

Politics, Psychology and Spirituality – the search for a new basis for progressive politics

– Jim Robinson

The difficulty with politics is that it is such a projective process. Our views and perspectives are so conditioned by the unconscious prejudices, biases and assumptions that emerge from our need to justify our relationship to our world. The degree of fixedness, of dogmatism, of identification with our perspective, simply reflects the degree to which we are configured by insecurity, and insecurity is always the consequence of trauma. Trauma causes us to be afraid of re-experiencing some hurt or pain or distress that we have not yet been able to face or accept. This is why positions are defended so resolutely and fiercely, with no defensive tactic left unused, from anger, smoke screens, deflections, “red-herrings”, bullying, arrogance, dismissal, ridicule, and so on. All of which are designed to avoid revealing the unconscious motivations behind the stance being taken.

Obviously, the same can be said for any aspect of our relationship to life, but politics, along with religion, seem to highlight the depth of this unconscious projective process more than anything else. Which is why of course they are such notoriously difficult topics of conversation. If they are really engaged in, they can quickly reveal the deep un-processed, un-aware, raw, and dangerous feelings behind any strongly held stance.

To give some caricature like examples of this – the trauma of those who take a “right-wing” political stance, often comes from how their background includes an excess of criticism, judgement, and authoritarianism. The deep wounds from this leads to the habitual closing down of sensitivity and empathy and the denial of any fragility or vulnerability. The need was to “toughen up” young and become self-sufficient too early, with the result that there is an over identification with the need for people to take “self-responsibility”, they object to anyone “having it easy” or “scrounging from the State”, they did not get support, so why should anyone else? Their victim mentality finds expression in meanness and the blaming of others, projecting the unacceptable “badness” within themselves (from having had that message drilled into them) onto the “other”. Whilst this is true of those from all levels of societies, as a generalisation it does seem to be even more relevant to those at either end of the wealth spectrum. We have a tabloid press run by billionaires expressing bigoted views that are eagerly consumed by those with little wealth.

For those on the Left, the background conditioning may have been more relaxed, but perhaps with insufficient boundaries and combined with a deficit of unconditional love. This also creates a “victim” stance, an immature place stuck with an underlying deficit need for love, that makes it hard to “grown up”. Parents, or the State, are expected to be supportive. This inevitably leads to blaming the world for everything, and this can easily move into idealising a future where the environment is perfectly supportive. In that future we can be “happy” without the effort of taking responsibility for ourselves. The trauma from the lack of love, as from the excess harshness above, leads to a deep sense of inadequacy, of “not being good enough” in some way, the “badness” here gets projected onto those with wealth and power, or “the system”.

Some people of course experience both the crushing effects of the lack of love, compounded by harshness. This can result in deep shame and feelings of “not being good enough”. Such disassociation and alienation from self and others often results in a refusal to engage in politics at all.

These are of course just sketches from the enormous variety of ways that our insecurity can play out in forming our relationship to politics.

Alice Miller fought tirelessly against the abuse of children (e.g., “For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence”). She argued clearly and powerfully that it was harshness and the lack of love in childrearing that was responsible for people’s difficult relationship to life. She explained how nineteenth century child rearing manuals with their deeply pernicious premise of “children are born evil and have to be made good”, gave rise to the culture that created Hitler and allowed National Socialism to flourish. We have just experienced four years of Trump’s administration in America and the comparisons are all too clear to see. Trump’s selfish authoritarian and anti-democratic inclinations, along with his rampant narcissism, makes the comparison to Hitler alarming. Thank goodness his arrogance caused him to make such a mess of dealing with the pandemic, also for the strength of American democracy. Combined they prevented him from winning (or cheating) a second term in office.

The last ten / fifteen years have seen a renewed explosion of the understanding around trauma (Babette Rothschild, Peter Levine, Gabor Mate, Bessel van de Kolk, Thomas Hübl, to name a few prominent proponents). Trauma causes our insecurity, it creates our defensiveness, is the cause of all our negativity, all our blaming of self or other, all our hatred, fixedness, attachments, resistances, and identifications. It is not just our personal lives that are conditioned by trauma, our societies, our cultures, and institutions are all packed with the consequences of societal and generational trauma as Hübl has helped make clear. We exist in the sea of its consequences where hardly any aspect of our lives is not polluted.

