

## Do we need Marx as therapists?

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“The treatment of an entire family ... is a new procedure in psychiatry. Just when Family Therapy originated is difficult to estimate because the movement has been largely a secret one. Until recently, therapists who treat whole families have not published on their methods, and their papers are still quite rare ... As a result, ... one could attend psychiatric meetings and hear nothing about Family Therapy unless, in a quiet hotel room, one happened to confess that he treated whole families. Then another therapist would put down his drink and reveal that he too had attempted this type of therapy. These furtive conversations ultimately led to an underground movement of therapists devoted to this most challenging of all types of psychotherapy and this movement is now appearing on the surface”.

This enchanting extract from Jay Haley’s “Wither Family Therapy” (Family Process, 1, 1962) induces us into an atmosphere of mystery and nostalgia, reconstructing an ambience where a genuine movement in psychotherapy was pioneered by a group of anti-conformist thinkers and risking people.

It is commonly accepted that family therapy appeared in opposition to individual psychotherapy and especially to the dominant psychoanalytic establishment.

What I find very interesting is the time and the context where Haley wrote this article.

If we had to wonder “Wither Family Therapy?” today, as Helm Stierling did (1997, 2000, 2003), this could be seen as a “mature” question, posed at a time where many alternatives, following debates, have made the field of great diversity and complexity. But how does one come to such an “existential” question at a time where family therapy movement was becoming robust, thriving, and gaining control over its predecessors’ individual therapies?

One can speculate that the early formulation of this “wither” question is related to a precocious agony of a Haley-militant as to what is going to become in a post-oppositional period, which in fact followed the underground period. The resolution of a principal opposition (individual psychoanalysis-family systemic psychotherapy) in a way that family therapy created its own professional territory, gave the purists of the new epistemology recognition and authority, but, nevertheless this victory of the “new” over the “old” raised anxieties as to how this “new” could keep alive in a state of self-sufficiency, continue to flourish on a “peacefull ground”.

Or, in poet Kavafis’s words “And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?”

Can we have growth and rebirth without contradictions, as a normal evolutionary process?

I would like to stress three points where oppositions are recognized in an intermediate area, where continuity leads to discontinuity or “revolutionary leaps”.

1. Oppositions in therapy
2. Oppositions in theory
3. Oppositions in institutional frameworks and psychotherapeutic culture.

1. As all human relations are dominated by oppositions it could not be expected that the therapeutic context (where we experience intense, even intimate relationships) is possible to develop without oppositions.

In the field of family therapy it is very important to stress that in first-cybernetic order therapies the therapist, as an outside observer, set himself apart from the oppositions, which were exclusively attributed to the family.

The active, even manipulative therapist did a hard work to reveal and/or control oppositions; for example confrontation was used in a directive, strategic form. (Is Carl Whitaker an exception?).

Then, during the appearance of constructivism and then social constructionism-narrative therapy, the therapist became part of the therapeutic system, or adopted a “not-knowing”, collaborative stance, inducing alternative narratives.

Is it then possible that therapy, as a process, got rid of this annoying and stressful, embarrassing trash as oppositions?

I think that this was the turning point of inculcating (even incriminating) oppositions in therapy.

Many therapists, mainly in group-therapy, describe a dialectical process excluding themselves from the “dirty work”. But how can a therapist “feel real” (in phantasy and life) as a person having only clean hands, “clean” feelings and good manners?

To my experience modesty and caring, honesty, respect and spontaneity value also the capacity of “containing” inner and inter-relational oppositions (which sometimes take the form of painful struggle). So, the therapeutic process, based on the therapeutic relationship can create peak moments in therapy and become “mutative” to transitions.

There are similar questions regarding narratives. How do oppositional narratives operate and how can they lead to “catharsis” in an Aristotelian sense?

I believe that meaning lies on feeling.

I still find valuable L. Hoffman’s text “The Family Life Cycle as Discontinuous Change”(1989) where she illustrates how in every family there are phases of peaceful progress and evolution which are then abruptly disturbed by a leap, discontinuity following a crisis. If we experience this in the families we work with, and in our own families, why not “allow” it in the family of family therapists?

2. The theoretical field of family therapy has overgone through oppositions and crises, some of which were defined as “shift paradigm”, a term used first by Thomas Kuhn (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 1962).

This was also described by Dell and Goolishian (1979) as “evolutionary feedback”, and M. Foucault (1977) who posed the question: “How does it happen and in particular instances and in particular orders of knowledge there is an abrupt “taking off”, an acceleration of evolution, where transformations do not relate to the calm, continuous image that is usually been accepted?.”

I don’t intend to privilege discontinuity over continuity.

What I want to underline is the idea that continuity and discontinuity are two polar opposites “united and struggling” at the same time, in a recursive spiral. (One can remind of Marx’s notion of historical development as a recursive spiral).

In our field, and this is most important, the result of a shift is not simply a change in theory and techniques, but it carries a deep reformulation of psychotherapeutic culture.

Some of the interesting paradoxes in the development of knowledge are presented in the era of modernism as well as post and post-post modernism.

“Modern” Marx attacked universal, eternal truths, including those of modernism, and brought conditional, relative, historical, local beliefs in science and morality.

“Modern” Freud using psychoanalytic “truths”, and on a rigid setting, let flourish all the flowers of fragmentation, irrationality, dreaming and day-dreaming, i.e. the chaos of the unconscious.

A similar paradox is that the history of post-modernism and the narrative movements’ emergence has been radically oppositional to modernism, a form of resistance and protest. It appeared as an “anti-foundationalist” foundationalism (Flasca, 2002).

I would like to dwell on the idea of “revolutions” in the theory of psychotherapy, on those non-cumulative developmental episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced by an oppositional, even incompatible new one (the “disciplinary matrix” as Kuhn later formulated it).

