MY FATHER'S FLAGS: PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES ON BEING AN AMERICAN FROM THE STREETS AND THE CONSULTING ROOM

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ABSTRACT *In this paper the author explores the generational object of the American flag in three periods of American history: the post World War Two era, the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the period immediately following 9/11. In each of these periods the flag holds a difference resonance. In the first it symbolized the assurance of a measure of freedom and social security; in the second it represented the imposition of American dominance abroad; and in the third the flag was used to justify a new and unnecessary war. The author argues that a new flag is needed, one that signifies a revitalized 'progressive patriotism' dedicated to reclaiming and rebuilding the institutions that have been eroded in this period of American history. The paper then shifts from the symbol of the flag to the psychoanalytic consulting room. The author maintains that psychoanalytic development and clinical theories now stop short of the examining the psychic relationship to the social world outside of the family and that in order to truly help people live fully in the 'place that they live', psychoanalysis must extend its theories and clinical interventions beyond the Oedipal triad to communal groupings the larger society.*

Key words: generational object, progressive patriotism, superpower syndrome, un-linking, effective social action, post-depressive position

FROM THE STREETS

My father's flag

My father had a collection of American flags. Most of them were small flags attached to short wooden sticks. He also had one large flag on a long metal pole. Every year on 4 July my father lined the sidewalk leading to our house in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with the short flags. Starting with the three steps at the

base of the sidewalk, he interspersed the flags on both sides of the walkway all the way to the front porch, where he hung the large flag from a pole attached to the awning.

As a young girl I helped my father set out the flags. It never occurred to me to be embarrassed by his arcade. He felt proud to live in this county. He also felt especially patriotic on Independence Day because becoming an American citizen granted him the freedom he lost as a Jew hiding in Poland. My parents arrived here in March of 1949 after a period of postwar convalescence. They were among the fortunate beneficiaries of that period of American history when, as Paul Krugman (2004) notes, we were a relatively middle-class nation. It was the period historians refer to as the 'Great Compression', when income gaps narrowed, probably as a result of New Deal policies; unions thrived, and corporate profits were taxed as were people who inherited wealth.

During the first 30 years or more after World War Two, the American dream of upward mobility was a real experience for many people. My parents were among those people. Their drive to create a new life coupled with their entrepreneurial skills and a conducive environment were all they needed. They never stopped being grateful. Incongruities aside, that dream stood for a set of societal ideals beyond economic opportunity – ideals such as social equality, freedom, and, in the words of the progressive historian, Michael Kazin (2002), 'a populist democracy'. The flag was a symbol of those ideals for my father, who also happened to believe that all things *public* – the trains, the planes, the buses, the schools, the hospitals – ought to be *publicly* owned and regulated.

I don't mean to idealize the period of American history I just described. Certainly contradictory forces existed other than the ones I presented. Take, for instance, the fact that had my parents been on one of the ships that arrived on American shores from Poland in 1938, they would have been returned to Poland and probably would have been exterminated by the Nazis. For a combination of political, ideological and economic reasons, the United States established quotas on Asian and Eastern European immigration in the form of the National Origins Act of 1924, which remained operational until the 1960s. Promoted by groups such as the America First movement, a coalition of groups against US entry into World War Two, that policy meant that immigrants fleeing from Nazi persecution weren't always welcome here. (Ironically, these quotas didn't apply to German immigrants.) But, you can safely say that in that 30-year period, Cold War mentality notwithstanding, as well as our longstanding policies of racial injustice, being a white American meant that one was assured of some degree of freedom and social security.

Generational objects

'We are called into history by the inevitable thoughtless solicitations of events and processes that force us to ponder our possible fates,' writes Christopher Bollas (1992, 267) in his affecting essay on generational consciousness. He believes that these historical events and processes 'sponsor generational work', as each generation 'weaves a conscious generational object into being out of unconscious interpretations of events that arise' (Bollas, 1992, 267). If we were to break this down further using some of Bion's conceptions about how the mind

works, historical events are embedded in a complex web of 'waking dream thoughts.' (Bion, 1962; Ferro, 2002a; Ogden, 2003). Though the events may be the same for everyone, each person construes them in highly personal ways, with uniquely experienced unconscious registers (alpha and beta elements) composed of images, sounds and sensations that surround these events. Sometimes a single 'object', like a flag, or a song, or a film – the list is infinite – can become a mental register of a significant historical period or event for an entire generation. Or what one generation emotionally and mnemonically associates with one object can be radically different from that of another generation. In this sense, generationally speaking, my father's flag is very different from my flag, which is itself vastly different from the flags that crowded our landscape in the aftermath of 9/11.

