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The political potentiality of the psychoanalytic process

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Prologue

Psychoanalysis has been, since its inception, a deviation from the norm, a discourse and practice on that other that is the unconscious. In its early history, psychoanalysis was referred to in Europe as the “Jewish science” – perhaps symbolic of the position of the Jewish people throughout history as that radical and persecuted other within, or at the core of, the self-sameness of “normal Christian Europe”; or, in other words, as emblematic of the unconscious. Psychoanalytic discourse and practice can thus be thought of as a scene of radical otherness within the entrails of the normal – call this consciousness, the status quo, or ideology.

In this sense, psychoanalysis, by its very nature and history, is on the side of those who have been excluded, persecuted, made invisible, and marginalized. Elisabeth Roudinesco (2001) provocatively claims that “Psychoanalysis must always offer its help in struggles against all forms of discrimination – anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism, and any other kind of persecution. As a discipline, it has always been persecuted with the type of argument used against minorities” (p. 121). Psychoanalysis is on the side of silenced minor histories and struggles and works on inheriting them and the plights of whom Frantz Fanon (2005) called the “wretched of the earth.” From the socio-political and historical Western point of view that places European, Christian, heterosexual, male, and white people as central or normal, these individuals have been erroneously perceived as the “underdeveloped,” the “savages,” the “infantile,” those who are supposedly waiting for “civilization” to “illuminate” them. This is how, for example, the Christian colonizers imagined the “Indians” in the “discovered” so-called Americas. This conceptualization from a position of misogyny, hetero-normativity, and racially/socio-economical privilege continues today to inflict itself upon the poor, the queer, people of color, immigrants, and women.

In contrast, psychoanalysis assumes difference or otherness as an irreducible reality and draws its assumptions and clinical practice from a position that assumes no point of normalcy or primacy. In psychoanalysis, difference is the primary starting point. The unconscious stands as a testament to such difference or otherness, and our work problematizes the categorization of the individual

in relation to an “average,” seeing this as a derivative and defensive formation against difference. Indeed, the framework of psychoanalysis places us within the scene of a rich but suppressed otherness which is constitutive of the world. It is an otherness or even a darkness through which we can begin to imagine the state-of-things as being otherwise.

Given that this is the case, psychoanalysis is in a unique position to foster political potentiality in a patient’s subjectivity, particularly in working with individuals who are excluded, deprived of centrality in their particular cultures and societies, and considered in so many ways the “wretched of the earth.”

In this essay I will share my experience in working with Antonio,¹ whose life history and various aspects of identity have placed him in the position of one of the “wretched.” Through his story, which I find to be representative of my work with other individuals with similarly complex histories (including childhood, political, and cultural trauma), I will explore how the psychoanalytic process can enhance political potentiality in an individual’s subjective sense of self. I hope that Antonio’s case will illustrate the ways in which patients, due to their perceived otherness and related abuse, discrimination, and marginalization, can sometimes play out and interpret, within the analytic process, fantasies that unconsciously weave together the heterogeneous intra-psychic and socio-political dimensions of their lives. I will alternate in this essay between presenting some aspects of my treatment of Antonio and theoretical articulations that sprang from my experience in treating him and others. It is my attempt at re-creating, on a small scale, the dynamic interplay between theory and practice in psychoanalysis.

Introducing Antonio

I treated Antonio for three years, beginning five years ago, when he was 36 years old. A Latin American gay man, he was born and raised in a country historically and culturally defined by sharp socioeconomic, cultural, and racial divisions and tensions. He emigrated to the U.S. many years ago, escaping sexual, socio-political, historical, and racial persecution and discrimination. He was applying for asylum when we started treatment.

When Antonio first came to see me, he suffered from complex and debilitating post-traumatic symptoms. He was extremely withdrawn; he had recurrent nightmares in which he re-experienced his multiples traumas; he suffered from medically unexplained loss of hair and rashes on his body; he got terrified whenever anybody approached him from behind; and he was depressed and in a state of constant anxiety and fear.

