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Purposes Outside Ourselves

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ABSTRACT *This article is derived from a talk given before the Psychotherapy and Liberation, May '68 Anniversary Conference held at the IGA, 2–4 May 2008. It examines the potential for realizing two aspects of liberation: individual and social. The article suggests that individualism emerged as the dominant strand and has been made use of by capitalism to deepen our subjection. The article offers an explanation of our compliance with this exploitative economic system, drawing on the psychoanalytic concepts of projection, projective identification, oedipal conflict, narcissism, paranoid-schizoid functioning and the group matrix. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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The idea of ‘liberation’ embraces both social and individual emancipation, which are not necessarily divergent, but pulled in different directions in the aftermath of the May '68 movement.

Social freedom implies the possibility of supplanting the capitalist system of using and being used, and reaching towards genuine democracy (Widlund, 2008). In the sociology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this implied an equal and peaceful society, or socialism, as it was then understood (Morris, 1995; Wilde, 2001). Crucially, socialism is a *moneyless* economy with production for use not exchange. Orwell (1989) has Old Major declaring: ‘No animal must ever . . . touch money, or engage in trade.’ Indeed, this organized body of thought about money and exchange predates socialism (Winstanley, 1973).

Orwell's character was putting forward the idea to show how it has become hopelessly tarnished by the emergence of brutal state capitalist spoilers in the form of the Union of Soviet ‘Socialist’ Republics and National ‘Socialist’ Germany. Nevertheless, despite these genocidal parodies of socialism, the idea remains the bedrock of the hope of social freedom. (In the same way, the Roman Empire, which surpassed even the Nazis in sadistic cruelty,

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put itself forward as a spoiler of emancipatory Christianity.) Socialist emancipation is a matter of equality, of making decisions between ourselves, of giving what we can and taking what we need, and of trust supplanting dealing as the basis of social interaction. This aspect of liberation re-emerged hesitantly and incoherently in the May '68 period.

Capitalism, the wages and money system, makes use of us; the very word to 'employ' means to 'use'. We seek to be used, celebrating the growth of opportunities for capitalists to use us; as well we might because we depend on being used to survive. Our hope in socialism has faded, replaced by the 'aspiration' to make the best deal we can.

Why have we given up on the idea that we can do better than continue with an avowedly exploitative economic arrangement?

There are political reasons. As mentioned above, we accept Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot as 'socialist' on their own merits; this has poisoned our understanding of the idea.

In addition to this, labour movements have been disabled by the capitalists' increased ability to move capital and workers round the world and reforming parties have so completely surrendered to the needs of capital that there is no longer any meaningful debate about how society can be organized.

This leads us to an economic reason, which is that the users' profitability (arising from the social defeat of the employed class) allows for prosperity. Prosperity is seen as the solution to poverty but in reality is more akin to the pretty beads of fable, handed to the grateful and credulous 'natives' in exchange for their entire culture.

As well as holding the potential for social freedom, 'Liberation' also held the promise of individual emancipation, personal freedom from arbitrary boundaries and constraints and I think it is a perversion of this understanding of freedom that has emerged triumphant from the ferment of 1968. It manifests itself as a manic denial of social bonds in favour of individual faith in what each individual can grab from capitalism.

The largesse of the rich can buy the compliance of some of us and the despair of the rest. Consumer goods seduce us into compliance in front of a TV or computer screen, or staring through a windscreen. Because we are prosperous, we see our interests as being the same as our employers' interests, so that the exploited and the exploiter appear to be working together. The illusion of a 'middle class' that's never had it so good sold well in the 1920s in America, in the UK under Margaret Thatcher and is in good health at this moment in Russia, China and India. Even the creation of the *oprichniki* in the Russia of Ivan III, or the *vydvizhentsy* of the Soviet Union (Figes, 2007). emerges from this same mechanism of buying off a segment of the population who can turn a blind eye to or take part in the humiliation of the rest.

These reflections go a good way to explaining our stubborn acquiescence in being milked for profit. Who wants to live in the hell of Soviet 'socialism', National 'socialism', or Pol Pot's murderous version of moneyless 'equality', in contrast to the plenty of a consumer society?

Nevertheless, the question remains: how is it that these nightmares and seductions succeed in discrediting genuine hope? Is this really reason enough to accept the system we live under as if it were the best we can devise?

Let us consider whether analytic concepts can have some explanatory power in considering this question.

