

Passion and tenderness as political forces

*Jô Gondar**

In memory of Marta de Araújo Pinheiro

ABSTRACT. – To understand contemporary forms of social organization it is not enough to know the geopolitics in course; it is also necessary to enter the field of micropolitics and, particularly, the affections and sensibility modes that sustain the construction of social ties. Different affections and sensibility modes will differently build social and political life. In distinguishing the language of passion from the language of tenderness, Ferenczi did not intend to have a political discussion, but we can use these notions to think about the current possibilities of political coexistence. Fear and hatred are violent and incisive passions. Tenderness, on the other hand, constitutes another kind of force, more fluid and porous, opening a more extensive surface of communication with the outside world. It is the child's form of sensitivity, but also that of relationships of solidarity through dispossession. In this sense, the language of tenderness refers to the notion of vulnerability theorized by Judith Butler. It is not about defending a puerility or naivety, but a force of non-violence that, when affirmed, creates the possibility of a less unequal, fairer political coexistence, especially in countries immersed in a culture of hate such as Brazil.

Key words: passion; tenderness; affections; social bond; Sándor Ferenczi; political coexistence.

‘Economics is the method, the object is to change the heart and soul’ (1981). This way, Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, explained to a journalist how she intended to transform a society that valued the collective into a society that valued individualism. One of the main protagonists of the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, Thatcher was not unaware that in order to achieve her political objective it was necessary to penetrate social subjectivity, so that workers would function according to the terms of the game imposed on them. In their heart and soul would lie the foundations of political change.

The philosopher Vladimir Safatle (2016) called this political support base ‘the circuit of affects’. Freud had already demonstrated in ‘Mass Psychology’ (1921) the inseparable character of the individual and the social sphere, both

*Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro Psychoanalytic Circle.
E-mail: joogondar@gmail.com

of which are constructed from modes of relation that occur in the surrounding environment, functioning as a support for the various forms of bonds. Safatle's thesis postulates that a certain affective circulation shapes the forms of sociability and modulates the degree to which we submit ourselves, resist subjection and are able to reaffirm who we are and what we want: 'Our subjection is affectively constructed, is affectively perpetuated and can only be overcome affectively, through the production of another 'aesthesis'. This leads us to say that politics is, in its essential determination, a mode of production of a 'circuit of affects' (Safatle, 2016, pp. 38-39).

It is with other affects in the soul, which are very different from those incited by the neoliberal turn, that I am writing this paper. In order to understand contemporary forms of social organization and even the political conjuncture in which we are immersed, it is not enough to know the current geopolitical context; it is also necessary to enter the field of affects and the forms of sensibility that sustain the construction of social ties. On the broader social level, psychoanalysis unsettlingly reveals the geography of the affects of domination, segregation and colonization, as well as the affective conditions of political emancipation and the reasons for its blockages. These contributions allow us to understand both the adherence to certain forms of government and sociability, and the construction of emancipatory projects that seek to transform them. For it is not only a matter of understanding, but also of thinking of alternatives or at least possibilities of dismantling the affective and/or sensitive modes that sustain certain forms of bonding. Psychoanalysis shows us that changes in subjects and in social ties involve affective elaborations as a result of the experience of new forms of relationships. We can perceive this both at the individual level (in the transference as a new possibility of affective experiences in the analytic treatment) and at the collective level. Psychoanalysts are ethically involved in this process by pointing out, denouncing and corroborating the fact that different affections and forms of sensitivity shape different social and political life. (Safatle, 2016).

Affects and politics

Thomas Hobbes had already demonstrated the importance of fear as an affection that induces the construction of a strong state, capable of preventing the war of all against all, thus stabilizing society. 'We must therefore resolve that the original of all great and lasting societies consisted not in the mutual good will men had towards each other, but in the mutual fear they had of each other.' (1651a, p. 28). Hobbes thinks that by their very nature men are endowed with boundless selfishness, a greed for the goods of others, and an ambition to eliminate those they see as competitors. Hence the need for a strong state, a 'Leviathan' capable of preventing such excesses. But what could guarantee

obedience to the rules, obligations and contracts established by the state? Fear. Only fear would allow men to move away from the state of nature to build a life in society. 'Of all the passions, that which inclineth men last to break the laws is fear', writes Hobbes in 'Leviathan' (1651b, p. 253). To this, he adds: 'it is also the only thing that makes men keep them'. For this English philosopher, fear as a passion is the basis of the state, of laws and of the social bond itself. This is the meaning of Freud's well-known Hobbesian quote: 'Man is wolf to man'.