The youngest in his family, Antonio was born and raised in the capital city in his home country. His father, who was considered white, was raised in the capital, but his mother was indigenous and grew up in the countryside. In the capital, there was considerable bias against poor, uneducated, and “savage Indians.” Due to his background, Antonio felt that his very being, his origin, was torn between

what in Latin America has historically been called, with racial and socio-political prejudice, the divide between “civilization and barbarism.”

With time, he told me that although he lived in the capital where discrimination against indigenous people was rampant, he always identified himself, though in secret, with his mother’s indigenous “glorious past,” from before the time when the white Spaniards (associated, in his mind, with his father) colonized and destroyed the peaceful and blissful existence (related to his mother) of the original population with their violence. This was his own interpretation, which led, in his interactions with me as his psychoanalyst, to the unconscious fantasy of a wished-for peaceful and blissful co-existence with mother before the violence perpetrated by his colonizing and violent father.

In Latin America, especially in Antonio’s home country, his physical appearance typically placed him in the minds of others as indigenous or mixed. As such he often experienced racial discrimination, which over time was dramatically intertwined with discrimination based on his sexual identity. Beginning at home, and especially coming from his much older brothers and his father, he was always called “maricón,” a pejorative term with harsher implications than the English language pejoratives to which it may be translated. In addition to his racial and sexual identities, Antonio also experienced discrimination because he was born and raised in an extremely poor “barrio,” an inner-city shantytown, living in an almost torn-down house that his neighbors called the “house of horrors.”

Both of Antonio’s parents were emotionally and materially neglectful of him. His father could hardly hold a steady job because of his alcoholism and psychopathology that Antonio could not label because it was never properly diagnosed (probably psychotic breakdowns). The father was constantly in and out of psychiatric institutions, medicated and drinking. Returning home after being discharged from the hospital, he would have violent fits of rage, sexually assaulting his wife and verbally and physically assaulting the entire family. Antonio reported that several times his father cut his own chest with a knife, exclaiming, “This is all Antonio’s fault for being a *maricón*. He brought disgrace to the family. He should not have been born; he was a mistake.”

Antonio remembers with intense clarity the blood coming from his father’s chest and going onto the floor, mixed up with all the dirt. Needless to say, Antonio was intensely afraid of his father’s violence, and early on he began to feel guilty for all the violence at home, especially that between his mother and father: between the colonized and the colonizer. Antonio created within himself a deeply entrenched internalized sense of guilt for being indigenous and gay, with its corresponding punishment, attacks, and hate against his Self. Pause for a moment to imagine how a socio-political and historical violence is felt when it is internalized and directed internally against who you are. Antonio lived with that. As an understandable though inhibiting defensive strategy, Antonio became extremely withdrawn, keeping all his thoughts and feelings to himself (especially his rage), including his conflicts over being gay and indigenous, in order to not bring more

pain to the family. He was called “*el muerto*” (the dead) because he rarely spoke. This had, in his fantasy, made him invisible to violence and attacks.

But the attacks continued in ways that Antonio could not anticipate, and his exposure to trauma continued. For a long time, during Antonio’s childhood, his mother relocated to a faraway town in the country to find work and fill the income gap left by his father. During this time, when his father was hospitalized or drinking, which was most of the time, Antonio was left in the care of his two older brothers. Although he felt abandoned, at least during this time he felt that there was a truce in the civil war of his family. He had memories of them bathing him and taking care of him while they said, “We have hope in you, you are the only good thing that has come out of this family.” He felt an intimacy and closeness with his older brothers. But soon his brothers became involved with drugs and drinking. When drunk and stoned, they would become violent just like his father.

It was during this time, when Antonio was perhaps about five or six years of age, that his older brothers began to rape him while they exclaimed, echoing their father, remarks that only added to his internalized sense of guilt: “This is what you *maricones* want and deserve,” and “This is the punishment you get for being an Indian *maricón* who brings disgrace to the family.” After the abuse, Antonio would go to a room in his house, the “room of punishment,” he called it in analysis with me, a hoarding room where waste and garbage had accumulated, his space for punishing himself by hitting himself, cutting himself, tearing his hair out. All of these punishments were precipitated by unconscious guilt for being gay and indigenous in a racist/homophobic culture.