Trauma is the process by which we repress and bury the hurt, pain, fear, distress, that was too much to bear at the time. It is different from suffering that is not traumatic, which is where we are able to bear and process the difficult experience. With trauma, the self buries what would otherwise be destructive to it in some way. It is an instinctive unconscious defence mechanism which, whilst enabling us to survive, leaves us with many negative consequences. Trauma splits and separates the self from itself in the service of de-sensitisation from the unbearable pain, so unconsciously we had to become not ourselves, we then needed to maintain those splits along with the “false” personality we invented to hide behind.

The splits happen specifically between our heart, head, and body in order to keep the hurt out of awareness. This causes us to develop unevenly, with one of our “centres” tending to be over-relied upon because the others are caught in the associative “stickiness” of trauma. It also causes us to experience ourselves as alienated from ourselves and our environment. When you are conditioned by harshness, you become harsh, “the other” becomes the enemy. Then fear, anger, and blind, cult-like, adherence to narrow vengeful perspectives can result. This underlying anxiety facilitates the explosion of “fake news” and all manner of conspiracy theories that justify the deeply defensive positions. It is all designed to avoid the re-experiencing of those deep wounds caused by harshness and the lack of love. From this comes a preference for any catastrophe that might take away the responsibility of facing the pain of those wounds. It is out of this that “preppers”, as well as terrorists, emerge.

Again, whenever there has been a deficit of love in someone’s conditioning, that person is then tied to wanting and needing love, (even though this might be vehemently denied due to it being too painful to open up the heart again). Inflexible and identified positions, always have unconscious needs at their core and this is the case for both the far Left and Right. With both there is the tell-tale

anger and blame because trauma has defensively closed the heart. Whilst we learnt all this in the sixties, I do trust that we are learning it with greater clarity now.

There is though, a powerful and wealthy section of the Right, the “Neo Liberals” who are intent on defending capitalism at all costs. They tend to come from wealthy autocratic boarding school style backgrounds which inoculated them with a thick layer of superiority covering their insecurity. This is a dangerous combination, particularly resistant to self-awareness. Along with their access to power, it has enabled them to pursue very effectively their selfish agenda over recent decades. Often the influence has been surreptitious, through controlling of the media and funding “think-tanks” and using their wealth and power to manipulate public opinion wherever they can. Many (e.g., The Guardian (most recently Monbiot 24/11/20), opendemocracy.com, The Green Party, Positive Money) have been trying to expose the range and depth of these manipulative power plays over the years.

Ever since the seventies the Neo Liberal Right have been stoking up the fear of traumatised people across the globe. It is the age-old strategy of wealth and power (be it from states or corporations), to divide and rule and sow confusion. Anything to deflect attention away from the goal of accumulating ever more wealth and power. Anything to avoid being forced to take responsibility for the exploitation and destruction left in their wake. Making people afraid of immigrants and blaming them for the loss of well-paid jobs is the classic example. Another from the US, is how the idea of self-responsibility has been so successfully peddled that some people would rather die than accept state health care support. Having been made so afraid that “socialism” or “communism” will control their lives they remain completely unaware that they are controlled by propaganda. The reason for this gullibility is course comes from the denial of vulnerability and neediness that has been so deeply engrained by the harshness of their lives.

There has been plenty of criticism of the Left generally over the last forty years or so. The criticism is that they have been too “centrist”, that “New Labour” in the UK and similar approaches world-wide in effect opened the door to the recent resurgence of right wing popularism, because they did not provide a coherent enough alternative narrative to the global Neo-Liberal programme. This captured the political ground so successfully that it dragged the Left into the centre, where it lost its soul and forgot what it stood for i.e., compassion, empathy, equality, and openness. Even after the 2008 financial crash Capitalism continued its successful accumulation of ever greater wealth and power whilst increasing inequality. The mainstream Left was “hypnotised” into accepting the status quo with its false premise of “trickle-down economics”. Here in UK, after a year in office, Kier Starmer has done practically nothing to articulate an alternative vision of a more equal society.