Fear as a foundational affect of the state is linked to the defense of individualism (Safatle, 2016). Although in Hobbes's dynamic, there is room for hope – it is the expectation of good, just as fear is the expectation of evil – both affects are conceived from the perspective of the individual. In Hobbes's political horizon lies the man who fears the invasion of the other, the loss of his possessions, the threat to his integrity. This is the ultimate figure of social bonds, for whom the state becomes necessary: the individual with their privacy, their property and their borders that must be protected at all times. Under this individualistic logic, the other is always considered a potential invader.

The social dimension of the affects becomes more complex in Carl Schmitt. Influenced by Hobbes, this German jurist, and a member of the Nazi Party, also defended the idea of a strong state, but made the friend-enemy opposition the fundamental axis of 'the political' (Schmitt, 1932). For him, 'the political' is a form of relationship in which people band together with friends to confront enemies. But since there is no guarantee that adversaries will not attack or attempt to do harm, the friend/enemy opposition leads, at its highest point, to the situation of war. The enemies represent an existential threat and this authorizes us to kill them in the name of political reasons. According to Jacques Derrida (1992), Schmitt ends up making war the essence of 'the political'. In this glorification of war – precisely what Hobbes wanted to avoid – we see how fear is combined with another passion in the political field: the passion of hatred.

It should come as no surprise that this German jurist is being studied so much today. War has been a constant in the world and the state of violence permeates all aspects of society; hatred of the other, the foreigner, the different has been encouraged and fear has become a permanent condition. Fear and hatred as political affects produce a society that tends towards paranoia, clinging to the idea that the other, the different, threatens the security and unity of the social body (Safatle, 2016). The combination of hatred and fear has always been the affective engine of authoritarian governments. Now, however, this combination has become a global trend. In the 21st century, individualism and competition, especially valued by the neoliberal order, erect societies that demand too much from their members without offering them a ground beneath their feet. The submission of the subject to business logic, the demand for maximum performance, the emphasis on competition and on constant

evaluation imply a circulation of affections that oscillate between hatred, fear and terror. 'No time for losers'.

If we understand that politics is based on a mode of production of affects, any project of political emancipation will necessarily have to contemplate a change in the forms of sensitivity, in the ways of affecting and being affected in relationships. Is it possible, then, to think of societies from another affective circuit whose foundations are not the passion of fear or hatred?

Passion and tenderness

Once again psychoanalysis reveals its link with politics. Just as clinical work can deactivate affects that feed forms of subjection of desire, it is also capable of fostering other affects that favor subjective freedom. On this last point, the work of Sándor Ferenczi is worth nothing. One of the distinctive characteristics of the Hungarian psychoanalyst's work is the importance he attaches to affects, as well as his persistent affinity with the weaker links of the chain (that of minorities), in all forms of relationships: in political and social ties, in the relationships between children and adults, men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, patients and analysts. I intend to highlight one of them here: the relationship between children and adults. It involves the confusion between passion and tenderness that lies at the genesis of the Ferenczian conception of trauma.

Ferenczi was always interested in the child in his or her position of vulnerability in the face of adult power. However, he never considered this vulnerability as a synonym for powerlessness; the child is a being who thinks, creates, elaborates, and has knowledge and perception even greater than that of the adult. This way of being is expressed through a language, which he calls the language of tenderness. But it is more an affective mode than a linguistic mode as such. In fact, with regard to the text 'Confusion of tongues between adults and the child' (1933), it is not language that is at the center of the traumatic scene. Although Ferenczi attributes to adults a language of passion as opposed to the language of infantile tenderness, the confusion that occurs between them is not linguistic. What provokes the trauma is the invasion of adult passions into the child's tender universe.