Antonio and I came to understand this history as being constitutive of the meaning of his present loss of hair and the rashes all over his body: unconscious ways of continuing to punish himself to assuage his guilt, this time within the “room of punishment” of his own psyche-soma. Analyzing his guilt in the space of the analytic process, Antonio slowly stopped suffering from these psychosomatic symptoms.

The psychoanalytic process

In his famous paper “On the Therapeutic Action of Psycho-Analysis,” Hans Loewald succinctly defines the psychoanalytic process as “the significant interactions between patient and analyst that ultimately lead to structural changes in the patient’s personality” (1980a, p. 221). He adds that “structural changes in the patient’s personality” and psychic development in the patient “is contingent on the relationship with a new object, the analyst” (p. 221).

In “Psychoanalysis as an Art and the Fantasy Character of the Psychoanalytic Situation,” Loewald specified that what is unique about this process is a “re-enactment, a dramatization of aspects of the patient’s psychic life history” (1980b, p. 353) created in interaction with the analyst. In this sense, the psychoanalytic process can be understood as “an emotionally experienced recapitulation of the patient’s inner life history in crucial aspects of its unfolding” (p. 353). Quoting

Aristotle, who defined tragedy as “imitation of action in the form of action,” Loewald says that the analytic process has the form of a drama created by a fantasy function which weaves together memories and desire-fueled imaginative contents from the patient’s past entering in dynamic interaction with the present actuality: the specificities of the relationship developed between the patient and her analyst are intertwined with the socio-political and historical context of the patient and the analyst.

In interaction with the actuality of the patient, the psychoanalytic process slowly brings about for exploring the structure of the unconscious configuration through which the patient weaves together past, present, and future worlds in a way that might be causing psychic pain, suffering, symptoms, and troublesome character traits. This is a configuration constituted by the active functions of fantasy, memory, desire, imagination, defense, conflict, symbolization, and drive activity, among other elements.

Furthering his explication of psychoanalysis as process, Loewald conceptualizes the analytic situation as a play: the “make-believe aspect of the psychoanalytic situation” (1980b, p. 354) he calls it. Both patient and analyst contribute in the creation of it. Loewald says in “Psychoanalysis as an Art and the Fantasy Character of the Psychoanalytic Situation”:

The patient takes the lead in furnishing the material and the action of this fantasy creation, while the analyst takes the lead in coalescing, articulating, and explicating the action and revealing and highlighting it as an illusion (note that the word illusion derives from the Latin *ludere*, to play). The patient experiences and acts without knowing at first that he is creating a play. Gradually he becomes more of an author aware of being an author, by virtue of the analyst’s interventions that reflect back to the patient what he does and says, and by transference interpretations that reveal the relations between play and the original action that the play imitates.

(p. 354)

The psychoanalytic process allows for both a recreation of the unconscious framework from which a patient’s experience of the world is constructed and an immediate demonstration of their actions within that framework as it is transferred onto the analytic situation. Within it, the patient might be unconsciously inclined to assign the analyst the role of a past or present meaningful character, or just an aspect of a relationship which is organized through imagination, fantasy, and desire. Early experiences in the patient’s life will be determinant in this, though these “original experiences” or “original actions” are constantly re-fashioned in interaction with the actuality of the patient, and especially the actuality of the analytic situation. Loewald observes:

The unconscious organization of the past in repetition undergoes change during the course of treatment. In good part these changes depend on the impact

of current experiences with the analyst that do not fit the anticipatory set the patient brings to his experiencing another.