Bernie Sanders recently (Guardian 30/03/21) argued wonderfully clearly that the inequality in American is “obscene” and “anti-democratic”. I agree with him and can see that that the Left needs to be bold and clear, but the point of this piece is to explore how the Left also needs to find a new broader and deeper base, one that is anchored to a more holistic understanding of human psychology and our spiritual core. It needs to let go of identifying with oppositional power in its historically entrenched way. It needs to see and understand that all over-identified fixed positions are expressions of trauma and move towards the ground of moral superiority that comes from understanding human nature. The Left need to find a new soul, a new base on which to build, one that understands that Love and Consciousness and Energy are the heart of human nature, that “Goodness, Beauty and Truth” are our natural inheritance and how this means that equality and compassion are fundamental to a healthy society.

This is about understanding that all the selfish, destructive capitalism, all the traumatised gullibility, all the identifications with, and misuse of, power, all flow from trauma. It is about seeing how the

unconscious processes and habits that people are caught up with, are simply attempts to protect themselves from facing the buried pain and hurt deep in their hearts. Yes, it is deeply galling that those with power and wealth get to have so much influence and physical ease, but we have to remember that anyone can find their freedom in *any* situation, and that having wealth and power does not make you happy.

The core values of this new base need to be founded on the understanding that human nature has these two fundamental aspects. One is our psychology, understanding how it is trauma that causes all our difficulties, the other is about recognising that it is our “Spiritual” (for want of a better word) nature that gives us meaning, values, satisfaction, and direction. We are a paradox. We exist in both worlds, as separate individuals, and as integral parts of the whole, we are subjective and objective, personal and transpersonal.

We relate to the world through our heart, head, and body, so that on a personal level we have our feelings, our thinking, and our sensation. But on the “transpersonal” level, these aspects of our experience also exist on a more “objective” level; here there is the connection to unconditional Love, to Consciousness with its awareness of awareness and our capacity to understand, and in our bodies to the Energy of Life itself where we consciously embody sensation and breath. It is these experiences of “Goodness, Beauty and Truth” that provide our lives with meaning and satisfaction, and through which we have the possibility of eventually finding our freedom, our “home”, in the depth of the “here and now”, where we know we are part of the Whole.

As an over-generalised aside - The Trumpian Christian Right, often base their “spiritual” connection on the “Old Testament”. It contains a lot of anger, judgement, and vengefulness which the Right use to justify their fundamentalist prejudices. This, as I understand it, is not really Christianity at all, the “Old Testament” is *before* Christ. The Christianity of the New Testament is quite different, it is concerned with a profoundly radical form of unconditional Love, concerned with forgiveness and compassion. This is broadly in tune, it seems to me, with what the Left’s core values needs to be.

So, a new basis for our left-wing politics on the one hand would recognise our profound interconnectedness, and on the other understanding that it is trauma that causes our separateness and alienation. It causes all our negativity, dysfunctionality, harshness, anger and hate, our lack of empathy and compassion. It perpetuates our disconnection from Love and awareness, and it cuts us off from our creativity. It is only by understanding trauma and its effects that we can increasingly open our hearts. If the Left can understand this it can avoid getting caught into chasing power, rather than embodying and opening to the “transpersonal” that underlies the whole of Life. We need to avoid the despair that Richard Sennett describes (Guardian 3rd Nov 2020), “... hope doesn’t make sense today. I’ve lost my empathy for the complex motivations that animate fear and reaction.” But Love never loses hope or empathy. Love, along with Consciousness and Energy, exist deep within all of us, always wanting and waiting for the chance to be made conscious.

The Left needs to understand and incorporated into its politics, the fact that this larger, more profound part of us is this “transpersonal” or “spiritual” aspect. It is this that enables the radical embodied awareness of “I am you and you are me”. We are not separate, it is trauma that creates our illusion of separateness. In the end our hearts cannot be free of sorrow whilst any part of humanity is acting inhumanly, the connections are inescapable and unavoidable. Another’s unnecessary suffering, be it human or ecological, is mine.

Obviously, suffering is an inherent aspect of life, of growth and development and of course, death. But this does not mean we must give up trying to minimise unnecessary suffering and trauma. Whilst

poverty, and its partner inequality, are not in themselves the direct cause of trauma, in this merciless capitalist world they are hugely powerful contributing factors.

This does though, open up the issue of self-responsibility and the mysterious process by which people grow and develop. Self-responsibility is the one area where the Right's perspective has real validity, they recognise that it is fundamentally important. We each have to take responsibility for ourselves and all the support in the world will not necessarily enable someone to do this. It is something that we each have to accept and choose. But the Right abuse this understanding by concluding that support is not important. They say, "I made it in life, so you should too" or "if you over support you just encourage dependency and scrounging" or they repeat the "gospel of scarcity" with "there are just not enough resources to support everyone".

