and inflict punishment as a way of avoiding it—like those death-camp prisoners, the “Kapos,” who became the assistants of the guards, or like hostages who identify with and join their captors as in so-called “Stockholm syndrome.”

In these ways a critical superego is embraced and self-persecution escaped by targeting others. If one marches “under the banner of the superego,” focusing attention on the abusers and identifying

with victims, one's righteousness may for a time be enhanced and one's moral defects obscured—until, that is, someone finds the courage to accuse the accusers.

In *Man Against Himself,* Karl Menninger (1938) documented the range of "guilt-substitutes" and "suicide-equivalents" through which we unconsciously torture ourselves and unknowingly practice what I view as a type of archaic sacrificial religion. Just as an animal caught in a trap may chew off its leg to survive, so we placate the savage god Freud and his followers called the superego, seeking to escape with our lives by sacrificing our careers, our marriages, our health. In my view, unconscious guilt and the unconscious need for punishment motivate myriad forms of self-sabotage

and self-destructiveness in people whose chosen guilt-substitutes allow them to have no clue that they suffer from guilt. As Freud (1923) put it: “In the end we come to see that we are dealing with what may be called a 'moral' factor ... which is finding its satisfaction in the illness and refuses to give up the punishment of suffering. ... But as far as the patient is concerned this sense of guilt is dumb; it does not tell him he is guilty; he does not feel guilty, he feels ill” (pp. 49-50).

As early as 1950 Erik Erickson (1950, p. 279) wrote that whereas in the past patients thought they knew who they were and who they ought to be, but came to therapy because they were having trouble being it, the modern patient doesn’t know who he is or who he ought to be. Many of our patients come feeling ill or empty, not guilty. But for the

psychoanalyst, as for the courtroom judge, a person's claim that he is not guilty is the beginning, not the end of an inquiry. Evidence must be marshalled and critically reviewed. In fact, it is my thesis that "Tragic Man" and "Guilty Man" are not fundamentally different disorders at all, for progress in therapy generally reveals that underneath the manifest emptiness of the former lies the self-directed aggression of the latter.

Erikson's modern patient who doesn't know who he is or ought to be, Kohut's "Tragic Man" and Marcuse's "unstructured personality" had been prefigured decades earlier in the literature of existentialism, perhaps most clearly in Albert Camus' (1942) novel *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*). When his mother dies; or he is having sex with a woman who wants him to say he loves her; or he

shoots a stranger on the beach; or prior to his execution a priest offers to hear his confession—*Meursault* feels nothing and remains indifferent. Many contemporary psychoanalysts seem no longer able to see, or hear, let alone speak to the unconscious guilt lurking behind and driving this behaviour. However empty, bored and indifferent he is, *Meursault* manages both to kill and get himself killed. I can well imagine having *Merseault* on my analytic couch and witnessing the gradual emergence of the rage, and then the shame, and then the guilt, and then the tears underlying his manifest indifference. *Merseault* is a frozen man in need of therapeutic thawing.

The emptiness and fragmentation of the self are brought about precisely by the persecutory and annihilating superego. Of course, this is not merely

the Freudian superego formed at the end of the Oedipal phase at five or six years of age, but the pregenital superego formed in the first year of life as an internalization of and identification with the bad, persecutory breast, as Melanie Klein (1946) taught us—an annihilating part-object that lies beneath and at the core of the later Oedipal development.

Over the last decade or so in psychoanalysis issues concerning the superego, guilt and conscience have to some extent at least returned from repression. Around the time of the Occupy movement and the emergence of whistle-blowers such as Assange, Manning and Snowdon, psychoanalytic books and articles began to appear with titles such as *You Ought To! A Psychoanalytic Study of the Superego and Conscience* (Barnett, 2007); *Guilt and Its Vicissitudes: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Morality*

(Hughes, 2008) ; *The Quest for Conscience and the Birth of the Mind* (Reiner, 2009); *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience* (Carveth, 2013); “Reflections on the Absence of Morality in Psychoanalytic Theory” (Frattaroli, 2013); and *Guilt: Origins, Manifestations, and Management* (Akhtar, Ed., 2013).

No doubt this partial “comeback” was a reflection in psychoanalysis of a dawning recognition that the culture of narcissism had gotten us into hot water. What Rangell (1980) had described in *The Mind of Watergate* as the “syndrome of the compromise of integrity” led eventually to the 2008 crisis of “casino capitalism.” In mental conflict defences may be directed against the id, as in neurosis, but also against the ego, the superego and the conscience —that is, against the regulatory functions of the

mind—leading to those forms of psychic de-regulation we call narcissistic and, in extreme, psychopathic.

One of the most effective defences against the guilt-generating superego involves embracing and unleashing it, sometimes violently, against targeted others. The “normopathic” (McDougall, 1993; Bollas, 2017), often make do with quieter forms of disdain and disapproval. And there are righteous conservatives who seem to take for granted their divine right to rule. They often manage to induce in any opponents the feeling that they are being naughty children. Those identified with authority often succeed in crippling any opposition by evoking in opponents, through projective identification, the archaic, inhibiting superego.

Psychoanalysis originally opposed repression and censorship. It sought to make the unconscious conscious and to emancipate people, through “free speech,” “free association,” from inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety, putting everything into words. It suspended moral judgement in order to bring socially unacceptable elements of the soul, infantile and polymorphous perverse sexuality and aggression, into the light. While we have rightfully sought to overcome our racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism and other socially structured patterns of injustice, today, in the face of a new puritanism, it might well be difficult, even impossible in some psychoanalytic circles to teach Freud on sexuality, let alone Robert Stoller (1975, 1979, 1985) and Otto Kernberg (1991, 1993) who argue sexuality has to be, to a degree, transgressive (i.e., naughty) in order to be worth having. Such puritanism, this

“mania for reproaching” and its related authoritarianism, constitute an increasingly widespread social pathology that is spreading like a virus, especially in the humanities and social science faculties of universities, with the contagion spreading even into psychoanalytic societies.

Unfortunately, Freud’s blurring of the distinction between superego and conscience has impaired psychoanalysts’ capacity to recognize and avoid infection. In this area psychoanalysis is as vulnerable as the general public to abusive behaviour enacted “under the banner of the superego.” Psychoanalysts should, of all people, remember that “you can’t tell a book by its cover.” Beneath what appears to be an admirable concern for justice may lie, as Nietzsche (1887) among others taught us, a destructive will to power and

revenge driven by envy, resentment and other forms of malice that need to be called out and opposed by people of conscience.

Both “Tragic Man” and the new authoritarians are unaware of their guilt, in the one case through its repression, in the other through its projection. There are many ways to define the goal of clinical psychoanalysis, but developing a conscience capable of both bearing mature guilt and standing up to the sadistic superego, neither embracing nor capitulating to it, should be added to our list.

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