(1980b, p. 360)

Anticipatory expectations and meaning-making in Antonio's case

I remember with clarity the impression that Antonio had on me the first time I saw him, and the way I reacted and felt. He offered me his handshake, before and after the session, and I could feel the cold sweat and tension in his hands. He sat across from me, literally “on the edge of his seat,” vigilant, anxious, but at the same petrified by what looked like paralyzing pain and fear. Who was I for him, that made him feel so vigilant, and anxious, and petrified? It seemed to me like my mere presence, mediated by his anticipatory expectations of what it meant to be alone in a room with a man, a Latin American man, were already traumatizing to him.

It was as if he were ready to run out of the room at any moment and at the same time unable to move. Both wanting and not wanting to be there with me. He did not take off his jacket and held his bag tightly throughout the session, not seeming comfortable in his own skin and much less with me. He talked in a soft monotone, rocking back and forth, playing with his hands and his bag, and rarely making eye contact. Was he rocking to soothe himself? Was he rocking as play? All of this both made me feel paralyzed (I could feel the tension in my own body, perhaps as a way of mirroring the desires and fears of his body) and provoked a deep need to reach across the real and imaginary border that separated us at the time.

I remember that, during our first session, Antonio would sometimes oscillate, even within the short scope of one sentence, from the formal and informal modes of addressing another person in Spanish (between “*tú*” and “*usted*”). I also found myself enacting such oscillation in addressing him, and feeling strange in doing this. What were we re-enacting without knowing? A certain power dynamic, perhaps that between the colonizer and the colonized, captured by language?

Some time into the treatment, I mentioned this oscillation to Antonio, and he told me that he felt unsure as to how he should address me in therapy. I asked him what he preferred, what he felt most comfortable with. He told me that he was ambivalent about it, not knowing how formal or informal this relationship was. He eventually told me that he would settle with the informal “*tú*” (the way friends or family members address each other), which is what we used going forward. I remember feeling a lowering of my own tension once this had been settled, or perhaps negotiated for the first time (without knowing the full scope of its meaning), having found an incipient potential space where we both felt more comfortable to relate and work together, which came from an attempt at bridging the border that separated us, creating a proximity between us, whose meaning we did not understand at the time. It was a place between trust and treason, I can say in hindsight. I knew before he told me his story that it would be difficult to gain Antonio's trust and build the therapeutic alliance.

Based on Antonio's elaboration of his history and how he constructed his experience of the analytic process with me, I can say that his expectations of any human relationship with a man contained a proviso: "He who is there to care for me will betray and abuse me." Intimate relationships were imaginative re-elaborations of personal and historical trauma, and Antonio constructed his experience of the analytic relationship accordingly.

Early in the treatment, I was also struck by Antonio's capacity, or his genuine effort, to articulate his thoughts and feelings, sometimes coming up with images that were his only ways of communicating his sometimes vague and painful experiences. I noticed that whenever he would find himself stuck in continuing his story he would use imagery and metaphors to carry on and over the difficulty. For example, he used the image of the Conquest to understand the unconscious, intra-psychic fantasy dimension that structures his experience of the world, but also his actual experiences at home, in his racist and homophobic home country, and within the analytic process. This image made clearer the complex connections between his conscious experience and its unconscious dimension, between his past and his present, between his intra-psychic world and his socio-political world. It was a way of interpreting himself, a meaning-making and mental-linking process.

He developed this capacity from an early age. As a young boy, he would use popular songs and their lyrics to interpret his complex feelings and self-states. It is a capacity that I believe has allowed him to use the treatment as a space of play, a transitional or potential space to explore unsuspected experiences and meanings that emerged between us. I have come to believe that this capacity has literally saved his life and has been a powerful ally in helping him make sense of the senseless and violent events that have plagued his life and from which he has managed to escape. They were a life force that gave him a sense of freedom as potentiality to be otherwise.