My flag

For me, the American flag held a very different resonance. I came of age when flags were being burned and American nationalism was scorned as a consequence of our history of racial exclusion and entry into the Vietnam War. While a child of a solidly middle-class family (enjoying some privilege and an absence of economic hardship), the flag stood for the imposition of American dominance abroad, altering vast cultural, economic and political domains for the sake of American expansion. For us, Simon and Garfunkel's 'We've all gone to look for America' echoed a critical chorus about the disquieting hollowness that was born out of the pursuit of plenty for plenty's sake. The flag felt like the property of wealthy, white, anti-Communists whose objectives included American expansion and global dominance, regardless of the cost to human life and environmental resources. Pursuing these objectives in the name of American ideological principles such as freedom, justice, and democracy, meant that my generation of anti-war activists necessarily opposed the flag and patriotism as they were being defined.

The flags of 9/11

Thirty-two years after my high school graduation, America rallied around the American flag in the aftermath of 9/11. Even in Berkeley, California, where I live, the number of cars, trucks, and restaurant and shop windows displaying flags was astounding. Along with many of my friends, I found this initially troublesome and uncomfortable, never having shifted in our generational responses to the American flag. For us it remained the patriotic symbol employed to manipulate everyday working people in the interests of a wealthy, powerful elite in this country. Furthermore, the symbol of the flag was being used to herald a new war under outrageously false pretences. Robert Jay Lifton coined the term 'superpower syndrome' to describe the 'national mindset – put forth by a tight-knit leadership group – that takes on a sense of omnipotence, of unique standing in the world that grants it the right to hold sway over all other nations' (Lifton, 2003, 11). It seemed difficult to extricate the symbol of the American flag from the 'superpower syndrome' it signified.

I'd like to shift momentarily to another generational icon, Bruce Springsteen, who unlike many others, spans across several generations at once in his appeal. Springsteen, in the tradition of Woody Guthrie, Phil Ochs, and Bob Dylan, sings to Americans about America, most notably, about the working people America seems

to have left behind. You may recall how on the heels of the release of *Born in the USA,* Ronald Reagan, recognizing Springsteen's appeal, tried to align himself with what Reagan thought to be a patriotism like his own, only to be spurned by Springsteen himself. Springsteen sings about a different kind of patriotism, one in which the pride of 'My Hometown' carries with it the recognition and sadness about everything lost – the loss of the 'textile mill across the railroad tracks – foreman says these jobs are going boys and they ain't coming back . . .' Being 'Born in the USA' might mean you 'end up like a dog that's been beat too much till you spend half your life just covering up.' I have accumulated quite a collection of newspaper clippings over these past 3 years in my attempt to remain conscious of the losses to American public and private life. I will mention just a few. Most recently, the San Francisco Chronicle (March 11 2004) ran the following headline as front-page news: 'West Contra Costa students face a future with no school libraries, no counsellors and no sports.' Another headline appeared earlier in the year: '100,000 poor families could lose rent help: Bill effectively cuts housing subsidies . . .' And some good news: 'New rules for overtime hit a snag – White House proposal [to strip as many as 8 million workers of their right to overtime] rejected by Senate.' And lastly: 'US poverty rate rises for second year in a row: more nonwhites, Midwesterners fall behind as median incomes decline.'

These headlines offer a smattering of the systematic dismantling of the American social contract that led Krugman (2004) to write an essay in the Nation entitled 'Our political leaders are doing everything they can to fortify class inequality: the death of Horatio Alger.' This article ends with 'goodbye Horatio Alger. And goodbye American dream.' 'Goodbye to my father's flag.'

I hear the chronicling of these losses in Springsteen's songs. However, what he understood that my generation of progressives missed is that you've got to love what you struggle to change. Michael Kazin (2002, 41) makes this point in his essay on 'The Patriotic Left'. He suggests that rather than 'curse as "jingoistic" all "united we stand" and "God Bless America" signs and hope to somehow transcend patriotism in the name of global harmony, we could empathize with the communal spirit that animates them, embracing the ideals of a nation and learning from past efforts to put them into practice in the service of far-reaching reform.' That may seem like a stretch to some; however, unless we make some claims on our national ideals in a language that makes sense to people, we will remain unintelligible to our fellow citizens, leaving the establishment of a 'national narrative' to the conservative right – which has, indeed, been the case for quite a while.