What is the difference between passion and tenderness? They are two modes of relating to oneself and to the world. Passion as the language of adults constitutes for Ferenczi a strong and uncontrollable emotion. We can imagine it as a straight, incisive line, both in its movement to throw itself upon the other and to defend itself against the other. Fear and hatred are two examples. They are passions and, as such, they are blind, decisive and final. Hobbes would already have indicated this when he said: 'The only passion of my life was fear'. Tenderness, on the other hand, constitutes another type

of affect, more fluid and porous, which opens up a wider surface of communication with the outside world. It is more permeable to the other and to the potentialities of experience. It composes a world in which the individuality of contours, the fixity of images and the solidity of ideas dissipate, giving way to other ways of being and communicating, less exclusive, more relational and interdependent.

If the affective mode of tenderness, open to heterogeneity, makes those who are immersed in it more vulnerable to trauma, this precariousness of defenses is not considered by Ferenczi solely in a negative way. Children, less equipped with filters, communicate with the environment over a much broader surface, which makes them capable 'to know much more about the world than our narrow horizon now allows' (Ferenczi, 1932, p. 148). Infantile tenderness endows children with a creative capacity and sensitivity far superior to that of adults, keeping them 'in resonance with the surrounding world' (1932, p. 117). The Hungarian psychoanalyst even mentions the 'infantile state of omniscience and supreme wisdom' (p. 81), claiming that it is the regression to a porous and more fragmented state that makes mediums, psychotics and 'wise babies' so sensitive and sagacious in their relations with the environment (Ferenczi, 1932).

Thus, we can see how Ferenczi's tenderness differs from Freud's tenderness: Freudian tenderness comes from a sexual drive inhibited in its objective, while Ferenczi's tenderness is the basic condition of a type of sensitive intelligence that functions in a different register from both reason and passion (Hárs, 2015). Even so, it is still traversed by the drives: Ferenczi doesn't abdicate drives, neither the sexual nor the death one. Tenderness is not devoid of sexuality, nor is it the result of an inhibited sexuality; rather, it is another way of experiencing and expressing the sexual, in a polymorphous and nomadic way. Similarly, the death drive permeates tenderness. In Ferenczi's non-dualistic perspective, 'Thanatos' is at the service of life: it decomposes units, fragments, but does not exclude or annihilate, providing the material for other creations. In this sense, tenderness is not exempt from aggressiveness, but it presents another way of living and manifesting it, without the violence and forcefulness of passion. Aggressiveness can be exercised in a vital way, a theme that Winnicott was later able to further develop. He showed how aggression is fundamental to the child's motility and exploration of the world (1945), and how aggressive behaviors are part of the primitive expression of love (1950). Hence Winnicott said, in 1967, that many of his original ideas would have come from somewhere, and some of them possibly from Ferenczi.

It is necessary to note that tenderness and passion are not two radically separate worlds. Ferenczi never claimed that the child does not experience passion, nor that for the adult, tenderness is lost forever. A partisan of mixtures, he could not propose any division of the world into two parts. What he proposes

is that abusive relationships occur when someone dominated by passion colonizes another who is, more often than not, experiencing a more porous affective register. The distinction between the two affects does not simply refer to phases of life, as the place of the child in Ferenczian work is vast, complex, not restricted to a stage of development that must be overcome in the process of maturation. A good example can be found in the title of one of his last articles: 'Child analysis in the analysis of adults' (1931).

The main idea of this text is that the child is present in the adult, it is his sensitive, vulnerable, creative dimension, and it is with this dimension that the analyst must communicate, mainly in cases of traumatized patients. How does the analyst access it? By placing himself on the same line as his patient, that is, by accessing his own childish and tender dimension. Ferenczi writes in his 'Clinical Diary' (1932, p. 91) that at certain moments of analysis, both 'analyst and patient give the impression of being two equally terrified children who compare their experiences and, because of their common fate, understand each other and instinctively try to comfort each other'. He adds: 'An awareness of this shared fate allows one's partner to appear completely harmless, therefore as someone whom one can trust with confidence'. Here we are far from a vertical and hierarchical relationship between patient and analyst, in which the latter would occupy the place of supposed knowledge. This view assumes the existence of a community – a 'community of similar destiny', as Ferenczi asserts – which can be built horizontally from the vulnerability of its members, patient, and analyst.

