

A new base for progressive politics, amidst reflections on the US election – Jim Robinson - November 2020.

So much of politics is projection. By this I mean the process whereby people identify with a fixed political position. Whatever position is taken it tends to be a justification and affirmation of ourselves, it confirms and expresses, often entirely unconsciously, the needs that we are relatively unaware of. So includes all our biases and prejudices. The nature of this identification is then, largely compulsive.

For example, for those on the right there is often a critical and authoritarian conditioning in the background. The deep wounds from this leads to a habit of closing down of our sensitivity and empathy. Then we had to “toughen up” young and become self-sufficient too early. The result is that people then over identify with the need to take “self-responsibility”, they object to anyone “having it easy” or “scrounging from the State”. They did not get support, so why should anyone else? Their victim mentality finds expression in anger and blaming others.

For those on the Left, the background conditioning may have been much more relaxed, and perhaps with insufficient boundaries combined with a deficit of what is essential, i.e. unconditional “Love”. This can create a “victim” stance which makes it hard to “grown up”, and it is easy to see that a sense of entitlement can emerge. Parents or the State “should” be more supportive. This inevitably leads to blaming the environment for everything, and it can easily move into idealising about a future where the environment is perfectly supportive. In that future we can be “happy” without the effort of taking responsibility for ourselves.

Some people experience both the crushing effects of the lack of love, compounded by harshness together with a lack of boundaries. This can result in deep shame and feelings of “not being good enough”. Such alienation from self and others often results in a refusal to engage in politics at all. These are of course just caricatures of the enormous variety of ways that our insecurity can play out in forming our relationship to politics.

Alice Miller fought tirelessly against the abuse of children (e.g. “For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence”). She argued clearly and powerfully that it was harshness and the lack of love in childrearing that was responsible for people’s difficult relationship to life. She explained how the child rearing manuals of nineteenth century Germany with their deeply pernicious “children are born evil and have to be made good” premise, gave rise to a culture that created Hitler and allowed “National Socialism” to flourish. Today we have just experienced four years of Trump’s administration in America and the comparisons are all too clear to see. Trump’s selfish authoritarian and anti-democratic inclinations, along with his rampant narcissism, makes the comparison to Hitler alarming. Thank goodness American democracy is fairly robust and that he did not win (or cheat) a second term in office!

The last ten / fifteen years have seen a renewed explosion of the understanding around how trauma is the cause of all our negativity, all our fixedness, all our attachments, resistances, and identifications. It is clear from Mary Trump’s book (Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World’s Most Dangerous Man) that the Trump family was profoundly dysfunctional and cruel. I also think it is clear that much American “Christianity” with its fundamentalist tendencies, carries with it the echoes of those nineteenth century child rearing manuals. The harshness and cruelty deeply ingrained in the formation of the USA accounts for, as I see it, the deep level of trauma still within so much of the US population. Religious extremism, racism, and genocide are all part of this legacy. The stronghold of Trump support is West Virginia, a place where American hyper-individualism and harshness is perhaps seen in its rawest form. When you are conditioned by harshness, you become harsh, “the other” becomes the enemy. Fear, anger, and blind cult-like adherence to narrow vengeful perspectives result. Then there is “fake news” and all manner of conspiracy theories designed to justify those deeply

defensive positions. But this is characteristic of the right all over the world. The need to avoid re-experiencing the deep wounds caused by harshness and the lack of love, is always desperate. A preference for any catastrophe, over facing that pain, is the consequence.

Inflexible over identified positions always have unconscious needs at their core and this is the case both the far Left and Right. With both there is the tell-tale anger, blame, and defensiveness because trauma has closed the heart. Whilst we learnt all this in the sixties, I do hope and trust that we are learning it with greater clarity and depth this time around. A black American talking about the recent election said that at least Trump had exposed the passively aggressive racism in so much of white America. I also think this is also true of the many other compulsive aspects of traumatised America which Trump made permissible. I.e. violence, bigotry, arrogance, narcissistic pride, prejudice, and hate, He made them all acceptable, even celebrated. Not a pretty sight!

However, there is a powerful and wealthy section of the Right, the “Neo Liberals”, that come from wealthy autocratic boarding school style backgrounds. They are indoctrinated with superiority, which, along with their access to power has enabled them to pursue so effectively their selfish agenda over recent decades. Often the influence has been surreptitious, through controlling of the media and funding “think-tanks” and using their wealth and power to manipulate whatever they can, to further their greed. Many (e.g. The Guardian (most recently Monbiot 24/11/20), opendemocracy.com, The Green Party, Positive Money) have been trying to expose the range and depth of these manipulative power plays.

