

Nigel Collingwood

## ECSTASY AND POLITICS

The increasing emphasis on the transpersonal in the humanistic psychology movement and the relative sparsity of sustained interest in society and social issues, raises the question: what is the relation of these four: the transpersonal, the intra-personal, the interpersonal and the political? In this article I wish to explore only a part of this complex spectrum. I want to stress the political and social end, and establish some links between it and the transpersonal (formerly known, or unknown, as the spiritual). The need to forge such links, and the difficulty of the task, arises from a split in western consciousness that goes back at least as far as Aristotle. He came up with what amounted to two separate goals for human existence: (1) to be a politically responsible gentleman (not woman, of course), and (2) to contemplate reality and so to be a wise man. He did not succeed, as far as is known, in bringing these two goals together, and a corresponding split between action and contemplation has been a problem for Christianity at least since the time of the Desert Fathers, if not since the original injunction to separate the things that are Caesar's from the things that are God's. No doubt it is brash to try to do better than Aristotle, and reverse the trend of twenty-four centuries. Yet at a time when many people are turning away from political and economic issues towards an escapist form of religion or a comforting mystique of sport, the need to seek a healing in our consciousness and an integration in our activity is urgent indeed.

However, before making a case for a connection between the transpersonal and the political, it may make the task easier if we look first at the intermediate area of the interpersonal, and see how it too needs to be related to its political context. This will also provide an opportunity to clarify the concept of politics. (For the location of the transpersonal within humanistic psychology, see ch. 9 of John Rowan's **Ordinary Ecstasy**).

There are two common understandings of politics that are inadequate and miss the point. The first sees only party politics, the rivalry for power between groups of people who are rightly seen as having only a marginal effect on society, even if they achieve the validation that comes from winning an election. In this sense "political" is often

used pejoratively, and with reason. A second sense is used of power struggles within organisations, "internal politics", or "politicking", again tending to have a pejorative tone. But people who avoid politics in the first sense can be deeply embroiled in the politics of a college or hospital. Anyhow, the important meaning of politics concerns the building of human community and the allocation of the resources that such a community entails. The reference to resources (material and other) is vital, since otherwise it is easy to slip into thinking of politics merely in terms of abstract power, without realising that power over basic requisites such as food and housing is a crucial means of controlling human beings, who must have these things in order to live. In this sense the centrality of the political follows from the social dimension of human existence.

Only if we make the mistake of seeing the political as a matter of voting for "politicians" and leaving it to them to "run the country", is it possible to deny that politics is closely interconnected with our face-to-face relationships. For we cannot exist in our society unless we belong to various small groups and to large groups, the latter inevitably colouring and limiting the freedom of the former. Notable among the significant large groups are, of course, the social class we belong to, together with innumerable other group loyalties, local, national and social. In fact the same people who help to involve us in the emotional hang-ups which bedevil our interpersonal relationships are also the people who mediate to us most of our assumptions about the larger groups: namely our parents or parent-figures.

Yet it is hard to keep the balance and not slide back into the familiar liberal dichotomy between the (engagingly) private and the (annoyingly) public. "Tell me, Mr/Mrs Thatchfoot, what do you find time for in your personal life?" The effect of the media's personalising of the political is of course to trivialise it; the audience is subtly relieved of any responsibility of power to effect change. The dichotomy may seem to be elided among the famous, but it is reinforced for everyone else. Thus it is not surprising that those who seriously hold the personal and the political together are opponents of the socio-economic system in whose interests the media operate. Within the therapeutic tradition, it was above all Wilhelm Reich (1946, 1951) who fought against the dichotomy, integrating, specially in the early 1930s, his work on sexuality with his opposition to Fascism. More recently the Red Therapy group has sought to include a radical political perspective with humanistic therapy. But at least as far as their booklet goes, although there is a careful description of the effects of capitalism

on individuals, there is little analysis to show **how** these are, and inevitably are, the effects of the system. Thus an awareness of the pressures of capitalist society does not of itself lead to more than a notional bridging of the gap between the personal and the political. Even bringing political issues into the context of therapy, though an important step forward, is not enough. What is now needed is a way of being political, of working towards the overthrow of capitalism, that takes account of emotional energy and emotional blocks - that is, in effect, therapeutic.