It is not difficult to perceive this as a critique of the power games that occur in the psychoanalytic apparatus itself. Ferenczi introduces a possible horizontality in the links between analyst and patient. Known as an *enfant terrible*, he was always attentive to horizontal relations and inclined towards those who showed themselves, without dissimulation, to be vulnerable. Perhaps because he recognized himself as such.

This strengthens our hypothesis of extending the importance of the affective circuit to the wider political field. If tenderness is a form of infantile sensitivity, it is also, as the example of the 'analysis of two children' shows us, the predominant affect in bonds created from a common dispossession, *i.e.*, in relations of solidarity by dispossession. From this angle, tenderness refers to the notion of vulnerability theorized by Judith Butler.

Ferenczi with Butler

For Butler (2004), what creates the social bond between the members of a group or a society is not the fact of having the same father, the same leader or the same ideal, but the vulnerability present in each one. This is at the root of the feeling of solidarity – and not of charity, paternalism or tolerance, practices

that maintain places of power – insofar as we are all dispossessed. It is not a question of helplessness, a notion that refers to a constitutive, almost ontological condition and that goes back to a nostalgia for the Father. Unlike the latter, vulnerability does not invoke a Father or a transcendent idea; we are all vulnerable because we are thrown into a world of others from the outset. It is through relationships and not through our constitution that we present ourselves as vulnerable, subject to loss, trauma, exposure, to the recognition of the other or its absence.

This inevitably places us in a relationship of interdependence with all others, human and non-human. It is not possible, on the basis of Butler's theory, to value any form of individualism. If we recognize ourselves as interdependent, the very idea of the individual becomes inconceivable (Butler, 2020). Just as the opposition between an 'us' and a 'them', which is based on the same individualistic logic, becomes problematic: if the 'self' is always traversed by the 'you', I cannot eliminate or disregard the 'you' without eliminating or disregarding parts of myself. It is from this point of view that Butler formulates her famous phrase: all lives matter. The big political problem lies in the fact that some lives are considered more relevant than others (Butler, 2004). Because they are valued unequally, some lives are protected in their vulnerability, while others are not. Lives that are not protected are politically precarious, due to the unfavorable circumstances to which they are exposed, often from the outset. It is against this socially produced precariousness, that is, against the lack of recognition of the vulnerability of all lives, that political struggles must be waged.

The proposal of a horizontal social bond brings Ferenczi and Butler closer. It is curious that in this aspect a first-generation psychoanalyst can find himself aligned with a contemporary queer philosopher. Their conceptions are also intertwined if we link the conditions of life to certain affect. Vulnerability is not an affect, but a permanent condition common to all of us because we are fundamentally relational beings. If we were to find an affective figure that corresponds to this condition, it could not take the form of passion, which is always much more categorical and exclusive. We should think of an affect that makes us more open to others and more willing to broaden our bonds. This affect would be tenderness.

Linked to vulnerability and therefore to a primary and insurmountable condition of any human being, tenderness would be a basic vital affect. However, it can be transmuted or substituted by other affects, if this primary condition is not affirmed or recognized. In fact, in any form of violence, whether physical or psychological, there is an attempt to deny vulnerability, both our own and that of the other. For example: we may do violence or even kill in the name of a leader or an idea, but the meaning of that act is emptied if we recognize that the condition of dispossession is common to all of us. A form of defense against this condition also occurs when we attribute

vulnerability to certain groups in advance. In doing so, we consider ourselves different from them and therefore invulnerable. In this sense, there are affects linked to phantasmatic constructions of defense, that is, to forms of non-recognition of one's own or other people's vulnerability. In fear, I do not affirm my vulnerability, but on the contrary, I try to defend myself from it; I close my doors because I feel fragile in front of others and I see him as a threat. In hatred, I refuse to perceive the other's vulnerability – as well as my own – and try to despise and annihilate him or her in various ways. However, in doing so, is it not my own vulnerability that I am seeking, in my fantasies, to eliminate?