My flag again

This is all to say that my flag is beginning to change. I can't say that it is the same as my father's flag or the flag of 9/11. I can say that I want to claim it, along with what it should stand for rather than repudiating it and in so doing handing it over to the Right for its own uses. It was a great relief, while roaming in a local bookstore in Iowa, to spot a book entitled, *MoveOn's 50 Ways to Love Your Country: How to Find Your Political Voice and Become a Catalyst for Change* (2004).

With that flag in mind I think connections need to be made between the dramatic assault against our country on 9/11 by

Islamic fundamentalists, and the ongoing assaults on daily life affecting every aspect of the social contract we associate with democracy. That includes heath care, education, civil liberties, fair trade, fair elections, energy, environment, workers' rights, and foreign relations.

Thus far I have spoken from the streets as one American, through several decades in which the generational object of the American flag shifted in its significance and meaning. I will move now to the psychoanalytic consulting room.

FROM THE CONSULTING ROOM

The place where we live

What is the connection between the flag and the consulting room? The answer is both obvious and obscure. The flag represents the place where we live at its best and worst. Being capable of fully living in what Winnicott (1971) designated as 'the place where we live', is what we hope will come of a successful analysis. An image of walking to one's analysis or psychotherapy in any large metropolitan area comes to mind. Picture yourself walking down the streets and being stopped by one after another homeless man and woman asking for 'spare change', or as one elderly African American man persists, 'after you take care of your business, whatever you can give without hurting yourself.' By the time you arrive in the waiting room of your analyst's office, after perhaps having offered away bits of change, a couple of dollars, or maybe nothing that day, you're wanting desperately to be left alone, to be free of the burden and feelings of helplessness that have accumulated in the process of simply trying to get from one place to another. Your analysis provides you with a remarkable haven away from the streets outside. You feel relieved. At the same time you know this *is* the place where you live. You know that the number of homeless, jobless people without healthcare or any safety net at all is growing. You don't want to imagine being one of them. It is very unlikely that you will become one of them. Yet the strain of the reality that this is a place that allows people to go hungry, homeless, sick and unattended, leaves you anxious and confused. Then you begin your analytic hour. Does your analysis help you cope with the realities of the place where you live? Or has your analysis become a place so separated from the streets and social life that you wouldn't even consider talking about all of the thoughts and feelings you just had on your way over?

Psychoanalysis un-linked

In a recent American Psychological Association, Division 39 (Psychoanalytic) Section 9-sponsored (Social Responsibility) panel in Miami (2004), two papers were presented. One paper, by Lynn Layton and Gary Walls, developed the idea that our society promotes a mechanism of 'un-linking' between individual/psychic and socio-political life. The presenters noted how this schism was present repeatedly in the consulting room to the extent that people often apologized to their therapists when they referred to social issues and events, as if to feel they were falling down on the job of therapy at these junctures. I have certainly had that 'why am I talking about that here?' reaction from patients, implying that election results, or news reportage is somehow less personal or 'deep' a subject than a dream about me, which rates much higher

in the hierarchy of suitable topics for therapy. The other paper presented by Nancy Hollander and Susan Gutwill, similarly forged the much needed discussion of the role of interpretation of social realities in the therapeutic relationship.

I would like to further these discussions by proposing that what can be known in the context of the analytic relationship and what indeed is known in an analysis, are highly dependent on what the analyst privileges as valuable knowledge. Additionally, I would say that the schism Layton and Walls described is operative within the culture of psychoanalysis. Not only do our developmental theories stop short of the relationship to the social world outside of the family, but socially minded therapists suffer the same insecurities about the legitimacy of their work as do patients when their 'passions' about social life emerge. Countertransference anxieties about enactment, collusion or shallowness are likely to accompany those moments in a treatment.

At its best psychoanalysis offers a relationship through which to experience a shared reality – one that is generated by both participants – with a heavy emphasis on the analyst's increased capacity to process that reality – to convert the raw undigested experiences of the patient, analyst and the analytic couple into useable, emotional experience from which to learn.

Imagine then that in our training as analysts some aspects of psychic reality are privileged over others. Suddenly what can be known and tolerated is diminished. The combination of these factors – the undervalued social vertex (a term Bion, 1992, used for the infinite number of angles from which to listen) and the splitting-off of the social in its own right perpetuate the unlinking norm Layton and Walls describe.

