

## THE SOCIAL PATHOLOGY OF AGGRESSION

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We will begin by stating some premises, part of them which are more speculative than scientific ones. This means that it is not our task here to verify them, but they could be found in some works that deal with this concept in one way or another. The first and the most speculative one is that aggression as a capacity is a psychic phenomena that pertains only to human nature. We may say that some animals behave aggressively, we may say that nature is aggressive, but we think that the feature of aggression is attributed to them only relatively. The second premise is that even when some aggressive comportment is directed towards some abstract, impersonal or some organic being others than human being, the grammar of the word suggests that the original object of aggression is some other human being. We don't usually say that some-thing was aggressed, but that some-one was the object of an aggression. Something indeed could be the object of an action that could be interpreted as aggressive, as destruction, annihilation, but, similar to our mention before, these are only derivative objects, or, more likely, substitutions of an original object. Our third premise is that aggression is a transitive feature which directs a comportment or an action against some other human being. Aggression is always orientated and the sense of its orientation is that "against". We will see what happens when the object of aggression is apparently missing and we will find then that aggression has identified the object and the subject: aggression has turned against its place of departure, against itself.

We may then offer a preliminary definition of aggression as a psychic phenomenon that may be used to characterize an intentional action that is always oriented against some other human being or beings. As long as some action could be interpreted as aggressive, the subject of an aggressive action is said to be an aggressive person. As a constant feature of someone's comportment, aggression may be or become pathological, and then it could be reduced to some other psychic deviations like neurosis or psychosis, the object of some psychological therapy. But beyond its proper pathological manifestations, we may say that all people are capable to act more or less aggressively. We can all imagine some cases, events which could provoke us to behave this way. If aggression is a latent feature of our psychic life, it could always be brought to effectiveness/light by some chain of actions.

The question is how and when do we know that an action is turned into aggression? What makes an action an aggressive one? Within the WW2, Germany was considered an aggressive state. Russia is now being considered an aggressive state, and ISIS is considered an aggressive organization. What do we mean by these statements? What are their truth conditions? In fact, as the current debate about the political dimension of aggression is concerned, the crime of aggression is related to the individual responsibility for illegal war. An internationally agreed concept of political aggression would enable the international courts to 'judge and punish political and military leaders for planning, preparing, initiating and executing illegal wars' (Weisbord, 2009, p.4). Illegal war means here the crossing of a state's border that threatens the community and its members forcing them to fight and die in defense of that state, or undermines that community's ability to protect the human rights of its members (Weisbord, 2009, p.4). The cited work has as its main concern the conceptualization of aggression in order for it to stand as a fully fledged premise that may serve as a foundation for judging and punishing the crime of aggression in contemporary historical context where the main aggressive organization are no longer the states but smaller, transnational ones, like the well known Al Qaeda or ISIS. We will not enter into this debate which is not our concern here, but what interest us here are the main criteria that may serve to consider an action as aggressive. Our first mention is that, even if a state or some other organization is considered aggressive, the responsibility is to be found individually. The one or the ones to be held responsible, judged and punished are the key persons involved in that action, as preparing, initiating or executing it. The second mention is that aggression is related to some action that is punishable – like the illegal war.

Our third mention is the difficulty to conceptualize aggression. Even if we have only searched so far for the political quest for the concept of aggression, it could be easily emphasized that this difficulty pertains to any of the social levels that deals with this type of actions. We believe this fact to be due to the hermeneutical dimension of any definition that applies to aggression, regardless if we understand here the psychic phenomenon, the capacity or propensity to aggression, or its effectiveness as an action. This means that any attempt to conceptualize and define aggression should deal first with the issue of interpreting an action, thought, intention as an aggressive one. This interpretation, which takes place for the first time in common language, should unfold itself and become one that is theoretically founded, in order for it to be institutionalized. Something is preserved at each stage of this process, and that is the fact that aggression is something that should be

diminished, attenuated or even annihilated, and this is the job of moral or religious precepts or of the coercive system.

It could be rightfully objected that there are some forms of aggression that are accepted and acceptable in most of the so called civilized social communities. From the beginning we should state that, as we have seen in our previous mention of the illegal war, aggression is accepted as a form of self-defense, regardless if are talking here about defense war, of self-defense personal actions. Beyond that, there are many forms of aggression that could be emphasized through any sociological research into the categories of aggression, like politics, music, sports, popular manifestations or cultural events like movies, theatrical plays and so on. So it seems that even if society is rejecting some forms of aggression, the same society is trying to preserve some of its manifestations. We will see a reason for this dialectic of presence and absence of aggression in what follows.