What I find intriguing is this parallelism between the social theory and psychotherapy, that they share a common metaphor: revolution as human activity, which incorporates at the same time epistemology and ethics, and which in a meta-level can be seen as “historical leap”. This is an idea strongly emphasised and profoundly elaborated by Marx and the application of dialectics in nature, history and thought.

Transformation cannot be imagined as an “idyllic”, normal developmental process but has to face “anomalies” and on the relational level to allow the creation of a space for oppositions and struggle to appear and be “worked through”.

No matter how closed up different psychotherapeutic frameworks are, there is always mutual influence among them, either implicitly or “officially”.

“Revolutionary” conditions evoke when, within the matrix of a school, there is a collapse of the “holding framework” between dominant and main oppositional ideas.

No part can continue living the old way. The “unity and struggle of opposites” leads to the sublation of one or either parts of the antithesis. And there is the emergence of the new, which is demonstrating a “no”.

But what is the meaning of “no” and how can it survive on its own?

(Bateson has explained how in analogic human communication as well as in animals’ communication there is no “no”).

F. Engels in “Anti-Duhring” quotes Spinoza: *Omnis determinatio est negatio* – every determination or limitation is at the same time a negation. I must not only negate, but also negate the negation. It is “the negation of the negation”.

3. Revolutionary transformations are deeply transformative to existing institutions and the “superstructure” of psychotherapy, which includes different values, beliefs, experience and culture.

I would like to point especially up an opposition related to psychotherapeutic culture at this time of globalization.

Globalization creates complexity and allows incorporation of new tendencies in knowledge, professional attitude, ethics, aesthetics. But there is an inherent paradox: In the era of globalization we can construct creative dialogues on oppositions among different theories and ways of practice, through conferences, internet, international associations. And then, all of a sudden, we are before new obscure oppositions: Progress in communication v/s bureaucratization of institutions. Unprecedented possibilities for dialogue v/s non-critical adherence and commercialization of our profession. And finally, the therapist as self v/s controlling and uncontrollable systems.

As we can understand, these problems are presenting themselves everywhere, even in the organization of this very conference.

One central issue here is the reproduction of theory and practice, and further more the reproduction of “the way of being a therapist” (I am not referring to personalities or traditions of different theoretical schools). The way of working and thinking is reproduced mainly through textbooks, articles, presentations in conferences, educational programs. All these modes are in principle authoritative as they have to “normalise” the shift period, to create a conventional milieu, and to conform into a “non-oppositional” context. (The case of M. Ericson: Can “Ericsonian” theory exist?). This may lead to establishing bureaucratic and/or commercialized institutions and as a result to being trapped in oppositions which have as their main goal the reproduction of their power, which are control-oriented and therefore function to restrain intrinsic oppositions in the theory, practice and culture of psychotherapy.

As an example I have borrowed a description by C. Castoriadis of art during the years of Stalin. Castoriadis calls this period “massive production of positive ugliness”. I think that ugliness is just the result of the three former terms, i.e. massive, production and positive. Castoriadis states that this is not the case of lack of liberty which strangles creativity, since all great former artists did create under command (The Church, the King, the Polis), and in every continent, from ancient Greece to the Aztecs they worked on an imposed or obliged style, they created so as to serve institutional beliefs. But in any case they had beliefs of their own, they could not not believe. In the case of the bureaucratic society, says Castoriadis, in order to promote official pseudo-art, the regime had to “instrumentalize” and destroy art, creating hatred towards beauty. But then why could the officials not tolerate “innocent, inoffensive” pieces of real art let’s say a landscape? Because “instinctively” the regime knew that real art would give birth to oppositions, radical questions and would unveil its emptiness. So, says Castoriadis, this is the case of art: presentation of the Abysse, “fenetre sur le Chaos”.

Or, in the words of Winicott “the paradox of a destructiveness that creates objects, restores meaning”

One could argue that art is partly relevant to psychotherapy, but what has our epoch in common with a very authoritative era?

Globalization has in common with that period that it can create a “rule of uniformity” under a pseudo-tolerance of diversity. This is a rule which gives priority to technology, image and actions over language.

In that sense, contemporary western societies share the tendency of hating contradictions, denying oppositions as stimuli of inspiration and promoting mummification, bureaucratization and museum relations instead.

(This is also a principle of dialectics, how two opposites can be transformed one to another).

As a result, people are calming in this “global village” where diversity is supposed to be tolerated, respected and even encouraged, while the principal value of profit is amplified onto bureaucratic entities; and so oppositions, contradictions and wars take place by default of the “subject of history”(here is Marx again).

For example, if the notion of “diversity” is produced in a “positive” non-critical way, as part of massive culture, it becomes empty, hollow.

As therapists we are involved in negating power and control in order to restore self-dignity and dignity for therapy per-se. But while trying to do so denying internal struggle, pain and mourning of our past - while drawing our poetry from the past and future - we are even more trapped in a golden cage of uncontrollable systems.

In other words, none can escape to a “beyond oppositions land”. Beyond oppositions, there are always new oppositions. Instead of certainty, new uncertainties emerge.

As Castoriadis has noticed, it is the oppositions that can make our world historical and transformable.

So, as therapists, I think that we are “damned” to live and grow in a process where therapeutic, institutional, personal and professional change (evolution and r-evolution) creates and recreates dialectical oppositions.

We have to love, hate, envy, compete, experience fear and pain, stay one step before the abyss, or “fenetre sur le chaos”, before we can reach this hill where we can observe, in Bateson’s terms, “the pattern that connects”.

Maybe that is a reason why Haley was so precociously anxious to leave the underground position.

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