The potentiality of the psychoanalytic process

Antonio's case helps us understand how the psychoanalytic process activates the past and offers the potential for reflection, the creation of new meanings, and change. It grants a framework for experiencing what is historical in a dynamic way – the intertwining of how personal and historical past experiences will give shape to present and future ones. The past is always alive in the present and the future as a structuring force. But also, as Loewald observes, "It is not only true that the present is influenced by the past, but also that the past – as a living force within the patient – is influenced by the present" (1980, p. 360). The always dynamic interactions between past and present will structure the equally dynamic potentiality of the future. Loewald, echoing Winnicott, calls this a space of illusion, of play. In the psychoanalytic process, the future as potentiality comes from the re-enactment and playful exploration of the dynamic relations between past and present.

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Psychoanalysis deepens the patient's sense of subjectivity as a locus of activity in the creation of a fixed way of experiencing the world that might, for example, be producing pain and suffering. Patients who are aware of their unconscious authorship in the dramatic framework through which perceptions and relationships are experienced may find themselves liberated, able to be other than what they have been before within the recreated drama of analysis. Loewald says that within the analytic process, the "relative freedom from constraints in play and fantasy life is not only a relief from the exigencies of life, it also allows one to see beyond these exigencies" (1980b, p. 367). Freedom here is not only *freedom from* life's constraints and exigencies. It is also *freedom to* see and experience oneself and one's world in life-enhancing ways that enrich meaning. This is the realm of potentiality.

To further clarify what I mean by potentiality, it is important to consider that what Loewald calls "fantasy" is not opposed to "reality." Fantasy is more akin to what the psychoanalyst Jean-Georges Schimek (2011) calls "unconscious fantasy" – "an early established organizing structure, a kind of repetitive scenario which can manifest itself in action and thought, in symptoms, and in dreams so that conscious fantasy is only one of many partial manifestations of a basic unconscious fantasy" (p. 131). Unconscious fantasy, in this sense, is close to the dramatic framework of experiencing I have been discussing.² Loewald writes:

Fantasy here does not mean that something takes place that is not to be taken seriously or that is unreal. Patients . . . often think so, as they tend to think in regard to dreams. While analysts are more sophisticated about dreams and fantasy life, they all too frequently fall into the error of regarding fantasy as being opposed to reality, as something to be eventually discarded or relegated to a psychic enclave. But fantasy is unreal only insofar as its communication with present actuality is inhibited or severed.

(1980b, p. 362)

It is the lively, interactive communication and mutual constitution between fantasy and actuality that allows for potential change in our interior and exterior realities. Present actuality includes the process with the analyst. But even the analyst might err in taking the fantasy of the patient as something opposed to reality. It thus becomes a "psychic enclave" for both analyst and patient. It becomes something that cannot be subject to change, something which just *is* – a fully actualized, self-subsistent thing. Both internal and external realities are, therefore, taken to be dichotomic actualities with no room for potentiality, for change. But when this is the case, we are faced with defensive operations that disrupt the lively communication between the subjective and objective worlds, making them both lose meaning. The analytic process helps the patient become "aware that play or drama and actual life share reality" (Loewald, 1980a, p. 363).

For psychoanalysis, if there is an opposition to be analyzed, whenever it happens, it is not between fantasy and reality; it is, rather, between fantasy and

actuality. The drama or play of the analytic process allows for a lived understanding of how the dynamic interplay between fantasy and actuality unconsciously construes the reality of the patient. The ongoing experiencing and interpretation of this dynamic, unconscious interplay between fantasy and actuality, enacted as play between patient and analyst, is internalized by the patient as a process that fosters potentiality for change. Moreover, this process is the unconscious conceived as potentiality itself, a “transitional state between mere inner fantasy and actuality” (Loewald, 1980b, p. 369). Following Winnicott (2006), Loewald writes that it is a “third area” (1980b, p. 369), an area of experiencing which is neither fantasy nor actuality, one that expands “into creative living and into the whole culture of man” (p. 370). It all depends on the patient recognizing the “play of fantasy – a trial action in the sense in which Freud spoke of thought as trial action – which shares in organizing reality, far from being unreal and therefore to be discarded” (Loewald, 1980b, p. 367). The experience and interpretation of the unconscious as potentiality, as that third area that articulates fantasy and actuality, makes possible nascent, creative ways of acting and being in the world, the trial of a potentially different existence considered as an open, never fully actualized process.