We should conclude our introductory part here by saying that, for all that we have found out so far, aggression seems to be a social phenomenon, and this means that aggression has a definite social component that is a part of any attempt to understand and define it. Aggression, as a primary phenomenon, is always accompanying an intention, thought or action but only to direct this action against some other human being. An encounter between two or more human beings constitutes the necessary condition for any aggressive action. But, it could be said that this is not something that deserve an investigation. We all know, even if we did not put our thoughts into it, that aggression is something directed against someone and that aggression is something that, at least in its harmfully manifestations, is something that any civilized society should punish and eradicate. Aggression is condemnable when it impinges some other's rights as they are recognized within that society. Aggression is then some behavioral disposition that is not to be let to become manifest when it harms other people. But there is another thing to aggression that may deserve a critical exploration, a closer inspection, a fact that could serve as an explanatory momentum for both the development of organized/civilized societies and the development of human beings as social beings. Aristotle had said that men are social beings, they need the company of other people and this is one of anyone's most primary instincts. But there are some other contents that point into the fact that, beyond being social beings, the first organized communities arose from the need to protect their members from both mutual aggression and aggression from some other people, which are not part of that social organization. It seems that we should add the encounter of human beings as a sufficient condition for aggression, and not just a necessary one, as we contended for the first time.

Stemming from Plato's tripartite division of the soul, Francis Fukuyama in his work *The End of History and the Last Man*, emphasize the *thymotic* part of the soul as the one that could best explain what he considers to be the process of historical evolution which ends in the liberal democratic societies. Interpreted in Hegelian terms as the "struggle for recognition", it is said to constitute the most important, both active and explicative, moment of the historical reason whose finality is the mutual harmless recognition of this desire for recognition. The latter is the desire to be desirable in other people's eyes, the desire to be recognized as valuable human beings. The *locus* or the seat of this desire is that part of the soul of which Plato was saying that is crucial for the guardians of its imagined city in his *Republic*. The connection between *thymos* and the desire for recognition is made through investing the *thymos* with that 'propensity to invest the self with a certain value and to demand recognition for that value' (Fukuyama, 1992, p.XVII). The connection between *thymos*, desire for recognition and our discussion about aggression will be made through the statement that, at the beginning of the history, the former's expression was actually a fight, a struggle for recognition that determines its actors to put their lives at stakes. The first organized societies were hierarchically established ones, of masters and slaves, and the main criterion for this division was one's determination to risk his life in order for him to be recognized as superior. The idea of the end of history is grounded in the presumable finality of the historical process, that is considered not as the end of historical events, but as the final stage of the social organizing evolution, allowing a mutual, universal recognition of human rights as such, a recognition that does not suppose that anyone should effectively be in danger or losing his life on that way. As it appears at the end of history, the society is able to reconcile the two most fundamental human instincts or desires, the desire for recognition and the self preservation.

As any discussion about the finality and the end of history wishes to be meaningful, it also has to consider what has been called the nature condition of humanity or 'the first man' in Fukuyama's expression. In few words, we are talking here about human nature before the first appearance of something like a organized community, before civilization has arrived. According to Hegel, or more likely to one of his well known interpreters, Alexandre Kojève, beyond men's 'positive' desires toward something that can satisfy his bodily needs like hunger, thirst and so on, common to both men and their genus – the animal, man also desires that he is recognized by his fellows and this desire for recognition is the one that makes the human being a social being. This desire for recognition has, as its first consequence, the self identification of someone as self conscience, but beyond that, its impetus

is towards its recognition as human being or human nature. This propensity of human nature towards recognition is the one that stands at the beginning of the history as the key moment involved in the constitution of civilized societies but, as we already mentioned, the desire for recognition is turned into a real battle, into a bloody battle. These primal societies are nothing more than the outcome of this struggle for recognition that could end in one of the following ways: death or both combatants, death of one of them, or survival of both and the establishing of a society that is divided between masters and slaves. The masters are the ones willing to risk their lives until the end while the slaves are the ones submitting to the preservation of life.

