

The Erotic Leader

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I will put my proposal in a nutshell: the strong collective and individual reactions to the trials and tribulations of President Clinton, leading to his survival in office, show that he has functioned in a good-enough way as an 'erotic leader'. From my point of view, a truly erotic leader is not a leader who simply hops in and out of bed with people. Clinton may actually be an inferior, degenerated, partial version of an erotic leader. But public obsession in many countries with the sex lives of leaders suggests that there is something about the actual, physical, corporeal eroticism of leadership which is worth exploring further. The concern of the media with the sexuality of all leading figures in society, not just political leaders, suggests that, as in so many cases, mass consciousness has discovered something of interest. I think that the populace, in its obsession with the sexuality of leaders, is on to something important.

I see the good-enough erotic leader as using her or his sexuality to convey to citizens that they, the citizens, are exciting, creative and autonomous people who can work co-operatively together. Receiving ordinary admiration and warmth is an extremely potent factor in psychological evolution and the establishment of self-esteem. Whether the leader communicates his or her admiration to the people in

this almost physically warm way, or fails to do so, is an interesting and neglected aspect of the political process.

My model for this notion is the work I have done on parenting and on clinical process, focusing on what I have called 'erotic playback'. In the family, this is the way in which the parent communicates to children of both sexes that they are admirable, physically desirable and erotically viable creatures. Of course, in family or analysis, I am referring only to incest fantasy and not to the physical enactment of such fantasy (which, by analogy, is what Clinton has done). Western politics and societies seem to me to mirror Western families in that the subtle damage and deprivation caused by erotic deficit is far less spoken of than that caused by erotic excess. Actual physical incest takes place at an appallingly high frequency and it is important to recognise that and mobilise against it. But there is something equally central and much more benevolent in sexuality which is being overlooked. Moreover, the consequences of an absence of such positive sexuality in the family and in society are also overlooked.

My reference to the erotic includes sex, but has to do with more than sex. It has also to do with harmony, relatedness, purpose, significance, and meaning: Eros. As we know from psychoanalysis and Jung-

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ian analysis, sexuality is involved or implicated in all of these things in some way and at some level. This means, of course, that ambivalence, anxiety, jealousy, rivalry and a sense of lack will also be present in the picture.

How does the erotic leader function? First of all, let me stress that the erotic leader can be of either sex. As I work through what is involved, I will delineate it according to the actual sex of the leader and the actual sex of the citizen, though bearing in mind that sexuality is also a metaphor and that we still know more about men as erotic leaders than we do about women.

Erotic leaders not only makes citizens feel good and beautiful at a very deep, almost bodily level; they also bring out and reflect back the healthy self-love and self-admiration that exists in everyone. Their admiration contributes to making people feel honoured in their internal diversity, including sexual and other kinds of rivalry with the members of the internal family. Because sexual identity is not a unified, fixed, static, eternal, universal thing, erotic playback as communicated to the citizen by the erotic leader encourages that citizen to think of him- or herself in a diversified way, to come alive and hold together in the mind all aspects of the self: body areas, mental areas, sub-personalities, complexes, ego, id and superego, public and private, active and passive, political and psychological. Because sex carries such a diversified charge, sexual communication with an erotic leader encourages the citizen's recognition of herself or himself as a diversified being.

From a depth psychological standpoint, there is something about the way in which

sexual processes can switch between submission and domination on the part of the individual involved that make them particularly relevant for a discussion of this particular kind of leader—the erotic leader. Switching between psychological submission and domination is something that is quite missing in Western polities, regardless of the lip-service paid to the supremacy of the ballot box. Where are the submissive leaders? Where are the dominant citizenries? In our inner lives, and in our relationships, we surely know about this switching. The erotic leader can create a micro-environment in which the citizen-leader relationship can switch between submission and domination. In Jean Genet's play *The Balcony* there is a special kind of brothel in which the police chief can dress up as a criminal and the bishop can wear the garments of a prostitute.

When the erotic leader is a male, he makes a female citizen feel other than maternal. I am not saying mothers are not sexy. Mothers are sexy. But there is something about female sexuality that can be separated and divorced from the maternal. The male erotic leader works with the female citizen to enable her to go beyond the traditional and socially restrictive virtues of relation and care. When the erotic leader is male and the citizen is male, what arises between them is what I call 'homosociality', which is fraternity in action. We see this in operation in many gay communities which are experimenting with new political and social forms, partly in order to come to grips with the challenges presented by HIV/AIDS. There is something very special about the homosociality that a male erotic leader and a male citizen can develop between them.

When the erotic leader is female, and the citizen is male, she offers that male citizen a chance to merge with her, against the prevailing psychodynamic orthodoxy which says that symbiosis and merger with the feminine or the mother is a very bad thing for a man. What we could call 'ecomasculinism' (to describe men who care passionately for the environment) needs a political climate in which female erotic leaders create circumstances that enable male citizens to merge with them, such female leaders trading off their traditional, earthy representations as women.

What if the erotic leader is female and the citizen is female? Then I think the citizen is offered a very special and different approach to power, rivalry and competition. Such a couple are not going to be stuck in some sort of false sisterhood. They are going to be rivalrous and competitive with each other. But it is an unusual kind of rivalry, less dominated by male values, and, in its femaleness, not necessarily structured by the penis or by rivalry for its possession.

There are dimensions to this, however, that go beyond sexuality and individual functioning. Like human sexuality, human societies, for instance that of the USA, are exceedingly diverse. My further suggestion is that there are links between a full flowering of diverse, plural human sexuality and a full flowering of diverse, plural human culture. These links may be activated by an erotic leader such as Clinton. The sense of admiration and respect for the full potential of sexual diversity can cross over into the processes that enable societies to sustain cultural diversity — for example, ethnic or 'racial' diversity. Once the collective moves into those areas where sexual desire is in operation, which means that fixed identi-

ties and rules cease to play the part that they are supposed to, then we are sensitised to and prepared for the challenge of living in and managing a diversified culture. I believe the US is in a liminal or threshold situation in relation to these issues: so near, yet, as the country's first 'Black' president is humiliated, so far away.

To summarise: the erotic leader makes the citizenry feel good and admired, and that carries its own benefits. But there is also a communication here about ethnic and cultural diversity which is on more than an individual level.

I will end my sketch of the erotic leader by adding that erotic leadership played in a good-enough key inevitably involves *failure*. A too concretely successful sexual leader like Clinton will inaugurate a special and spectacular order of failure. Erotic leaders will fail (as well as succeed) because there are real difficulties for the citizen in taking this type of leader inside her- or himself so as to relate 'erotically' to other people in society. Citizens will fail to relate to each other in ways that are congruent with the messages they receive from an erotic leader. So the whole business of erotic leadership will not work as planned. For example, the giving of erotic playback may remain very much the sole property of the leader, and this may happen with Clinton. Moreover, you cannot just clobber people into feeling better about themselves. In our world, and maybe in all possible worlds, we have to face that many people do not and will never feel good about themselves. Consider how many of Roget's categories for synonyms of 'failure' have a personal flavour: inferior, impotence, mistake, insufficiency, lost labour, imperfection, bungling, hitch, loser, loss, insolvency, object of scorn, guilty act.