Various political configurations rely on the denial of vulnerability by nurturing the fantasy of a protective leader or a powerful enemy. The scenario is very different when vulnerability is affirmed. This affirmative courage can have an emancipatory political function, as it does not lead to resignation or victimization. Affirming vulnerability does not mean taking comfort in the status of victim; it is not just a matter of demanding reparation for the harm suffered from a power recognized as such. Demanding reparation may be just, but it maintains the places of power and that is not where the fundamental political transformation lies. More important is the deconstruction of fantasies that, nurtured by fear or hatred, perpetuate the search for authority figures and the belief in a transcendent sovereign force.

Tenderness as a political force

In this sense, vulnerability appears as a force, as Judith Butler proposes (2020): a force of non-violence and an affirmation of power. I think that tenderness is the political affect that corresponds to this force. Butler argues against the violence of the state that defends itself from black and brown communities, poor people, queers, migrants, homeless people, in short, dissidents of all kinds, as if they were dangerous and bearers of destruction. This would justify their precarization and even their annihilation since their lives are not considered worthy of mourning. Butler's struggle is based on solidarity by dispossession, creating modes of resistance and movements for social transformation that separate off aggression from its destructive aims to affirm the living potentials of radical egalitarian politics.

This presupposes a critique of individualism and especially the possibility of socially circulating affects that allow the affirmation of vulnerability as our common condition, rather than fantasies that defend us from it. It is at this point that tenderness can nurture political emancipation. Tenderness opens the doors of indeterminacy and allows for the creation of a common world, enlarging the field of the 'we'. But it is necessary to remember, once again, through Ferenczi, that tenderness is not synonymous

with impotence, childishness or absence of aggressiveness. Butler follows this same line in referring to non-violence: 'We do not have to love one another to engage in meaningful solidarity. The emergence of a critical faculty, of critique itself, is bound up with the vexed and precious relationship of solidarity, where our 'sentiments' navigate the ambivalence by which they are constituted' (2020, p. 203).

Contrary to passion, tenderness is inclusive. It rejects the omnipotence of passions to create spaces of hospitality. It allows ambivalence to be endured and negotiated politically, an essential condition for non-violent practices. Open to the other, but also to the aggressiveness that does not annihilate the other, tenderness can become the affective foundation of social forms that we do not yet know, liberating events that we do not yet know how to experience.

A utopia? Maybe. Utopias call for the power of the political imagination since we can only build what we were previously capable of imagining. The creation of a new democratic culture is a long-term process, but for that we need to transform the horizons of what is politically possible, a process that requires an urgent change in the circuit of affections. We need to imagine other affectively possible worlds so that we can live in a non-violent way, experiencing a more egalitarian and fairer political coexistence, especially in countries immersed in a culture of hate, as it is the case in Brazil.

We discussed above the combination of two passions – fear and hatred – as a global trend, from the circulation of an economic-political logic that values individualism and competition. In Brazil, a 'culture of hate' has been particularly strengthened since the 2016 Parliamentary Coup and the election of a far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022). With a discourse that encouraged the use of weapons and violence, and a tendency to turn opponents and minorities (blacks, indigenous, women, homeless, etc.) into enemies, Bolsonaro potentiated a hatred that was already circulating in Brazil, associated with social inequality and authoritarianism (Rubim, 2020). The center-left political turn with Lula in 2023 has brought together a broad front and seeks to deflate political hatred. It is laudable, but not enough. If we take into account that affects shape the forms of sociability and the modes of political relationship, we have to combine, for a real innovation, macro and micro-politics level. Which is to say that a true political transformation involves changes in the circuit of affects.

As Stephen Jay Gould observed (2007), history is not made by the actions of a few great names, such as Julius Caesar, Alexander, or Napoleon, as we are used to summarizing it. The real fabric of life, he says, is the thousand little kindnesses we silently and unconsciously offer each other every day: a mother tending to her child, a friend reaching out to another, a passerby helping a perfect stranger. In dealing with people's changes and affective elaborations, psychoanalysts are involved in the possibility of these acts.

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