

## Politics in the nursery

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*In this short essay I take a developmental view, starting with the first social relationship, which is that between infant and caregiver, (almost always the mother). This little society grows from two to three to larger numbers, but there is a limit, after which we live, as Benedict Anderson (1) states so memorably, in an "Imagined Community" ie a state or nation. Membership of a large group such as a this tends to encourage quite primitive concepts about what it is one belongs to, often defined by vague idealisations that depend on the exclusion of those who are not members. The political subject, including potential readers of this book, is not such a sophisticated individual as he or she may believe. We have very basic desires which drive the process.*

chapter in *The Political Subject* (ed) W Wheeler, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2000

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In the beginning there are two. The baby comes out and looks for company. He (2) is at least as keen to make contact for social purposes as for feeding, so the face and the breast are both targets. His eyesight is good, but he can only focus on relatively near objects, which is ideally suited for intimate conversation. This is what usually happens. Mother holds him to her face and talks, in the way that most of us can hardly help doing when confronted with a tiny human, or indeed any immature mammal. Babies do not understand the language but they do get the message. If we did not speak to infants as if they could understand us they would not learn to speak, or think, later on. The purpose of this almost instinctive process is to provide the conditions for the development of mind and body. Just feeding a baby and keeping him warm will not do. He must have attentive company too, otherwise his brain will not develop properly, and the regulation of body systems - blood pressure, temperature, growth hormone production, heart rate, etc - will be upset. What has this got to do with politics?

The political subject is a person, or more properly a personal state of mind. It refers to a relationship that we have to the country or region we inhabit, of which we are citizens (3). It is not usual to adopt a developmental perspective when considering political process, apart from a historical one - how social groups came to exist, how they tried to exert power one over the other and so on. Few writers consider the origins of political consciousness. It is somehow 'given' that we are interested, sometimes compulsively, in the machinations of power, in particular the drama of the relationships between the men at the top. Even the politically ignorant tend to have a view on the soap opera aspect of politics.

This reflects our political training in the nursery. From the start we have an acute sensitivity to the social skills of our partner, usually mother, soon to be joined by others; father, grandparents and later childminder or nanny. Does she get it? Here I am, in this little body that I can barely control, and her job is to work out what I need her to do now - change the nappy, get the wind out, feed me, hold me, put me down but, most important of all, to talk to me about what is happening to me, so I can begin to make sense of it all. For other mammals this is far less of a problem, as they are born with greater motor skills than we are. Because their brains are relatively small, birth comes later in the development of the individual. Humans are uniquely immature at birth, and most of brain growth takes place outside the womb - where there is room for the head to expand - in the first two years of life. It is during this time that we acquire basic social skills, but also the physiological and neurological structures that will take us right through life. These will determine to a considerable extent our capacity to regulate states of arousal, emotion and attention.

Political consciousness evolves directly out of these early interactions. This is far more influential than anything that the education system can provide later on. You can (should) introduce children to history and democracy, but their basic positions on social justice and political strategy are already in place before they go to school. Although there is a fiercely intellectual and rational tradition in politics, it is also a passion, constantly for its practitioners, and from time to time for the citizen too. We may like to think that we make entirely rational political choices, but this is far from the whole story. The emotions we bring to citizenship are just as powerful as those that we bring to intimate relationships, to love and to sexual desire. Consider your motives. Why follow this or that party, theory, or programme? What is the goal you seek to achieve? Some will describe, perhaps with a little embarrassment, a kind of world that is peaceful and orderly with everyone going about their business. On further examination this turns out to be based on a recollection of childhood, especially if the individual was born in the 1940s or 1950s in Western Europe, when from a child's point of view, life may have seemed just like that. Others, who may or may not be from the same generation, will have a more vengeful story to tell, of an enemy that has to be defeated, even destroyed. This is likely to be derived not from any nostalgic longings, but from painful experiences of injustice and rage against another, usually more powerful, person or group of people.

The arrival of a younger sibling also provokes reflection on how babies are made, which is very disturbing, even if the result is the pleasure of a playmate later on. Adult language is not adequate to describe these turbulent but necessary mental events, some of which may not have been articulated at all, but which provide a template for later beliefs about the way the world should be. Such revolutionary experiences have to be managed somehow, and our (relative) success or failure in doing so effects our perceptions and judgements in later triangular relationships, in families, friendships, work and political groups, and so on. This is not a reductionist point of view. I am not saying that political passions are 'merely' or 'nothing but' derivations from early life but that these experiences powerfully colour our later views. (And they can of course be modified. One of the addictive aspects of political

discourse is that it never needs to stop. Like religion and psychoanalysis there is always something more to be said that just might make a difference.)