In the defence of identification with the aggressor (Ferenczi, 1949), we take on the attributes of the overwhelming power, initially the parents, that holds our lives in its hands and we also do this with capitalism. Instead of recognizing that the owners of capital might be using us, we imagine ourselves to be in control and the companies to be our servants. We are sophisticated, knowing consumers who know a bargain when we see one, and companies exist to meet *our* every caprice and whim, rather than the reverse.

Identified with the aggressor, we can derive satisfaction from supermarkets acting as our agents in pushing other working-class people to the limit so we can feel it is we who are driving a hard bargain. The idea that our employers are the consumers of our labour, which is cheapened by this process, is too shameful to consider. We block this off in grandiose denial and imagine our enslavement into others in projective identification (Klein, 1997; Segal, 1989). At the same time, we project our capacities and agency into money, attributing to money great powers that in reality belong to us (Fromm, 1986). We have the ability, all of us, working together as citizens of the world, to run the world together as equals and yet we delude ourselves otherwise. We deny those qualities in ourselves, projecting our own functions and capacities into a fiction that holds and wields all the power we can't bear to own, so that the centre of decision making is located outside ourselves. What we cannot 'afford' we cannot have and what we can afford we *must* have. Money starves us or it fattens us up, but either way, it is money that is in control, enabling our labour to be siphoned off and gathered together as profit.

It seems to me that we project *onto* money the status of a parent on whom we depend, while we project *into* money our adult capacities. In relation to money it is as if adults are babies or small children. We behave as if we are unable to judge whether we need something or not, and it is money *in loco parentis* that makes those decisions. This parent can be so stern that for many of us money refuses us enough to eat, refuses us medical care. It can deny us the barest dignity in old age or life itself, treating us with contempt and cruelty, regardless of whether goods are in reality scarce or plentiful.

On the other hand, money can be an overindulgent parent, that hands us the poisoned chalice of oedipal victory (Freud, 1953) in a rupture of the social constraints implied and required by living harmoniously with others. As we have seen, defensively identified with the powerful, the modern customer is encouraged to act like an omnipotent, solipsistic baby: what the discerning consumer 'expects' and 'demands' – at once and at the 'right price' – is screamed from every television set and advertising hoarding.

A manic triumph over human limitations is sold to us as 'prosperity' and 'freedom of choice', where personal emancipation is indeed in conflict with social freedom. We can choose but only from a selection of schizoid ways to evade our responsibilities to one another. Prosperity brings us cars, personal music players, mobile telephones and security lights. If we choose these things we can use them at our own discretion, regardless of the effect on our fellows. If we fail to choose them and enter their protective bubble we are exposed to a cacophonous world peopled by others who are plugged into a space where we don't exist for them. The lure of consumer culture is that other people do not have to exist for the subject any more, as we take refuge in grandiose denial of our vulnerability and dependency on one another. It takes a couple to produce a child and a whole village to bring one up but there is no village; ask a 'sovereign consumer' to take your needs into consideration and you will quickly learn the meaning of oedipal defeat. Not only is there, increas-

ingly, no village, but also no father, no principle that sets out boundaries and a sense of what is appropriate, proposes limitations and tries to differentiate between choices.

Joel Bakan (2004), citing Hare, argues that if companies were individuals, they would be sociopathic, seeking only their own gratification, indifferent if not hostile to the needs of others, and externalizing costs. Identified with the capitalists, we encounter one another as if we are companies, in a way triumphantly celebrated by Margaret Thatcher in her utopia of individuals and families seeking their own salvation. As with companies, the effects of our selfishness are disregarded as externalities, leading to an openly anti-social way of life.

Widlund (2008) draws on Zygmunt Bauman in describing this state of affairs. He points out that in ancient Athens, the *Agora* was a space between the individual and the wider society, a space both physical and abstract in which people could meet and create something together. We could think of this space as the 'matrix' of Foulkes. Attracted by its derivation from 'mother', Foulkes applies this term to the web of relationships of which we are part and from which we emerge. Bauman points to the hollowing out of this social area, leaving only atomized individuals and the overarching domination of companies with which we are invited to identify. We need to connect horizontally, but in triumphant capitalist society, we connect upwards to the economy into which all our power is projected. We each have our own individual lifeline upwards and do not know our neighbour.

