The silent escape: Finding meaning and freedom in the face of totalitarianism and oppression

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Abstract

The article aims to be an exploration of the concept of freedom from the viewpoint of existential philosophy and its relevance to society today. The specific historical, cultural and geo-political situatedness of the phenomenon are discussed by summarising my qualitative research on the experience of freedom and oppression in ex political prisoners of the Romanian Communist Gulag. Following critical narrative analysis, the participants' stories appear to gravitate around the noetic dimension of freedom.

Keywords: *meaning, freedom, existential philosophy, psychotherapy, communism, totalitarianism, Romania, Gulag, oppression, society, politics*

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For most people, the word 'totalitarianism' is associated with oppressive political regimes and conjures images of brutal dictators such as Hitler or Stalin. We might get a sense of its monstrosity when stories like that of Otto Warmbier (1994–2017) make the main headlines, but the majority of people seem to think that humanity has learnt its lessons and that totalitarianism belongs into a sealed past that bears no relationship to their present reality. Although totalitarianism seems to have sedimented the collective psyche of the West as a frozen lesson in history, it has unfortunately erupted many times before the 20th century and has certainly outlived the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1976) warned that totalitarian elements are still present in today's society – but that they are most likely crystallised under different less overt forms, compared to the brutal tortures and atrocious genocides that permeated the 20th century and still continue in countries like North Korea, Syria or Cuba; today's society faces a more subtle form of tyranny that menaces freedom and democracy, which De Toqueville (1835) referred to as the new species of oppression. According to the French philosopher, in an attempt to spare individuals of *'the care of thinking and the trouble of living'* (2001:739), the state becomes an instrument to flatten distinctions and restore equality, promoting itself as the only agent and arbiter for people's happiness. This new socially engineered free will is not crushed through torture or imprisonment, but rather cleverly weakened and bent, until people are reduced to *'nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd'* (2001:740).

De Toqueville's insightful and prophetic conceptual re-framing of oppression as soft despotism draws attention to the challenges that today's society is confronted with. In his equally prophetic novel *1984*, Orwell describes a diseased society in which good and evil are inversed and 'doublespeak prevails' (1949:163). Although Western phenomena – such as the Political Correctness movement – have a different guise than historical totalitarianism, they have the potential to become just as detrimental to democratic values as any other tyrannical project, where anyone who disobeys the prescriptive rigid rules imposed by the State and its institutions can be publicly discredited or financially sanctioned.

When we accept that human beings are more than the sum of the parts of a giant sociological mechanism and are intrinsically free, many difficult questions arise. If much of individual consciousness is dictated by society at large, to what extent can we talk about personal freedom? How does freedom relate to free will and responsibility? How are we to save the democratic project from the forces that are eroding it, along with the values of freedom and dignity that ought to sustain it? Where does personal freedom lie and how can we articulate it to ourselves and others?

Across the ages and many cultures of the world, freedom has been considered so essential and precious to humanity, that many millions of human beings have willingly sacrificed their lives for it. In order for it to be the object of such devotion, one can fairly assume that freedom must have a deep relation to the very core and meaning of being human.

Existential philosophy postulates that the human condition is inherently fraught with dilemmas and paradoxes. One of its aims is to understand how people come to terms with the 'givens' of existence, such as death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness (Yalom, 2002). In 'Psychology of Worldviews', Karl Jaspers (1919) reflects on our ability to influence or direct our lives in the face of what he called 'limit-situations', advancing the idea that existence confronts human beings with implacable givens, one of which is the anticipation of one's mortality and own finitude; he posits that by openly facing up to these fundamental *'Grenzsituationen'* and coming to terms with them, human beings can uphold their integrity and attain their freedom. Freedom is therefore viewed as an indelible ontological given, which is closely interwoven with the idea of responsibility and choice (May, 1977). We are *'condemned to be free'* (Sartre, 1946, p. 43) and bear the full weight of our freedom and we alone are responsible for how we live.

My personal journey and clinical work have made me realise that human freedom and choice are pivotal to the practice of existential psychotherapy and constitute a key ingredient for change. To some degree, the existential therapist's endeavour is always about extending the clients' understanding of their freedom and increasing their awareness of it. Most psychotherapy clients are grappling with some aspect of their freedom: some look for freedom from compulsions or anxieties, freedom from others' behaviours or thoughts, freedom to be themselves, freedom from past traumas or inner enslavement. As an existential therapist, I believe that one of my aims is to help people become free to be aware of and experience their possibilities.

One thing to keep in mind when drawing on existential philosophical works is that they are mainly concerned to describe the abstract (*ontological*) dimension of life and human living in a very general sense before exploring the concrete (*ontic*) experience of the individual. Unlike the field of clinical psychology, sociology or politics, these are descriptions that tell us what the sine qua non of human existence is – approaching concepts like freedom or death in a very global way, without any sensitivity to geographical, cultural or historical contexts.