The political potentiality of the psychoanalytic process

What is specifically political about the potentiality of the analytic process? Since Aristotle, potentiality is taken in Western thought to be the opposite of actuality. What is potential is what is not yet actual, such that whenever the potential becomes actualized, its condition as being potential is annulled or canceled. Potentiality is conceptualized as a faculty or a capacity. Think about the eyes’ potential to see, their capacity to see, the faculty of seeing. Once our eyes see an actual object, then, during such action, their potentiality to see disappears or is annulled in its actualization. Eyes that are actually seeing cannot be said to have the potential to see.

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben has attempted to go beyond the binary opposition between potentiality and actuality. His highly original interpretation of Aristotle confronts us “with a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality” (1999, p. 181). In this sense, potentiality is never annulled in actuality but rather remains in it as “shadow”:

Human beings can . . . see shadows, they can experience darkness: they have the *potential* not to see, the *possibility of privation*. . . . The greatness – and also the abyss – of human potentiality is that it is first of all potential not to act, *potential for darkness*.

(p. 181, emphasis in original)

I believe we can use Agamben’s re-interpretation to conceptualize the experiencing of the unconscious as one of potentiality: a structuring process and

force which articulates the interplay between fantasy and actuality. Inasmuch as potentiality produces actuality and is conserved in it as its shadow, the unconscious is “potential for darkness.” The analytic process fosters the patients’ experiencing of this darkness, which is the shadow of potentiality inhering the actuality of our world.

Agamben explores the political implications of this new way of thinking about potentiality/actuality. He writes in “On Potentiality”:

Here it is possible to see how the root of freedom is to be found in the abyss of potentiality. To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is, in the sense we have seen, *to be capable of one’s own impotentiality*.

(1999, pp. 182–183, emphasis in original)

Insofar as human beings exist as beings who possess the power to know, produce, and act, they always exist in the mode of potentiality. But every human potentiality exists only in relation to its own privation – potential not to act or think in a given way, the potential to experience our own darkness: the unconscious. Other non-human living beings exist only in relation to their potentiality: they can only do this or that. Human beings, on the contrary, are the “animals who are capable of their own impotentiality” (Agamben, 1999, p. 182).

The unconscious as “potentiality for darkness” (or as the very darkness which is potentiality) produces embryonic new ways of acting and being in the world that escape determinism, automatism, and mechanical causality. We are talking about existence as an always open and never fully actualized process that is not transparent to itself: the realm of freedom. Transparency, both in relation to the internal and external worlds, is the result of defensive operations that makes them fixed, inert, given things, hence not subject to change. It is the space of the primacy of consciousness, the status quo, ideology.

Elisabeth Roudinesco writes:

It is because Freud put subjectivity at the heart of this structure that he came to conceptualize an (unconscious) determination obliging the subject no longer to regard himself as master of the world but as a consciousness of self, external to the spiral of mechanical causalities. . . . For [his theory] is the only one . . . to install the primacy of a subject inhabited by the consciousness of his own unconscious, or again by the consciousness of his own dispossession. . . . The subject is only free because it agrees to take up the challenge of this constraining liberty and reconstructs it meaning.

(2001, pp. 54–55)

Paradoxical as it may sound, only a subject who becomes aware of their own dispossession (“privation,” for Agamben), or of her own lack of self-transparency – all ways of referring to the unconscious as potentiality – can begin the political

project of freedom: the challenge of taking up the reconstruction of the meaning of an always constrained liberty, a task put forward by the analytic situation.