As Fukuyama admits, this may sound strange to our present days. And it should sound strange in any civilized society that has as its main concern the protection of civil rights, life being the first of them. As we may contend that the desire for recognition still plays some role in our daily routine, with its most visible expressions like the wish of fame and social status, we do not see them as disguised forms of that primary desire that may turn in the loss of life. We are no longer in a position that requires someone to put his life at stake along the way to his being recognized as a human being. The bourgeois ethics of proper liberal political philosophy that has been developed starting with the writings of Hobbes and Locke in the XVII<sup>th</sup> Century, has always been focused on a dialectic of desire and reason. According to this, as we may observe in some of wittings of the other grounding figures of contemporary democracy as Rousseau's social contract, the constitution of a civilized society has as its main goal the domination of reason over the other parts of the human soul like instincts and desires. This takes the form of a rational (reason-able), conscious, self-imposed renunciation of the satisfaction that is demanded by one's deep, natural desires as it is the only way to assure the survival of the individual, as a member of a community that could protect him against mutual or some other's violent actions. This has been done only through enhancing the surviving instinct and turning it against a more and more impoverished and diminished desire for recognition.

But the "thymotic" dimension of the soul is not only orientated towards aggression as we may understand it by stating that its primary expression is that struggle, violent 'war of every man against every man' as we see in Hobbes. *Thymos* is also that part of the soul that is the seat every man's most desirable features like courage, justice, spiritedness and so on. As we know, Plato's tripartite division of the soul is paralleled by his social tripartite division where the defenders of the city are the most powerful expression of that component of the soul which is *thymos*. When orientated towards the enemies, aggression is a fundamental part of the military training. Aggression it

then justified when it is used for protection against what may threaten the city and the social order within its walls. But, we may ask, even if the aggression as a feature of the *thymos* may play an important role in defending some social organization like Plato's city, why should we preserve the same impetus toward aggression in what concerns the human *psyche*? The guardians, defenders or soldiers have to protect some social order that is commonly accepted within some society, but what is to defend in case of some individual? His life is already protected within that society through laws and law enforcement institutions. When attached to the class of guardians the preservation of *thymos* could be something that has benefits for the entire society, as the evaluation that is part of the *thymos* is something that has been objectively accepted by the large majority of its members. But when internalized, the same evaluation is something subjective, which pertains to our own ability to evaluate ourselves, and then it could be, and usually it is, something that could contradict other's evaluation of our selves or of their selves. Someone's desire for recognition imposes itself to other people and then it may become aggressive as it collides with others evaluating us. When detached from its objective ground, the desire for recognition becomes what is called *megalothymia*, the subjective impetus toward recognition as better than the others. *Megalothymia* is someone's own hyper evaluation that is the feature of aristocratic societies, a radicalization of the desire for recognition that requires that our qualities are recognized as superior to others.

There is a question that remains unanswered in Fukuyama about the difference between the desire for recognition and its hyper version, which makes it difficult to separate what is a universal feature of the human soul from its radicalization. But there are two things that deserve to be highlighted at the end of our discussion of his work. The first of them is that is it the desire for recognition that first delivers us to aggression towards other people, and that it is something that characterizes the first recorded encounters between humans. Beside the original war that set people against people as it is recollected by the Locke and Hobbes, this is an intuition that first affects the encounter or people as such, and we mention here one of Sartre's plays where hell is said to be the timeless encounter that brings people starring into each other's eyes forever. But, besides being the trigger of aggression, the same desire for recognition is one of the most important moments of the constitution of civilized society, as they were means of protection against that aggression. The second mention is that the historical process is a transition from *megalothymia*, the desire to be recognized as better, to *isothymia*, the desire to be recognized as equal. The object of the desire for recognition has been displaced in order to be accepted amongst the members of the civilized

societies. The aristocrat has been convinced to turn himself into some business or political man, while the social privileged remains of the desire for recognition is that desire to equality, equity and so on.

The most efficient social mechanism that has been employed in order to assure the dominance of the self preservation instinct over the desire for recognition was not the one that has been imagined by either Hobbes, Locke or even Machiavelli, which were opposing the *thymos* to self preservation or to itself, but the metaphysics of the Christianity and its two fundamental features, the sense of culpability and the guilty conscience. These are two of its most important insights that have helped the democratic, civilized societies to overcome the aggression of human nature and impose the right to universal recognition. With or without metaphysics, this is said to be the end of history: the last man is the one that embraces all men as fully recognizable in their status as human beings.

Even if we are not ready to contend something like the finality of history, we are, by large, living in a world that is more successful than the preceding ones as long as the preservation of human life and human rights is concerned. This could be disputed, but Fukuyama offers some powerful reasons for his assertion which will not be discussed here. As we saw, the preservation of human life has to be asserted against the other fundamental human instinct that is the aggressive desire for recognition or the *thymotic* dimension of one's temperament. But, along with the feeling of security and even happiness that is continuously growing in these days, there are some issues with the civilized world beyond the ones that pertain to the development of the natural sciences that may affect what is called the ecological system of our planet. We will refer here to some of the issues that are concerned with the ego-logical and not eco-logical, and there are many researches that show that the growth of civilization is often accompanied by a growth in psychic disorders, of which the most important is psychic depression. Not turning ourselves in psychologist, we will only discuss the non-pathological part of these types of issues that may be well characterized as a feeling of discontent that from time to time impedes our pursuing of personal happiness, even in a world that offers more and more means for attaining our aims, material, professional or even ethical ones.