After the first relationship the crucial steps in learning to relate to others (4) are marked by the arrival of a third person. Whatever the family structure the realisation that one was conceived by a woman and a man together does not just add a number to the world. It also removes the infant from the centre of the universe, as Copernicus did for the Earth. Whether he is present or absent, the discovery of father's role as co-procreator is a terrible shock, but also a spur to deeper understanding - three dimensional thinking.

*"If the link between the parents perceived in love and hate can be tolerated in the child's mind it provides him with a prototype for an object relationship of a third kind in which he is a witness and not a participant. A third position then comes into existence from which object relationships can be observed. Given this, we can also envisage being observed. This provides us with a capacity for seeing ourselves in interaction with others and for entertaining another point of view whilst retaining our own, for reflecting on ourselves whilst being ourselves."*

(5)

Although many individuals affect 'no interest' in politics, all of us, except the most autistic or psychotic, are, like our not so distant cousins the wolves and other pack animals, involved in group processes of an intensely primitive kind. We constantly observe how others are getting on with each other and how we are with them. You have to know where you stand. As the anthropologist Gregory Bateson put it "severe pain and maladjustment can be induced by putting a mammal in the wrong regarding its rules for making sense of an important relationship with another mammal". (6) The difference between humans and other group living mammals is the intensity of the social relationship that *precedes* group membership. The position you take up in your first peer group, at nursery, is already influenced by family relationships. If your caregivers were able to stand the stress of having a demanding and dependent infant to look after, and to enjoy the conversations with you, and to love you most of the time (hate is allowed, probably even necessary, as long as it does not overwhelm love), then you come out of infancy prepared to trust others, to be curious, generous, to share and enjoy things with your peers and to stand up for yourself when something unfair happens to you (and, later, to stand up for others too). This is secure attachment and around two thirds of populations studied fall into this category. If, on the other hand, the primary caregiver (usually mother) is out of tune with the baby and there is nobody - such as a father, grandmother or childminder - to share the task with, then the poor child gets a different message. Instead he is likely to be wary or aloof in his relationships, repeating with peers what he has picked up from the first relationship. This sounds hard on mothers, but they do carry an enormous responsibility, even when the task is more fairly shared with the father or someone else closely involved. And the patterns run through the generations. The kind of parenting you do is affected by

the kind of parenting you had (7). A variety of styles of relating can emerge, depending on mismatches at the beginning (8). When caregivers are inconsistently attentive and too often more in need of care than able to give it, the result is a clinginess by the child who has to keep an eye on mum rather than the other way round. More or less common (depending on the prevailing culture, 9) is the avoidant infant who behaves as if he did not need looking after; an adaptation to physically present but mentally absent care. A more disturbing pattern is shown by children who are mostly afraid of their parents, though they are of course still dependent on them. These are quite frozen with anxiety, even terror, because of violence or rage from parents, or between them.

Even in the toddler years it is possible to predict the way a child will tend to behave as an adolescent and adult. Such predictions are not always right, but more so than most social scientists would like. After all, the point of politics is to change the world, so it is alarming to find that some qualities are relatively immovable. The importance of these patterns of relating is that they are quite stable over time and have been reliably observed in different populations. They are largely independent of genetics, education, social class or intelligence. Many people seek to challenge their history by deliberately being different from their parents. To their surprise they often find that they have brought their parents with them into the next generation, hearing the echo of their voices as they shout at their children or partners. Change is possible, but not through will power alone. Growth requires new relationships, and some of us are fortunate in the partners we find, or the friendships we form, including of course political ones. Psychotherapeutic help comes into this category, too. Cultural change, including greater respect for interpersonal skills (and therefore for women who tend to have them in greater measure) encourages human qualities that were previously disregarded or undervalued to express themselves. In a society devoted to war, for example, different kinds of attachment are promoted, more anxious and obedient, less reflective and thoughtful (10).

I doubt that one could predict a person's place on the political spectrum from early relationships, but it could be possible to say what style they might adopt: how rigid, how angry, how competitive, how cruel, how obedient, how utopian, how Machiavellian, how ambitious, how diplomatic and so on. Likewise the broad political goals a person seeks are influenced by nursery experience - is justice more important, or peace, freedom, or equality? Real historical events, such as war, migration and other social traumas, must also have their impact, but even these are modified by the parents' reactions to them. I suggest that the 'silent majority' of the public includes a large proportion of contented (ie securely attached) individuals, while the more passionate and active will be drawn more from those for whom early experience was more stressful and required greater struggles to overcome.