What are we willing to look at when we ask the question what is going on in an analysis? How wide is our lens? What are we obliged to consider when we see the same picture appearing in our consulting rooms over and over? Has the social aspect of reality been relegated as indigestible – too raw to make sense of and therefore necessarily split-off or evacuated? Has this vertex become what some analytic theorists posit as a 'blind area' (Ferro, 2002b) within the analytic relationship, which protects the couple from confronting 'overviolent' emotions? If so, this blindness takes the form of avoiding the social reality of the analytic couple's shared experience in which anxieties are split-off, and necessarily forced to live 'outside' the field of the couple.

Psychoanalysis linked

John Berger (2001, 58) writes:

> The future has been, for the moment downsized, and the past is being made redundant. Meanwhile the media surrounds people with an unprecedented number of images, many of which are faces. The faces harangue ceaselessly by provoking envy, new appetites, ambition, or occasionally, pity combined with a sense of impotence. Further the image of all these faces are processed and selected in order to harangue as noisily as possible, so that the appeal out-pleads and eliminates the next appeal. And people come to depend upon this impersonal noise as a proof of being alive.
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> Imagine then what happens when somebody comes upon the silence of the Fayum faces [the earliest group of painted portraits] and stops short. Images of men and women making no appeal whatsoever, asking for nothing, yet declaring themselves, and anybody who is looking at them, alive! They incarnate, frail as they are, a forgotten self-respect. They confirm,

> despite everything that life was and is a gift. There is a second reason why the Fayum portraits speak today. This century, as has been pointed out many times, is the century of immigration, enforced and voluntary. That is to say a century of partings without end, and a century haunted by the memories of those partings.
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> And so they gaze upon us, the Fayum portraits, like the missing of our own century.

We have momentarily moved from flags to faces. Is it possible to consider the shifting expression on a human face a generational object? I think so. For instance, the shifting expressions of the model in paintings over time – from looking off in the distance, to looking directly at the viewer – has been examined in relation to shifting social realities (Wolff Bernstein, 1996). Or, in another essay of Berger's (2001, 428), he notices the ever-present sadness in Monet's eyes in photographs of Monet. This sadness, Berger believed, was the unwitting outcome on Monet's face of an experience of aloneness that came with the movement into Impressionism. Berger (2001, 428) described how previously the viewer 'entered into a painting' in which its permanence (time and place) was established, in contrast to the unusual combination of both 'precision and vagueness' present in later Impressionist paintings. For both painter and viewer this combination marked the entry into an anguished and lonely 'extraction of memory', even if those memories were pleasurable. This experience of aloneness mimicked other developments in late nineteenth-century society, 'in which both painter and viewed found themselves more alone than ever before, more ridden by the anxiety that their own experience was ephemeral and meaningless' (Berger 2001, 429).

The birth of psychoanalysis accompanied the period in which Monet painted. However, more than 100 years later, we moved from the visible yet unacknowledged expression of sadness on the face of a painter to what Berger later describes as faces that 'harangue ceaselessly by provoking envy, new appetites, ambition and occasionally pity.' These are the faces that work their way into the interior domains of twenty-first century psychic life creating a different kind of anguish and aloneness – less to do with meaninglessness than the fear of failing to become visible and thereby becoming forgotten. Berger (2001, 385) writes:

> Solitude is confused with the triumph of indifference and made entirely negative . . . Only one thing can defeat indifference: a star performance. The star is the only form of idol in the modern city. He fills the theatre. He promises that no indifference is final... The historical precondition for the theatre of indifference is that everyone is consciously and helplessly dependent in most areas of their life on the opinions and decisions of others. To put it symbolically: the theatre is built on the ruins of the forum. Its precondition is the failure of democracy. The indifference is the result of the inevitable divergence of personal fantasies when isolated from any effective social action.

Here Berger offers a powerful and incisive critique of contemporary life. Implicit is the idea that personal life is critically related to social and communal action. The future becomes downsized when the link between effective social action and personal life is broken. For us the logic of the market is substituted for effective social action. Images of success that stimulate need and consumption replace real connections to social and political life and institutions. Suffice it to say, I could spend the rest of this essay thinking about the implications of this far-reaching critique. However, these

quotes are meant to situate our work as psychoanalysts and therapists. You might wonder how, or why.