That sense of discontent, uneasiness or even anguish is the main object of one of Freud's late writings entitled, in its English translation, *Civilization and its Discontents*. As this feeling is not something that could be easily explained and reduced to a more basic pathology, the word Freud had chosen for its expression is not a usual one: *Unbehagen*. For its translation, Freud suggested "discomfort" but the final and official translation retained

“discontent” as the most expressive term for Freud’s intentions. The story, critically reduced to its basics, unfolds as follows: the rise of civilization is something that has developed in order to protect man’s basic needs for protection against both nature and his fellows. This is not a new story, as we already saw that is something like a common assumption among the civilization’s story tellers. And what follows, as even Freud admits, is no news. Civilization has its counterpart that is set against individual’s basic tendencies and impulses, one of them being the impetus to aggression towards other people.

The main two pillars of the civilization that Freud emphasizes are the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power of love, which made the man unwilling to be deprived of his sexual object, the woman--, and made the woman unwilling to be deprived of the part of herself which had been separated off from her child. Eros and Ananke [Love and Necessity] have become the parents of human civilization too. (Freud, 1961b, p.48)

In order to attract people towards each other, civilization had to institutionalize someone’s natural affection for other in two ways: first, the erotic compulsion had to be restricted to a single companion, and then, it had to be sublimated while its object was displaced towards his fellows. We are now talking about several ways of loving someone, which are rooted in the ancient division that was made by Christianity between Eros and Agape. Anyway, it seems that the work of civilization had to be on the right track while love was supposed to be the common denominator of human societies. What could be wrong with that picture which is an approximation of the Christian ideal demand of loving your neighbor more than you love yourself or loving your enemy? The problem is that, if we turn to ourselves, any introspection which is not superficial, any critical evaluation of our real intentions shows that these are by far removed from that ideal. The Christian command seems contra factual. The historical factuality shows that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus* (Freud, 1961b, p.58)

If we remember what has been said before about the spring and growth of the first communities out man's state of nature, there are reasons to be conjectured that the ideal command of universal love is nothing that a reaction against this natural tendency to aggression. As we remember, we concluded our discussion about Fukuyama's last man by stating that the most effective social mechanism for taming this aggressive impetus was the Christian metaphysics and its Pandora's Box where men first found the gifts of culpability and guilty conscience. What Freud does is to trace both this tendency to aggressiveness and its counterpart back to some more primary functions of our psychical apparatus. There is one mention to be made here. Freud's writing that concerns us here is one of his latest and the author had to suppose that the reader is already accustomed with at least some psychoanalytical concepts and theories that he had been developed. The corollary of this is that, even if Freud's latest writings may be considered as engaging large phenomena like history, culture and civilization, his main assumptions and concepts that are employed in order to explain and clarify these processes are difficult to understand and interpret unless someone get familiarized with the former ones. This is a deficiency of the interpretation that cannot be overcome here but we will try to present some of Freud's theoretical acquisitions that may concern the reader of Freud's analysis of historical phenomena. The structure of human psychic is the expression of a continuous movement of psychical energy, while its main principle is the constancy principle or the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle is the one that is trying to make us all happy by keeping the excitation of the psychic to a minimum. When the psychic is excited, from either internal or external stimulus, it delivers a quantity of energy that has to be diminished, and this is made by satisfying the demands of the former impulses. But the Ego soon discovers that his desires are impossible to be satisfied on its own, without considering what is external to it. Then, as the Ego is confronted with reality, another principle intervenes in order to assure the Ego's survival, and that is the principle of reality which regulates the functioning of the pleasure principle, according to the demands of the surrounding world.

What has to be considered is that these principles are opposing each other, the pleasure principle continuously demanding satisfaction beyond the reality principle, while the latter is concerned to impose social constraints and restrictions to the former, that makes its demands socially accepted. This antinomic couple is for the first time questioned in one of Freud's essays from 1920, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where we witness the apparition of another primary compulsion that set the movement of psychic energy against its formal directness, and that is the instinct of death. This instinct is

said to be even more primary than the pleasure orientated movement of psychic energy that was seeking to preserve the survival of the Ego and of the human species. The instinct of death is still a preserving one, but that is set to preserve some initial, archaic state of development, the inorganic one. It is set to destroy the units that were created through the double play of the pleasure and reality principles.