The part one plays in any group is affected by the quality of early care. One's hatred or enjoyment of conflict, for example, or the desire to lead or to follow, will show up in a group, whatever the task. The important thing for most people is to be accepted,

and much political activity takes place in groups where debate is expected, but only within certain boundaries. Some beliefs, if expressed, would mean expulsion from the group. Belonging usually takes precedence over everything. Sometimes the political subject will forget his ultimate purpose, so engaging is the immediate process. Bion (11) described the astonishing stupidity that can overcome even sophisticated and educated people when they have to work together. In spite of having the correct information, individuals find themselves unable to stick to the primary task of a meeting and instead become preoccupied with irrelevant matters such as the interesting relationship developing between two other members of the group, or with the conviction that someone will lead this group and 'solve all our problems for us'. Such collective daydreaming is always going on, and can easily disable the work of the group. Our hopes for democracy have to be tempered with a respect for the primal processes - envy and rivalry in particular - that undermine our capacity for useful work in groups. The fact that over 600 people can meet regularly without violence in such a place as the British House of Commons is evidence of many centuries of learning and regulation: the taming of the wolf-pack within us all. Again, this is not to detract from political ambitions, but to emphasise the immensity of the task of real co-operation between people. Even in a post modern world tribal processes can not be removed from human behaviour. They have to be understood as part of it.

Like a thrilling story, political drama is captivating in itself. Who is going to lead this group; how will we keep out so-and-so; what is happening to our opponents; and so on. When the object of the exercise is eclipsed by these otherwise ordinary preoccupations, the result is very dangerous indeed. Under such conditions people will kill others without concern. Even when objectives are not forgotten, the passions of membership can simplify and pervert them. In the nastiest scenarios, there is not enough room and people have to be moved out. This is a fairly constant process in history, most memorably in the expanding Germany of the late 1930s and in Yugoslavia today. It seems unbelievable that these expulsions and murders are meant to achieve a happy society where everyone can live in peace together afterwards, but that is the idea. Such is the power of the imagined community (12). You cannot know everyone in it, but you feel that all are your brothers and sisters. Like dogs we drive out the ones that do not smell right.

Attachment to parental figures and the pressures of the group are both very basic forces in human life. They have biological roots, which means that we have to respect their power. This is not the same as believing that everything that we do is genetically determined, that we are mere Darwinian items or selfish genes. Quite the reverse. Human thought is extraordinarily creative and, at its best, both gracious and free. But if we base political understanding on theories that regard human nature in one dimension only - either essentially selfish, or essentially generous - we do ourselves an injustice.

## **Notes**

1. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983
2. It is necessary here to make the routine apology for the lack of a gender free pronoun in English. 'He' might just as well be 'she', but not both together. "...men at the top" (p 2), on the other hand, means what it says.
3. If we are not citizens of anywhere, then we are in serious social difficulties. Refugees and other stateless persons suffer so greatly because they have no rights. This is experienced as not belonging anywhere, not being cared about. This lack of attachment is precisely analogous with the neglect and abandonment of individual children by parents or others (and is taken up in S. Kraemer. & J. Roberts (eds) *The Politics of Attachment*, Free Association Books, London, 1996.) This is not a causal link. Abandoned citizens are not necessarily abandoned by those that they love, though of course they are often separated from them, which is painful.
4. The term 'object relationships' is used by psychoanalysts because it is about the object of our desires.
5. R. Britton, The Missing Link; Parental Sexuality in the Oedipus Complex, in J. Steiner (ed.), *The Oedipus Complex Today: Clinical Implications*, Karnac, London, 1989, p 87.
6. G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology*, Granada, St Albans, 1973, p248
7. M. Steele, H. Steele & P. Fonagy, Associations among attachment classifications of mothers, fathers, and their infants: Evidence for a relationship-specific perspective, *Child Development* 67, 541 -555, 1996
8. J. Belsky, K. Rosenberger. & K. Crnic, The origins of attachment security: "classical" and contextual determinants, in (eds) S. Goldberg, R. Muir & J. Kerr *Attachment Theory; Social, Developmental, and Clinical Perspectives*, The Analytic Press, Hillsdale NJ, 1995
9. Goldberg, S, *Attachment and Development*, London: Arnold, 2000, ch 7.
10. S. Kraemer, Promoting resilience: changing concepts of parenting and child care, *International Journal of Child & Family Welfare*, 3, 273-287,1999
11. W. Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, Tavistock, London, 1961
12. B. Anderson, *op. cit.*