Ever since the seventies the Neo Liberal Right have been stoking up the fear of traumatised people across the globe. It is the age-old strategy of wealth and power (be it state or corporations), to divide and rule and sow confusion. Anything to deflect attention away from their goal of accumulating ever more wealth and power. Anything to avoid being forced to take responsibility for the exploitation and destruction they leave in their wake. Making people afraid of immigrants and blaming them for the loss of well-paid jobs that they caused, is the classic. In the US they have so successfully peddled the idea of self-responsibility that many people would rather die than accept state health care support. They are so afraid that state “socialism” or “communism” will control their lives but are then completely unaware that they are simply spouting the propaganda they have been sold.

What needs to be remembered though, is that all this selfish negativity on the one hand, and gullibility on the other, flows from trauma. It is about the unconscious processes and habits that people are caught up with, in order to protect themselves from facing the buried pain and hurt deep in their hearts. Yes, it is deeply galling that those with power and wealth get to have so much influence. We have to remember though that anyone can find their freedom in any situation, and that having wealth and power does not make you happy.

The recent Guardian articles by Thomas Frank (7th Nov) and Yanis Varoufakis (8th Nov), Bhaskar Sunkara (10th Nov) (George Monbiot (11th Nov) all speak powerfully of the failures of the Democratic party in the USA and the weakness of Biden. They argue that it was his “normal” that allowed Trump to win in 2016 and might allow another even more dangerous autocrat to emerge from “middle of the road” policies which will not win the hearts of enough people to enable real change. Bernie Sanders (Guardian 26/11/20) also argues that the Democrats needs to be very clear about “which side they are on” in the fight against Neo-Liberal Capitalism, in order to win back working-class America. Whilst I agree that the Left needs to be bold, the point of this piece is to explore how the Left needs to find a new broader and deeper base, one that is anchored to a more holistic understanding of human psychology and our spiritual core.

The above writers are by implication also critiquing the Left generally over the last forty years or so. “New Labour” in the UK and similar approaches world-wide in effect opened the door to the recent resurgence of right wing popularism, by not providing a clear alternative to the global Neo-Liberal

programme. It was as though their agenda captured the political ground so successfully that it dragged the Left into the centre, where it lost its soul and forgot to fight for what it stood for i.e. compassion, empathy, equality, and openness. Even after the 2008 financial crash Capitalism continued its successful accumulation of ever greater wealth and power whilst increasing inequality. The mainstream Left were somehow hypnotised into accepting the false premise of “trickle down” economics.

But then it could be argued that the left lost its soul right at its very beginning through having been seduced by power at the start of the Russian revolution. Whatever your historical analysis, the Left surely now needs a new soul, a new base on which to build. This means letting go of the remnants of the “hard left’s” legacy around old-fashioned power games, along with its marriage to trade unions.

The core values of this new base need to be founded on the understanding that human nature has these two fundamental aspects. One is our psychology, understanding how it is trauma that causes all our difficulties, the other is about recognising that it is (for want of a better word) our “Spiritual” nature that gives us meaning, values, satisfaction, and direction. We are a paradox. We exist as both separate individuals and as integral parts of the whole, we are subjective and objective, personal and transpersonal. We relate to the world through our heart, head, and body, so that on a personal level we have our feelings, thinking and sensation. But on the “transpersonal” level, these aspects of our experience can be known on a more “objective” level, where there is; the feeling of Unconditional Love, Consciousness with its awareness of awareness and capacity to understand, and in our bodies the Energy of Life itself is there when we consciously embody sensation and breath. It is these aspects of our experience that provide our lives with meaning and satisfaction, and through which we have the possibility of eventually finding our freedom, our “home”, in the depth of the “here and now”.

As an overgeneralised aside - The Trumpian Christian Right, often base their “spiritual” connection on the “Old Testament” which to me is not really Christian at all, being *before* Christ. It contains a lot of anger, judgement, and vengefulness which the Right use to justify their fundamentalist prejudices. The Christianity of the New Testament is quite different, it is concerned with a radical form of Love, forgiveness, and compassion for the unfortunate. This is absolutely in tune, it seems to me, with what the Left’s core values needs to be.

