

The evolutionary heritage of vulnerability: comment on the article ‘Passion and tenderness as political forces’ by Jô Gondar

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I am happy to have come across the reflections of Jô Gondar, in this intense intervention on passion and tenderness as political forces, and I consider this an opportunity to be able to share the thoughts that the article evoked in me. Gondar’s reflection strikes me as powerful and elegant, in its ability first of all to remind us, by way of a prologue, of the holistic dimension, as we would call it today, of the human being or, in other words, the fact that long before and beyond any speculation or abstraction, the human being is a complex whole.

Gondar, therefore, reinforces in a single movement the inextricable relationship between theory and action, between the inside and the outside, between what happens in the intimacy of a learning relationship such as that of a child with his or her caregiver and the repercussions on the community, producing the great narratives that run through it, across the dimension of the affections and the dimension of the political. This seems to me to be an attitude and a posture often found, for complex historical and social reasons, within a certain cultural tradition of south American origins – such as, for example, Freire’s liberation pedagogy or the theatre productions of the actor and playwright César Brie, where the theme of the interface between public and private, between the space of the affections and the political space, seems almost to be taken for granted.

It is also worth mentioning, in this sense, the phenomenological psychiatric thinking of Basaglia (Colucci & Di Vittorio, 2001) and the reflections subsequent to Foucault (in whose post-structuralist vein Butler also fits to some extent) and, not least, Sironi’s thinking in the ethno-psychiatric clinic (Inglese & Cardamone, 2011); authors who move, with due differences, in this varied

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tradition, affirming the inseparable link between the political-social horizon and the structuring of individual psychism, in the scenario of certain dominant narratives that impose themselves to the point of transforming life trajectories and bodies themselves.

Gondar, moreover, immediately recalls the link between micropolitics and macropolitics, allowing us to go back to our idea of the human being as a whole. In this way – bearing in mind children and the importance of early relationships - one can think of the parental function as a political gesture, participating fundamentally in the creation of a developmental trajectory that will lead the child to acquire resources and play in the community in a trusting, participatory and non-judgmental way or, on the contrary, in a suspicious, competitive and devaluing way. In this sense, talking about the quality of parental care and attachment bonds not only assumes the value of supporting the child's wellbeing but also his or her ability to be in a relationship, learning how self-realisation does not imply an uncontrolled expansion of one's own trajectory to the detriment of others, but can only evolve in a relationship of interdependence with others.

Cultivating tenderness means developing an attitude and qualities that are closer to and akin to tolerance of differences, intuition, creativity, the ability to pause in uncertainty, qualities which I would say are closer to wisdom than to knowledge. Obviously, there is a need for both, but there is the danger today of confusing them, imagining that having more knowledge automatically makes us wiser. Wisdom is integrative, knowledge is divisive, wisdom knows how to stay with what is there, knowledge yearns to go further and further, wisdom and tenderness are united by the openness of the gaze, which becomes so wide that it can embrace broader and subtler horizons, knowledge compares, evaluates, chews up data and impatiently demands results. Knowledge craves omnipotence while feeling powerless, wisdom accepts to be in the middle.

It is interesting that sexuality and death are reread by Gondar in the light of tenderness as complex human experiences, where tenderness itself is capable of safeguarding their complexity, accepting to experience them without expecting to come to terms with them. After all, tenderness represents the particular strength that allows us to root ourselves in ourselves while accepting, at the same time, the loss of mastery, allowing us to open ourselves up to experience - seeing in death, for instance, as Gondar suggests, not the end of everything but a disarticulation of what is known so that the possibility of re-articulation in other forms is permitted.

Of course, as has been reiterated, vulnerability is not powerlessness. This, in fact, recalls the nostalgia for the father and even, perhaps, the temptation of a return to an omnipotent mother, in a symbiotic fusionality that no longer needs anything. The theme of the avoidance of one's own vulnerability - in terms of social and intra-psychic repression, even to the point of denial - is a decidedly contemporary one: we are witnessing the profound

effects of this psychic colonisation of certain models and narratives, within which vulnerability is a defect - I am thinking, moreover, that even when vulnerability becomes a quality which is spectacularised and communicated in forms and ways that claim absolute visibility, with subtle narcissistic intentions, one misses the goal of getting in touch with one's authentic fragility - it is no coincidence that the word 'vanity' and 'vanishing' share a common etymological root.

It is in this scenario that the therapeutic relationship and the profession of psychotherapist move, think, and act. I am thinking here of the beautiful definition of the therapist as a 'wounded healer', as someone who goes through and shares suffering - Ferenczi's image of therapy as the meeting of two terrified children who share their fears, allowing mutual recognition that is already a cure. At the same time, the psychotherapist, in Gondar's vision, but perhaps I am risking here, becomes a figure who presides over a role and function which aims to rehabilitate fragility, 'shared vulnerability as an evolutionary asset', not as an evolutionary obstacle. In this sense, I too, as a clinician, sometimes experience myself as a witness who accompanies in a transformative work, who simply restores dignity and value to vulnerability, which we can only take care of. I find here important points of contact with the Buddhist compassionate attitude and, specifically, with the Compassion Focused Therapy approach (Gilbert, 2016). Which, beyond the more technical contents linked to neurobiological evidence, bases its interventions on the profound recognition of our shared humanity. Underlying the awareness of vulnerability - and an authentic community - is the recognition of a dispossession, a shared wound, something missing. In the context of so-called therapeutic efficacy, even Fisher, with respect to trauma intervention, asks whether it is not more worthwhile to focus on caring for the wounded and surviving parts of the trauma rather than to focus primarily on reconstructing the traumatic history; in the context of the issues addressed here, this seems to me to be a contribution that goes in the direction of a greater appreciation of compassion and tenderness in therapy for the patient's wounds and of caring for these vulnerabilities.

It seems to me that, in the light of what Gondar is affirming with Butler, one can almost reread the evangelical precept of 'love thy neighbor as thyself' - in this perspective, a difficult act whose chances of success are physiologically risky - making it become 'love your neighbor's vulnerabilities as much as your own' - a democracy founded on acknowledging vulnerability and compassion for oneself and for the other. It seems to me that the issue of security - here not taken, of course, in a defensive and militaristic sense but in the very opposite direction - is central and complex: we can love the other if we feel safe, but the concept of security must be reformulated - from a state of defense based on fear to a condition of openness based on tenderness. Hence, we need to find educational styles that point towards the opportunity for compassionate interactions (Gilbert & Choden, 2019), which allow us and others

to be open to relationships. Both participants in communication, in fact, involved in a relationship, co-regulate their nervous systems (Porges, 2014) and create the conditions for trusting the other. On the other hand, again from a neurobiological point of view, a society that bases transactions between people on suspicion, lack of trust, and fear, can only make the nervous system retreat into the known defensive positions of attack/escape or collapse - hyperarousal and hypoarousal - resulting in a physiological impossibility to create co-regulatory bonds, creating effects of chronic stress, alertness and hypervigilance, and activating the competitive motivational system to the detriment of the cooperative, caring and nurturing one.

I would like to thank the author for sharing her point of view: indeed, I believe that Gondar's reading and proposal not only contribute to enriching the thought that thematises the psychotherapeutic relationship but also point to a viable path - perhaps, the only authentically evolutionary one - to the construction of communities that once again take care of themselves and their future.

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