As thoroughly as existential philosophers have debated the concept of freedom, they haven't explored its different facets across particular groups of people and within their specific historical, cultural and geo-political situatedness. What's more, the principle of existential philosophy according to which freedom is absolute despite our facticity and the painful realities of the world leaves little room to conceptualise political oppression within its framework (Grether, 1974; Arendt, 1968).

The relationship of existential theory and practice to the political and ideological is indeed

a complex one, since an existential focus is by definition related to the social justice component and is aimed at the development of an awareness of systemic forces of oppression – a liberatory consciousness (Love, 2000) in a specific geo-political context. One of the implications of my research for the field of Counselling Psychology would be for practitioners to become more aware of the complexities surrounding issues of political violence and oppression and attend to political, social, and economic forces in their conceptualisations of their clients' lived experience of distress, tailoring their interventions to diverse issues and sociocultural contexts.

I identified Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA: Langdridge, 2007) as the most appropriate tool for analysis of the interview data, as it offered a detailed investigation of a small number of research subjects whose processes of accounting and making sense of their experience was seen of intrinsic interest (not a source of generalisation), as well as placing a strong emphasis on understanding the life stories presented by the six participants. Unlike some of the other idiographic and inductive qualitative research methods I considered, CNA enabled me to move from the focus on the life stories of the participants and their associated meanings to a critical analysis of the narrative world in which they are embedded and an engagement with broader socio-political concerns, which I considered a central aspect of my research. The method's particular attention to the temporal dimension also enabled me to explore if and how my participants' sense of freedom changed over time.

Given that the Romanian Communist past has become a battleground between the elite's narrative of Communism as cultural trauma and the popular narrative of Communism as a better alternative to the current society, I was particularly interested in the extent to which the canonical (popular) narrative was resisted by the personal narratives of the participants. The inclusion of a critical moment enabled me to explore the hermeneutic incongruity between the popular and the cultural elite's narratives and to engage with broader socio-political issues.

Following critical narrative analysis, four major themes and their corresponding subthemes have emerged as distinct from each other, without losing sense of the overall cohesive narrative (Langdridge, 2007). The overreaching themes of the participants' accounts were identified as: taking stock, searching for meaning, setting history straight and finding an escape within. The narratives seem to gravitate around the noetic dimension of freedom, what Rollo May called 'essential freedom' (1981: 55), implying that in order to be free in society one must first feel free inwardly.

Whist acknowledging the fundamental role that the institutions of democracy and the market society play in protecting civil liberties, these ideas imply that they are not enough to generate the cultural and spiritual reserves that people need in order to feel free. By turning inwardly and reconnecting with what was meaningful to them, the participants were able to overcome the cruel and demoralising conditions of detention and find comfort in an introspective, reflective life – a 'silent escape' (Constante, 1995). By writing stories and poems in their minds, memorising and communicating with those in the cells around them using the 'language of the walls' or cultivating their spirituality, they escaped the grey routine of prison life and tapped into a reservoir of meaning and freedom.

This echoes Solzhenitsyn's (1973) concept of freedom in his *Gulag Archipelago*, where he describes the inhumane conditions in the Soviet labour camps and what it means *not* to be free. For him, the only way to achieve freedom is to overcome the spiritual malaise of the modern era and to re-discover the transcendent core in our Being. He equates the absence of freedom with the absence of an introspective, reflective life. In his view, the West's lack of spiritual fulfilment is so entrenched and the numinous is so gravely absent from people's lives, that it's no surprise at all that people are struggling with Being more than ever before. For the Russian philosopher, the spiritual crisis in the West is more profound than the other political, economic, and environmental crises.

Similarly to Solzhenitsyn, Viktor Frankl's (1997) idea of freedom is inseparable from a self-transcendental orientation towards value and meaning. We are only free as long as we are congruent with the 'inner voice' within.

The implications of this are that some individuals can fundamentally decide what shall become of them, mentally and spiritually, even when they are faced with the most degrading circumstances. They can retain their dignity and spiritual freedom even when they are in a prison, labour or concentration camp.

The vacuum of meaning (Frankl, 1955) is more prevalent than ever in today's society; mental health problems have reached unprecedented levels in the last 20 years, particularly amongst teenagers; when tackling an epidemic, one needs to think beyond treatment and symptom management. Is this mass neurosis symptomatic of a contemporary world that is missing something vital to the fabric of human existence itself? Is this disturbance generated and maintained by a society that became alienated from the essential principles of life? And if so, what is the answer?

A key theme that was revealed by my study so far is that freedom has a very significant inner dimension; one way of dealing with the challenges of today's world is to turn inwardly and remain vigilant to one's personal existential choices. It appears that when it comes to freedom the tension between the political and the philosophical needs to be carefully weighed, since it challenges us to rethink the relationship between personal meaning, authenticity and liberal principles and values. The articulation of our 'inner freedom' can be a pivotal component in building an authentic political community (Craiutu, 2007) in which there is a dialogical relationship between free and equal individuals and society, and where freedom emerges from the dynamism of the intersubjective space between them.

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