So, a new basis for our left-wing politics on the one hand would recognise our profound interconnectedness, and on the other, the understanding that it is trauma that causes our separateness. It causes all our negativity, dysfunctionality, harshness, anger and hate, our lack of empathy and compassion. It perpetuates our disconnection from Love and awareness, and it cuts us off from our creativity. It is only by understanding trauma and its effects that we can open our hearts and the Left can avoid getting caught into chasing power, rather than embodying opening to the Love that underlies the whole of Life. We need to avoid the despair that Richard Sennett describes (Guardian 3rd Nov 2020), “... hope doesn’t make sense today. I’ve lost my empathy for the complex motivations that animate fear and reaction.” But Love never loses empathy. Love, along with Consciousness and Energy, lives deep within all of us, they all are always wanting and waiting for the opportunity to flower.

The Left need to understand and incorporated into their politics the fact that this larger, more profound, part of us is this “transpersonal” or “spiritual” aspect. It is this that gives us the radical embodied awareness of “I am you and you are me”, that we are not separate. It is trauma that creates our illusion of separateness with its inevitable processes of alienation. In the end our hearts cannot be free of sorrow whilst any part of humanity is acting inhumanly, the connections are inescapable and unavoidable. Another’s suffering, be it human or ecological, is mine.

Obviously, suffering is an inherent aspect of life, of growth and development and of course, death. We can though, work to avoid the unnecessary suffering that causes trauma. Essentially this is about the

deficit of love and/or the surfeit harshness. So, whilst poverty, and its partner inequality, are not in themselves the direct cause of trauma, in this merciless capitalist world they are hugely powerful contributing factors.

This does though, open up the issue of self-responsibility and the mysterious process by which people grow and develop. Self-responsibility is the one area where the Right's perspective has some validity, it is a fundamentally important aspect of us all that they recognise. They know that everyone has to take responsibility for themselves and that all the support in the world will not necessarily enable someone to do this. It is something that we each have to choose to do. But the Right then abuse this understanding to conclude that support is not important. They say, "I made it in life, so you should to" or "if you over support you just encourage dependency and scrounging" or they repeat the "gospel of scarcity" with "there are not enough resources to support everyone".

Life can never be perfect, we are bound to experience trauma in one form or another, growing up and taking responsibility for ourselves, for our feeling, our thinking, our bodies, our lives, is something we often want to avoid. Adolescent mammals are reluctant to let go of parental support and fend for themselves and our human development is so long and complex, that ruptures and traumas are inevitably, which makes us "victims", which then exacerbate our reluctance to grow up. I guess there will always be some people who will refuse no matter how "perfect" the world becomes. Choice is this essential aspect of being human. Any changes to society must acknowledge this aspect of human development and have a clear aim of supporting people to make their choices and take responsibility.

But what is important here, is that this does not validate building a world that creates unnecessary suffering and trauma. The Left's agenda of raising the "quality of life" (in the fullest possible meaning of that phrase) of the majority is surely, only sanity. Capitalism by its very nature causes trauma and insanity. Obviously, a market economy needs to be part of how we function as a society, but we need the Left to take these other priorities to centre stage. The Left is the only force powerful enough to transform the world away from Neo-Liberal Capitalism. But it needs the insight and inspiration that comes from this realisation that we are not separate, that our politics need to be based on Love, as Marianne Williamson argued in "The Politics of Love". This has to go alongside understanding how it is trauma that conditions us into negatively, and makes us acquiesce to being enslaved.

This is all about returning "power to the people". Hierarchical systems tend to infantilise, de-power and create trauma. Government spending needs to flow down to the most local level possible, supporting democracy to deepen and widen organically, re-empowering people everywhere. The banking and financial system needs to be upended to serve people, not banks and capitalism (see Positive Money, also Daniela Gabor (Guardian 26/11/20)). The Government needs to exercise much greater control over power and wealth to enable these priorities.

There are reservoirs of trapped and suppressed creativity waiting to be released if people's hearts can be opened. The Earth needs this deep re-humanising of societies throughout the globe. How can anyone with an open heart, hate, or continue to destroy this magical miraculous planet? The Left need to claim this ground and inspire people to see that change is possible, that it is doable. There are many people working on imagining new forms of society based on these values, and if the mainstream Left can be bold and brave enough to own them, it could inspire, enthuse, and create the momentum needed to bring about the radical change the world needs. Love has this power; I am not sure anything else does. We need people who can articulate and communicate this radical synthesis of the transpersonal, the psychological and the political, who can inspire across the traditional Left / Right trenches.