At the level of theory this will entail a dialectical understanding of interpersonal and political existence, i.e. an understanding in terms of the one shaping the other: for instance, the way in which two or more people relating to one another through language cannot but bring with them the assumptions and values of the social groups who have formed and are forming the language. A whole way of seeing the world is implicit as soon as they start to speak. At a practical level, the tendency to **use** people, and to be blind to one another's less conscious motives and behaviour, needs to be replaced by sensitivity, exercised by means of continual monitoring of the effect of political activity upon individuals and groups undertaking it. If we need to work for the dismantling of the colossal game (in something like the Eric Berne sense) of capitalism, then the subtle, unnoticed continuation of the game within the political group is a grave, perhaps the gravest obstacle to its success. It is easy to get preachy at this point, but we are now beginning to assemble the therapeutic tools, above all through work in groups, which can help to change the "ought" into "can" and "will".

Now (at last!) for the relation between the transpersonal and the political. First of all it is necessary to clear away an easy, but in the end naive and fallacious approach. It is sometimes suggested that a simple, though presumably large, increase in the number of people meditating regularly would result in the end of all conflict in society. Unfortunately this claim, even if true, would be beside the point. Politics is not about the elimination of conflict. If it has any effect at all, it is an activity shot through with conflict concerning as it does the allocation of resources. If anything is to be eliminated, it is injustice and poverty.

Admittedly, transpersonal experience may lead to more effective political activity in so far as it leads to a relaxed way of carrying on in a position that is always liable to induce stress. But I want to suggest that a far more important relevance to politics lies in the realm not of means but of ends. Somewhere in most maps of

the transpersonal is ecstasy. In ecstasy, no matter how it is construed - whether as union with another being, or with the universe, or as completeness within oneself - there is a central element of harmony and peace. At first sight it may seem outlandish to try and relate such experience to the struggle against injustice and poverty. Yet I want to suggest that the longings for a society not just marginally better than our own, but one able to offer fulfilment to the widest possible range of human potentialities - that such longings are, at least in part, rooted in and nourished by ecstatic experiences and the pre-natal life in which they in turn have their origin.

Perhaps it will but the discussion into context if we approach it by casting a brief glance at theories about infant and childhood experience and its influence on later political attitudes and behaviour. Reich's work has already been mentioned; it was a reaction against Freud's pessimistic view that the ordering of behaviour required by civilisation is based on the reality, not the pleasure, principle, and hence on the repression of instinct. Reich, by contrast (see the Preface to the 3rd edition of **The Mass Psychology of Fascism**) saw the core of the organism as loving and creative, but overlaid by character structure, so that people's political aims, however sincerely sought, were inevitably missed. Bion's (1961) theory of group process has some relevance to large political groups, but in the Freudian tradition he too is pessimistic; the ego-dominated Work Group can easily be contaminated by the Basic Assumption group, where dependency, fight-flight and pairing emerge as unconscious processes. More recently Southgate and Randall (1980, 1981) have glossed this with an optimistic theory, according to which, although Bion is seen as being right about the dynamics of the "destructive" group, there is also possible a "creative" group, where work is enhanced by constructive energy also emerging from unconscious areas.

However, it is the future reference that could be relevant to the political. It is noticeable that this reference is absent from the Greco-Roman tradition - apart, that is, from the purely cyclic view of history, according to which the Golden Age will come round again. It is the Judaeo-Cristian tradition that puts so much stress on a future Reign of God where human brotherhood will be dramatically and irreversibly realised. As the plight of Israel became worse, these yearnings were expressed in apocalyptic form, and thus provided material for the many milleniarist groups in the last two thousand years; see Cohn (1962). Admittedly a connection between these longings and the experience of ecstasy is hard to prove. Marghanita Laski, who has carefully sifted reports of ecstatic experiences (1961, 1979), offers the connection as her own belief, and as a "guess". She also argues

that no other explanation can be put forward. But that seems to neglect the influence of the milleniarist literature, once written, and also the possibility, which she mentions in passing, that manic states (I assume the distinction to be valid) may play their part. (Incidentally, Reich's frequent pejorative use of the word "mystical" (in English versions) I take as also referring to feelings of manic enthusiasm and power in identification with the Leader (see D.L. Smith, 1980), although it is their sexual origin that he tends to emphasise).

