Confinement and Being in Retreat

Analytic reflections on the Covid-19

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Gita Gopinath of the Monetary International Fund called the present period the Great Confinement; from the psychological perspective it is rather going into a Great Retreat; a form of regression. The essential *regressive* movement caused by the pandemic serves a higher individual and collective interest. This inner psychological shift is consistent with what we see in the other spheres of life. While altering our psychoanalytic practice, it has also activated family interactions, introspection and dream activity.

Tele-analysis is practiced today in a borderline/psychotic kind of state: the pandemic dilutes the difference between patient-therapist (who carries the illness?) akin to the organization of the borderline patient with poor symbolic functions and deficient self-object differentiation. Furthermore, the anxiety is shared by the analytic couple. Tele-practice is exhausting for many reasons. We seem to be in a different physical, psychic and cognitive posture: we usually *sit back* and listen, with the technical third we tend to *lean forward* to talk or listen. This leaning forward is not only psychomotor but *also psychodynamic*. Possibly, we try to compensate for what we know consciously and mostly unconsciously is lost from direct interactions. A state of uncertainty infiltrates the counter-transference as if every session could be the last one.

I've observed interesting differences with my patients. Some are less inhibited on the phone, they report more dreams, they recall lost events of their childhood and have generally become more introspective. Equally, I find myself more active than usual. Interestingly there has been a reversal of symptoms like social anxiety, school avoidance and agoraphobia as if these had lost their psychic function. Adults found in the distancing a new internal space to resolve dead-locked object-relations.

The danger from our perspective is not only external, but *within*. Namely the eruption of projections, splitting and existential anxieties deflected in blind anger. Our hope, like for all survivors of trauma is what Henri Rey described as Reparation (Vs restitution which is a form of repetition compulsion): i.e. the safe internalisation of a good internal object (i.e. more hope/love) in spite - or maybe because - of the present adversity.

The pandemic exposed abruptly the limitations of our indidualism, and imposed instead a solid Group functioning. We have given up the pursuit of individual drives and subordinated them like compliant citizens to collective prohibitions. In doing so, we seem to have a need to see our leaders infallible and in control even if they are wrong. Groups however, can turn psychotic if the healthy tension between individual and collective selves is lost and this equilibrium is fragile.

The unconscious doesn't know that the Covid19 is self-destructive (neither the Covid19 itself it seems). However, the Ego *knows* (or else *should* know) that it is not smart to destroy the host on which you depend. The expansive drive of the invader, paradoxically, leads to its extinction. Whenever this mechanism infiltrates a system, it is akin to a fatal auto-immune

disorder. Extreme ideological systems and radical fundamentalism find here their explanation as an example of group psychosis.

I wonder how is the Covid-19 represented in the unconscious? Most probably as an oral sadistic invading and fusional object. The devouring, destructive incorporation element, must carry a psychic resonance while the phagocytic attack spares no part of the self.

The *psychic trauma* of the pandemic is characterized by the fact the enemy is invisible and universal. The obvious fear of illness is not, in my opinion, the main issue but something much more primary: *the fear of the unknown.* A fear that no anticipatory anxiety can manage. In contrast to sudden natural catastrophes that activate survival drives or purely existential crises that rouse a search for meaning, the fear of the infinite unknown blends the two together: Something like: *«If I survive, I will find meaning to my life; and if I have meaning now, it will help me survive»*

We know from Ferenczi that since birth, Trauma is a seminal organizer of the human psyche. Ontologically, humans always confronted death and life after death. We are now collectively experiencing various shades of that kind of fear and share reactions with our ancestors. For example, a wish to be saved (salvaged) and a greater receptivity to higher orders of reality. Faith in Science replaced today the role of religions. Ferenczi, the first traumatologist, saw in the regressive fragmentation a chance at a better adaptive psychic reorganization. The present crisis is a unique form of knowledge as we wonder about a post-pandemic *new reality* that would not be a status quo-ante.

By slowing down the world, Covid-19 achieved overnight a rise of individual and collective conscious awareness that we didn't think possible. The individual had refused the *suffering* of climate change and the Global Unrest and now has no choice. The transformative limitation however of the positive aspects of being in retreat is that it has been extraneously *imposed* rather than the outcome gained from intra-psychic changes. It may therefore not last. I believe that the *relative depth and permanence* of any constructive change to come will depend on the degree and type of psychic transformation that the individual and society will tolerate.

The different means of the robotization of the individual and its instrumentalization (J. Kristeva would say its automation) and the slow *subjecticide[1]* of the past decades are not lesser dangers than the Corona Virus.

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[1] The term is borrowed from the French philosopher Alain Badiou.