Life can never be perfect, we are bound to experience trauma in one form or another, growing up and taking responsibility for ourselves, for our feeling, our thinking, our bodies, our lives, is something we are all resistant to at times. All adolescent mammals are reluctant to let go of parental support and fend for themselves and our human development is so long and complex, that ruptures and traumas are inevitably. This makes us "victims", which we all are to some extent, which exacerbates our reluctance to grow up. I guess there will always be some who refuse this, no matter how "perfect" their world might be. Choice and self-responsibility are essential aspects of being human and any changes to society must acknowledge this aspect of our development and have a clear aim of helping people to make their choices and take responsibility for their feelings, their philosophy, and their bodies.

Of course, this does not validate building a world that creates unnecessary suffering and trauma. The Left's agenda of raising the "quality of life" (in the fullest possible meaning of that phrase) for the majority is surely, only sanity. Capitalism by its very nature causes trauma and insanity. Obviously, a market economy needs to be part of how we function as a society, but we need the Left to take these other priorities to centre stage because only a huge alliance of progressive forces has a chance to transform the world away from the current stranglehold of Neo-Liberal Capitalism. The Left need the insight and inspiration that comes from this realisation that we are not separate, that our politics need to be based on Love, as Marianne Williamson argues so well in "The Politics of Love". This has to go alongside understanding how it is trauma that conditions us into negativity and makes us acquiesce to being enslaved.

This is all about returning "power to the people". Hierarchical systems infantilise, de-power and create trauma. Government spending needs to flow down to the most local level possible, supporting democracy to deepen and widen organically, re-empowering people everywhere. The banking and financial system needs to be upended to serve people, not banks and capitalism (see Positive Money, also Daniela Gabor (Guardian 26/11/20). Governments needs to exercise much greater control over power and wealth to enable these priorities. We need to see clearly how all our institutions, our systems of voting, of local government, of social security, of education, our criminal justice system, the military, etc., etc., are all configured by trauma and its hierarchical signatures.

There are huge reservoirs of trapped and suppressed creativity waiting to be released if people's hearts can be opened. Defeatedness depresses energy and so many are defeated. Action and hope bring energy, so the possibility is enormous! The Earth needs this deep re-humanising of societies throughout the globe. How can anyone with an open heart, hate, or continue to destroy this magical miraculous planet? The Left needs to support this ground and help to inspire people to see that change is possible, that it is doable, to imagine and articulate how new non-traumatising forms of organising society are possible. There are many people working on this re-imagining, struggling to

articulate the “what” and “how” that new forms of society might look like when based on these values. (In addition to the more imaginative left-wing politicians, examples are, The Green Party and the many environmental movements, Flatpack Democracy movement, Alternative UK, Rebel Wisdom, Positive Money, Social Innovation Exchange, Microsolidarity, School of Life, Relational Change, Integral Philosophy’s offshoots, to name but a fraction of what is emerging just here in the UK).

If the mainstream Left can be brave and imaginative and inclusive enough to own this psycho-spiritual-political perspective, it could inspire, enthuse, and be a powerhouse in creating the momentum needed to bring about the radical change the world needs. Love has this power; I am not sure anything else does, in this I agree with Marianne Williamson (“Politics of Love”). We need more people like her who can articulate and communicate this radical synthesis of the transpersonal, the psychological and the political, to inspire across the traditional Left / Right trenches. Most Conservatives are in favour of love and compassion after all. It is the understanding around trauma, and the insights this brings, that are needed.

So, yes! Understanding trauma, and the opening of our hearts to the compassion and Love that flow from that, this has the possibility of being the “third force” in reconciling at least some of the Left and Right’s polarities, whilst at the same time accelerating and supporting the ongoing expansion of consciousness across the globe. This is surely what our planet so desperately needs.

Jim Robinson - Gestalt psychotherapist and supervisor in East Sussex, UK. It seems that I have been working all my life to understand the relationship between the psychological, spiritual, and political. It is now consciously in the service of supporting healing, growth and developmental on as many levels as possible. Email – jim@jim-robinson.co.uk Website – www.jim-robinson.co.uk