The notion that personal fantasies are inextricably linked to effective social action is a radical statement that I'm not sure many psychoanalysts would agree with. I think if one were to develop that notion further in psychoanalytic, developmental terms, it could lead to the positing of a 'post-depressive position' (Poggi, personal communication, 2004), in which we could put forth a form of relating that extends beyond the triad of the Oedipal (whole objects) to communal groupings and society at large. The capacity of effectively locating oneself in relation to a social grouping could be considered a developmental achievement along with its concomitant attainments and respective regressive anxieties – for example respecting difference, maintaining separateness, assuming responsibility for group members – as well as fear of disappearing, competitive anxieties and so on. Bion (1961) described the various dynamics possible within group life. Gerard Mendel (1969) applied some of Bion's ideas to institutional group life but, apart from some of Erikson's writings, I don't believe psychoanalysis has sufficiently recognized the need for effective social/political life within the context of the developmental continuum.

We are equally lacking any clinical literature on the relationship between what we can know about our culture and society and what happens inside of the psychoanalytic relationship.

Clinical example

A woman in her forties begins her session describing her anxieties about her eight-year-old year old son. She worries he doesn't fit in. He prefers adults to children. He enjoys his solitary play over more interactive, social play. To her mind he is uncooperative, odd, demanding and at his worst, defective. She is prone to think similarly about herself, as always on the verge of failing. Then she tells me of a recent encounter with her son when, after school, the day he has 'special time' alone with her, she suggested they stop for hot chocolate, but only on the condition that they first go to the library. Her son protested, saying he didn't want to go to the library since he had just ended his school day and that he either wanted the hot chocolate or he wanted to go home and play. She felt angry that he didn't want to go to the library, which signalled that she was failing as a mother and that he would fail later on in his life. At that point in the story I asked her if she really wanted to go to the library. She replied, 'I don't know.' Then I asked what she made of feeling so driven to take him there, especially after a full day of school. She paused and again replied, 'Actually, I don't know.'

Feeling compassion for her, I said: 'It doesn't make sense, does it?' Then I remembered the article I read the day before in the NYT about anxious parents sending their high school children to 'getting into college' summer camps in which they spend their entire camp time preparing for college applications, interviews, and admissions tests. I also remembered the pamphlet that my own 11-year-old daughter brought home from school entitled 'Understanding your child: a guide for anxious parents'. The opening paragraph began with the following question: 'Are you just imagining it, or is there an epidemic of parental anxiety?'

Then I thought about what my patient's expressed anxiety might be telling me

about our relationship and what I could tolerate of her wishes. Listening with an ear toward our relationship I wondered what she felt I required of her to get fed. I also know that her father was an intensely critical and controlling man, with little tolerance for her expressions of any feeling, much less dissatisfaction. But what I said was that I thought she lost trust in herself and her son because she is so fearful that unless they fit in, in ways that don't make sense to either of them, they stand to fail. So she feels under constant pressure, and there is evidence of that pressure all around her, to make things happen that are supposed to be good but aren't.

What kind of interpretation was this? The social vertex seemed the most real to me in comparison to either the transferential or genetic alternatives. Did the patient confirm my choice in her response? I recall that she felt badly that she needed my help to sort out how best to help her child, which to me suggested another social reality regarding the disdain for dependency in this society. I wondered if she imagined that I was above needing the same kind of help sorting out these same questions. She fell silent at that point, but her self-criticism stopped.

In another exchange she told me she felt like she either rushed around or felt bad (like a failure) about what she wasn't doing if she encountered a moment of unstructured time. I spontaneously responded, 'you're not alone on that one. I think many people struggle with the same experience.' She responded, 'So I should just get over it.' I was surprised at her response and told her that it sounded as if what I said rendered her anonymous in my mind, as if she had no sense of specialness or distinction. She responded, 'I thought you were saying get over it.' I then said that reminding her that she is a member of a group and that the things she struggles with may be related to larger struggles could offer her a different way of thinking about what she feels. This thought holds the hope of feeling less isolated. But, it also means that she is less self-sufficient than she would prefer to think, and that our relationship has limits to what can change as a consequence of it, the therapy, alone. My point in sharing this exchange is that patients present with defences against anxieties associated with locating their membership in a social grouping and society. These anxieties and defences are just as important to understand as anxieties about intimacy in relation to a dyad. As analysts we lack any body of clinical writing to help us consider both the nature of these specific anxieties and how to interpret them. I am hoping that we can forge that unexplored territory.

I am not suggesting that we change much about how we do psychoanalysis or therapy. I do however believe that we are not helping ourselves or our patients cope with a reality that we won't see. If there was ever a time to consider the personal political, the time is now.

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