The political, as I understand it, refers to a space construed from the dynamic interactions of multiples subjectivities. It is a space of dynamic interplay between the intra-psychoic and the inter-psychoic constituted by a complex gamut of actions, conflicts, expenditures, emotional investments, and discourses. This dynamic interplay then becomes reified in specific institutions, rules, restrictions, modes of organization and governance, and discourses. The political is a process or flux that creates the conditions of possibility of what we take to be the aforementioned *contents of politics*: its specific incarnations. It is the political conceived as potentiality, or as what I am calling *political potentiality*: the unconscious as *dúnamis*.³

Let us see this from a perspective that will further elucidate my understanding of the specifically political dimension of the potentiality fostered by the psychoanalytic process. The analytic situation is not only a representation of the world, it is also part of it. It never occurs in a socio-political, historical, or cultural vacuum. The two actors in this process (patient and analyst), together with its specific localization in time and space, are a thing of the world. In talking of analysis as dramatic process, we are thinking about how the subjectivities of the analyst and the patient unconsciously activate and recreate the complex relations between the intra-psychoic and the inter-psychoic.

There is a *constitutive knot* that is brought to the fore, as unconscious potentiality, between the socio-political, historical, and cultural dimensions of the world, *and* the intra-psychoic dimension of subjectivity. The analytic process fosters a space, a political one, according to my previous understanding of it, where to explore how subjectivity is always a singular recreation and crystallization of the socio-political, the historical, and the cultural; but, on that same token, it is also a space where to examine how the latter are always the result of interpretations stemming from specific subjectivities in interaction with it. The analytic process fosters, and has as its main object of interpretation, the third space that ties and unties the knot of these two realms in the patient.⁴

The analytic process becomes, therefore, the site of the exploration of the constitutive relationality between subjectivity and the world, one which is traversed by conflicts, expenditures, desires, emotional investments, and discourses that are inherent to the political as potentiality. For psychoanalysis, it is a relationality structured by language, the stuff of which the analytic drama is made of. It is language conceived as the bearer of the socio-political, cultural, and historical dimension of reality, but also as the bearer of individual subjectivity. Considered in this way, language includes its conscious content-based feature, but also its procedural, unconscious ones – gesture, tone, body, rhythm, patterns of affect, modes of relating, its dimension as an open play of signifiers, the fact of it being an interaction between subjectivities that produces signification, and re-creates action, power dynamics, culture, and history.

As Loewald reminds us:

The injunction to free-associate rather than give a coherent narrative promotes the tension towards re-enactment because everything that encourages the influence of unconscious currents, including those generated by the actual presence of the analyst, is promoting reactivation rather than mere representational recollection of past experience.

(1980b, p. 365)

Analysis, as a process that fosters political potentiality, or the understanding of the political as potentiality, promotes the activation of the unconscious procedural dimension of language: language considered as a structuring process of the political and not only as a content-based fixed set of representations.

Based on this activation and exploration, the patient may thus begin to explore non-fixed new modes of political self-understanding and understanding the world she is part of. I am talking about new modes of being in the world that can potentially go beyond the (too) coherent narratives that constitute the patient's subjectivity and political reality. The political potentiality fostered by the analytic process, and the experiencing of the unconscious as *that potentiality*, can interrupt, problematize, and re-work the political narratives that are at the base of the status quo, consciousness, and ideology. These are narratives which in patients like Antonio are more radically at the core of their suffering, discrimination, marginalization, and the suppression of their political agency; narratives which have become internalized and *made falsely necessary* in the form of a victimhood that is fixed, insistent, self-evident.

By exploring in analysis the genealogy of the formation of such false necessity as dramatic play between fantasy and actuality, the patient becomes freer to think about the structure of her drama as *a set of contingencies made necessary* through defensive strategies of self-preservation and adaptation, and through complex self-identifications with socio-political ideas of normalcy that structure her subjective and objective worlds as *what is given*, hence with no (elbow) room for change. Within the analytic process, the patient begins to inhabit a potential space where there is a radical questioning of what has become natural to them. It is a space of re-elaboration and re-signification where necessities are made contingent; and that, for this reason, promotes freedom.