Thus the thesis that ecstasy, and blastocystic bliss lying behind it, has a causative relationship with political yearnings for a genuinely fulfilling society, is hard to prove. Yet it is possible to put forward two weaker, but by no means empty, theses. The first is that blastocystic bliss provides an unconscious "memory" that can enhance and colour our ultimate political objectives. It may seem strange to suggest that such a state of unitary completeness, corresponding to a philosophical solipsism, can be relevant to a future position that will be pre-eminently social and shared. Yet if we attain a society where we feel at home with one another and with the total environment, then in a sense our ego-boundary, the limits of what we each count as being ours, will enclose the totality of our experience. This will amount to an end of the alienation from other people which Marx attributes to capitalist exploitation, and also amount to a new relationship with our non-human environment, touched on in his *Grundrisse* with the remarkable words: "man . . . becomes able . . . to conceive of nature (including the control of it) as his own real body". That is a picture of alienation and exploitation being replaced by wholeness and community. I am suggesting that, in the struggle to achieve such a society, the memory of pre-natal bliss, if it can remain alive and be fostered, can serve as an inspiration, even a challenge. (What is absolutely not entailed by my argument, of course, is any recommendation to carry out political activity in *some* kind of trance!). This leads us on to the second thesis. It is that ecstatic experiences after birth, by reviving this early memory, can provide the grounds for new enthusiasm for political aims which can otherwise easily become tarnished. Leaving aside the question of origins, we can find some support for such a suggestion in art and music. Among creative geniuses who have worked in this territory are Beethoven and Blake. It is notoriously a subjective matter to interpret music in psychological terms, but many admirers of Beethoven have felt that his later work puts them in touch with the mystical, the ecstatic. It is significant that the composer who had such hopes in the liberating mission of Napoleon and was so bitter at their disappointment as to strike out the dedication to him of his Third symphony, should choose, for the articulation (i.e. for his own psychological interpretation) of the ecstatic music of his Ninth, Schiller's *Ode to Joy* with its apotheosis

of human brotherhood. Blake, too, developed his visionary powers while keeping his political feet firmly planted on the ground. For example, Erdman (1952) has shown that the engraving named "Glad Day" by Blake's Victorian biographer (in the comfortable liberal tradition that is always ready to depoliticise), was in fact put by Blake himself over a couplet celebrating the self-sacrificing insurrection of the English on behalf of the colonial peoples in 1780.

My argument has been speculative. But if it can be substantiated, an important conclusion will follow. For practices that encourage the enjoyment of ecstasy and the retrieval of blastocystic bliss - i.e. meditation and pre-natal therapy respectively - will be seen as not mere escapes from political action, but as providing it with vital nourishment. Militants will not need to wait until they are "burnt out" before they guiltily seek a renewal of their inner resources, but will be encouraged to sustain themselves with the depth of meaning which the transpersonal can bring.

Care must be taken that the place of ecstasy in the Utopian tradition does not let us forget that, with the availability of advanced technology and thanks to Marx's patient unravelling of the game of capitalism, the goal of a free and creative society is no longer "Utopian" in the bad sense, but a genuine possibility. In such a society politics, political conflict, will still be the order of the day. But the difference will be that the struggles will be between groups with rival views on the allocation of common resources, not, as at present, against or for the exploitative system itself. This will mean a more exciting politics. Peace and harmony (if indeed those are suitable words -our language is not ready for the future!), drawing more deeply than ever on the sources of ecstasy, will be marked by a hitherto unknown expression of energy. As Marx put it: history, truly human history, will have begun.

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John Rowan

## POLITICS AND ECSTASY

In replying to Nigel Collingwood's article, I want to acknowledge what an attractive article it is, and how much it is in the kind of area which needs to be tackled. But there is, I believe, a very important error in it, which is worth dealing with in some detail. He says that ecstatic experiences have their origin in pre-natal life. And then he says that it could either be the life of the foetus, or even the life of the blastocyst, which give us the original template on which later transpersonal experiences of bliss are modelled.

It seems to me that this is actually to distort and devalue the importance of transpersonal experiences in a very serious way. If this is all they are, then they are just illusory - an unconscious projection