The death instinct is operating on all levels, biological, psychological and cultural, but its most obvious dimension or representative is the appetite for destruction that is discoverable on the large scale of historical events. While both the development of an individual and societies are the function of the preservation instincts of hunger and love, ego instincts and object instincts, the other main component of the same development is the compulsion to aggression that is a derivative of the death instinct. The two pillars are not so much Eros and Ananke, but Eros and Death. The aggression brought by the death instinct that is first directed towards Ego's own destruction, is usually diverted and directed towards some external object, through a defense mechanism of the Ego that is the work of the Eros. The paradox is that the death impulse does not contradict the satisfaction demanded by the pleasure principle, and Freud will emphasize the narcissist satisfaction of a carried on aggressive act, or the satisfaction that is felt through sadism. The social dimension of aggression comes as a confirmation of its psychological feature where it is usually found to accompany the Eros, as we may find out in phenomena like narcissism and sadism.

The dialectic of Eros and Thanatos is more complicated and more refined than it first appears. When we revise our lecture, it seems as we encounter more and more paradoxes in Freud's analysis. Freud is only mentioning that the diversion of the death impulse and its aggressive corollary towards the external world is a work of Eros. But Eros is the one that, in the mean time, is also the principle of attraction that creates the human communities that evolve into larger social aggregates. There is no clear explanation of this seemingly contradiction, and we have to search for it into the intricate relationships between the death instinct and erotic one, or the ego-istic instinct of preservation versus the species preservation.

As Freud's analysis is unfolding on both levels we see that the individual development parallels the development of social communities. As the aggressiveness of the ego first turns against itself, when diverted, the social pathology of aggression sets it against society, turning it into the greatest enemy of the civilization. And the society retaliates by restricting the satisfaction demanded, by institutionalizing the punishment for aggressive acts. This institutionalization is interiorized and disguised through the

internal representative of the external authority, the Super-Ego. This is a later acquisition of both psychic and social development that evens the act of aggression with the mere aggressive intention, and this is the moment when the guilty conscience is making its appearance. The aggressive conscience is the internal substitute of the aggression that is to be expected from external authority and we may find a proportional direct relation between the renunciations that are voluntarily adopted and the enhancement of the aggression on behalf of the super-ego. Freud offers a quantitative – economical explanation of this paradoxical relationship. As the quantity of aggressive energy remains the same within the psychic apparatus, the aggressive energy that has been disaffected by voluntary renunciation is taken over by the super-ego increasing its own aggressiveness towards the ego. The outcome is the continuous growth of that feeling of uneasiness or discontent that parallels any movement of the civilization.

Fukuyama contends that we may be more and more happier, but maybe the end of history means living in societies composed only by members that had lost entirely their desire to be recognized as better, their willingness to fight for and protect the common good, their sense of justice, and these are the societies that have as their most valuable possession the desire of individual to self preservation. If we listen to Freud, the sense of discontent is the one that could reverse the direction towards universal happiness, as the limit of this feeling is the growth of psychic disorders while psychic depression could turn into the one of the largest phenomena in the following years (for this, I find one work to be inspiring, *The Noonday Daemon, An Anatomy of Depression*, written by Andrew Solomon, but there are many books and articles on this topic).

So, what are we left with, at the end of our brief journey through aggression, history, happiness, love and death? Beside it being an object of analysis and explanation, aggression poses a problem: it is a phenomenon to which we should all oppose but, at the same time, it seems to be a constitutional feature of our own and of our society's development. If, as it seems that our discussion has turned us all into bad, aggressive people, what could be said about the moral debate which usually opposes the human nature and the moral law? One of Kant's moral axioms suppose that we should all behave as listening to a maxim that we wish to turn into an universal one. We surely don't want other people to behave aggressively towards us. We react badly to aggression, although aggressiveness is something that is a latent feature of anyone's comportment and we remember Sartre's words, that we don't need some other world to find hell, it helps us just to look into other people's eyes.

Reflecting the psychological analysis back to its previous sociological/political one, we may say that, even if aggression has as its moment of departure the encounter of two or more human beings, the aggressiveness is said to already predetermine our attitude towards them. Civilization may bring that harmless mutual recognition that may satisfy our desire, but, if we listen to Freud, aggression is then only internalized and turned against ourselves. Connecting the death instinct with aggressiveness makes the latter indispensable since we didn't yet find a way to dispense with death.

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