Epilogue: political potentiality in Antonio's case

With Antonio, I always tried to create a potential space between us, the third area between fantasy and actuality that "expands into creative living" (Loewald, 1980b, p. 370). A space where he could explore the socio-political, historical, and cultural elements that constituted his subjectivity in dynamic interplay with the activity of his own mind. A space where, therefore, he could begin to imagine himself otherwise – not determined to be only a victim, for example. This is

not to deny that he was a real victim of abuse and discrimination, but rather a way of understanding how he unconsciously construed the meaning of his own victimhood.

Recall that Antonio's abuse by his brothers occurred in a context of him being and feeling abandoned by his father and mother. The brothers then cared for him. While they bathed him, as I said, they would express their love. For this reason, he construed rape as intimacy, or intimacy as rape: something desirable but at the same time terrifying and hurtful. This was at the core of the construction of his own sense of victimhood, historically related in his mind with the colonized Indians.

In re-creating his relationship with me in this way, it allowed us to explore it as the form of a drama that had historically shaped the experience of himself and the world. The structure of this drama, which informed a way of seeing himself in relation to others, had become necessary and thus natural to Antonio: this is how things simply have been, are, and have to be in the future. It constituted a determinism, an automatism, or a fatalism which constantly dehumanized him now within the scope of how own subjectivity and his own agency. In helping him see how the form of this drama had become falsely necessary within his own mind and in its collusion, the analytic process fostered in him the political project of freedom, the challenge of taking up the reconstruction of the meaning of an always constrained liberty.

Antonio's life was plagued by real constraints. And it pained me that he had to live in a world where abuse, violence, and discrimination are common currency. But I was his psychoanalyst, not his educator, his political activist, or his savior. Had I assumed these patronizing roles within the analytic situation, I would have put Antonio in a passive position that repeated his multiples abuses. I would have become the colonizer of his mind like his brothers, his father, our culture.⁵

What I could do was help him, within the analytic process, to begin thinking of his constraints and privations as being in relation to his freedom; and not, on the contrary, experienced as producing a deterministic, automatic, and hence fully transparent sense of his own subjectivity: I can only be who I am, what history determined me to be: "ugly Indian, savage, marginal, *maricón*." The analytic process opened up the possibility of him fashioning his subjectivity as a place of activity that, having contributed to produce the meaning of his own victimhood, could also create other socio-political meanings, new ways of imagining himself in relation to others, perhaps even by giving unanticipated political meaning to, and finding political potentiality in, being an "ugly Indian, marginal, savage, *maricón*."

The analytic process was a potential place of play that helped him integrate his experience of being part of the "wretched of the earth," with his new experience of being free to understand this in creative ways that could produce an active resistance against the internalized status quo, against ideology and consciousness. Experiencing and understanding his unconscious as darkness, as an impotentiality at the core of his potentiality to act and think in the world, Antonio began

the project of imagining his life beyond the paralyzing, inhibiting post-traumatic effects that brought him to analysis. Antonio started to inhabit the politically potential space where he could claim his own sense of authorship and legitimacy in the world.

Notes

- 1 “Antonio” is a pseudonym. I have changed aspects of his life history and of the history of his treatment for reasons of confidentiality. I will always be deeply grateful to him.
- 2 From now on, when I speak about “fantasy” I will always mean “unconscious fantasy.”
- 3 This is the original Ancient Greek word for its Latin translation *potentia*, from which “potential” and “potentiality” stem from. In its Latin translation, *dúnamis* loses its sense as movement, process, and action that it still has in its translation into words such as “dynamic.”
- 4 As the psychoanalyst Madelaine Baranger writes, this third space, which she conceptualizes as “field,” has been thought in other ways by psychoanalysts such as André Green (“the tertiary”), Thomas Ogden (“the analytic third”), Cesar and Sara Botella (“the intermediate state between waking and sleep”), and Christopher Bollas (“the transformational object”) (2005, pp. 64–68).
- 5 This does not deny my belief that, outside the analytic situation, political activism is necessary in trying to change the socio-political conditions and structures at the core of Antonio’s trauma; or my belief that psychoanalysts have valuable discursive and theoretical tools that should be used in the public arena to criticize such conditions and structures.

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