The narcissistic recourse to a closed loop in which only the self is real, is related to shame (Mollon, 1984) and this notion casts further light on our problem of our acquiescence in being used. As we notice in relation to identification with the aggressor, the reality of being a wage slave is in itself experienced as deeply shameful, and this shame provides an impetus back into solipsistic denial. That process moves us away from a recognition of our plight and the seeking of hope in cooperation with one another to improve matters. Shame and narcissistic denial strengthen our vertical bonds of subjection, and weaken our horizontal affectional bonds (Bowlby, 1979).

This vertical fragmentation, and to a large extent the whole picture of life under rampant capitalism, has the look of a paranoid-schizoid environment (Klein, 1997). In identifying with the rich we project our powerlessness into others. We occupy an illusory bubble of supposed consumer power and pretend that it is others who are enslaved but not us, and that there is no loss in our abdication of responsibility.

We entertain the self-fulfilling paranoid perception that the high street and the town centre are dirty and dangerous, and bolt to the schizoid, private hypermarket and the shopping mall, which we deem to be bright, modern, clean and above all safe from aggression and hatred. As a result the public spaces are left to those who cannot escape them and the fantasy becomes a reality. The people left more crassly powerless become a threat to us in their own efforts to deny their vulnerability and somehow feel powerful, and as a result we identify even more strongly with the rich in keeping control. The more demoralized we are, the more charmless is likely to be our way of identifying with the powerful, the cruder are our options for making yourself feel in control, the more raw is the despair and rage we have to force others to feel. This produces antisocial, aggressive behaviour that can create misery for already hard-pressed people struggling to live and get by, so that it actually makes sense to want to escape this ugliness, to install security cameras, undermine legal safeguards and to lust after more punishment and harshness to be visited on the culprits.

We clamour for 'more men' on the street, meaning the police, but it is we adults who have deserted the street in our oedipal flight. We project into the 'underclass' the very strategies we use to identify with power, so that they are simply expressing, in a raw form, what we all do in copying the rich – grabbing what we can and letting somebody else have the pain.

Those who remain in public space are infantilized and those who escape into the narcissistic consumer bubble are seen as senior and adult. The subsidized bus is for oedipally triumphant 'kids' and the infantilized adults who share it with them, whereas the 4 × 4 and people carrier are for us self-reliant adults who can, we imagine, stand on our own two feet. Our cowardice in relinquishing public responsibility and escaping behind glass and steel is overlooked, as is the plight of the children who are not offered the restraint they need to differentiate themselves as individuals, and to keep them safe. Opportunities for us to exercise truly adult self-governing capacities have been systematically closed down. Institutions that encouraged the mutual enrichment of individual and public functions have been undermined; trade unions and collective workplaces have been destroyed or shackled by the flexibility of capital leaving each of us facing Capital alone, while we try to regard this as individual empowerment.

The challenge to 'authority' as embodied in mutual respect has been successful, and relativism overthrows what can be seen as the paternal principles of differentiating, evaluating, saying that this is better than that, this is right and this wrong, this belongs here and that belongs there. We think of this postmodern unboundedness as liberation but it is better thought of as the abandoning of coherence and the throwing away of our power to evaluate and understand. We believe that paternal mindfulness, as expressed in the concept of the oedipal 'third' (Fonagy, 2001) is somehow akin to deference. The boundaries of our narcissism are limited by recognition of the humanity of others, but this recognition is seen as deference, imagined as a state of enslavement we have left behind, but in our delusion that we are no longer deferential, we are more slavish than ever to the rich, and simply ruder to, and more competitive with, our peers.

Liberation is depressive in the Kleinian sense of embracing mutual respect, reasoned argument and productive conflict. Only in a functioning matrix can we be free as individuals. We need to develop beyond the paranoid-schizoid position to a depressive acknowledgement of our need for one another, which is expressed in connecting horizontally, in the Agora, and relinquishing the fantasy of a special individual connection to a dispensing power. In doing so we can take back our projection upwards of our own capacities and learn to live together for ourselves. As Fromm (1986) puts it: 'We have made ourselves into instruments for purposes outside ourselves ... we experience and treat ourselves as commodities, and ... our own powers have become alienated from ourselves.'

I have suggested that social and individual emancipation are not necessarily divergent but seem to be so at present, as the Agora is denigrated and emptied and the individual narcissistically inflated. Only as we find ourselves in each other, can we hope to be free both personally and socially.

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