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Note on Winnicott, Queen Elizabeth and the British Monarchy

Z. Loparic
IBPW/IWA

In 1970, Winnicott received a request to write about the monarchy. He accepted and wrote the article "The Place of the Monarchy", but specified that he would only deal with the monarchy in Great Britain. He had his reasons. He was not a connoisseur of political theories on the monarchy, nor was he specialized in the history of this form of social life.

Why, then, did he accept? He seized the occasion to apply – as he had done, since 1940, with regard to democracy – his theory of human maturation to his experience of living daily with the monarchy. Although certainly not an habitué of Buckingham Palace, he did live nearby and was daily informed, by the flag being hoisted on the palace's pole or staying furled, whether or not the queen was in her residence. Often, when taking a taxi for an appointment, Winnicott would get stuck in the traffic caused by her car, as she left the palace to perform some function that was part of her role, for which she is funded by most Britons, himself included, and the fulfillment of which everyone demands.

Even as he swore at the queen who delayed him, he acknowledged the importance of preserving the formality, deference, respectful distance and the entire paraphernalia of the royalty she represents. It is plausible that this woman, who was the queen, might hate it all, but no one will ever know. Yet this does not imply one might want access to the minutiae of her personal life, for it is only by remaining remote that this woman can retain her value as a dream and occupy a place in the realm of myths, and, in doing so, become a linchpin for a healthy life, which includes the ability to dream. Without this value, she would be no more than a neighbor.

When writing about democracy in the 1950s, Winnicott adopts the same personal approach. He does not treat democracy as a political system, nor as a historical process, but as a social way of living involving emotional factors and latent ideas, which emerge along the maturation process.

Thus, there would be a latent, unconscious sense of democracy that makes it an ally of the individual maturity of its healthy members. This is why a democratic society needs the objective, protected, safe mechanism of the democratic machine, through which the people can both elect and get rid of their leaders – hence the idea of secret ballot –, thus ensuring each

individual the freedom to express their deepest feelings of acceptance or rejection. At the same time, the exercise of the secret vote imposes on individuals, if they are healthy enough, full responsibility for their choice and its consequences. In this manner, the secret ballot activates the process of cross-identification with society, which consists of presenting the problems of social reality as their own, strictly personal, and, conversely, of projecting onto society the results of their inner struggle.

When talking about Great Britain, one must always iterate, says Winnicott, that the functioning of its parliamentary democratic system, as opposed to a Cromwell-type dictatorship, depends, for its stability and popular acceptance, on the survival of the monarchy. Conversely, the survival of the monarchy – the maintenance of the man or woman who occupies the royal throne, and of the principle of heredity – depends on the existence of a democratic machine that allows the people to feel they can remove leaders from power or overthrow governments through direct or parliamentary election. It is assumed, here, that the deposition of a leader or a government will be performed by secret ballot, the only type of voting that can express unconscious motivations or profound feelings, or even to the paradoxical tendencies to destroy what one impulsively wants.

The replacement of a political figure or a party involves an essentially conflictual process, both personally and socially. The monarchy can reduce the level of tension and give rise to a feeling of trust in institutions, something very welcome in a country like Great Britain, where the political scene is periodically and perforce tumultuous. This is one of the reasons why the monarchy is maintained, illogically and emotionally, permanently, as a guarantor of security.

For government, as well, can be overthrown illogically, and, at least in part, by the unconscious emotional motivation of breathing new life into all that is old, outdated and archaic, after having it destroyed – as seen in the unexpected electoral defeat of Churchill, victorious in the Second World War, as early as July 1945. The essence of British democracy is the division of the sovereign into king and prime minister. In the American variation of the democratic State, the president is the head of government, but only for a limited period, which is proving to be, these days, a source of institutional and emotional instability in that country.

How did the British monarchy come about? Applying his theory of maturation, Winnicott says the monarchy is a collective maturational achievement, attained gradually, in a specific and creative way, by the individuals who make up the peoples of the British Crown. Geographically speaking, the monarchy originated on an island; humanly speaking, it arose in the intermediate area of transition from sleep to wakefulness, from wakefulness to sleep; and

between oneiric or psychic reality and external reality – a transition that occurs in the space/time of all realizable possibilities, in the place of infinitely varied creative, play and cultural experiences. If we look at things as Winnicott suggests, we realize that most lives of adults, adolescents, children and infants are lived in this intermediate area. Civilization itself could be described in these terms.

In this place, in the baby's life, a piece of cloth, or a teddy bear, may bring together the two sides of the transitional situation. This object is a subjective creation, a personal possession, and, simultaneously, symbol of a mother or of an external maternal (or paternal) element, duly encountered, continuously available, stable, and thereby essential for the child's safety and joy, for its maturational health.

In adult life, monarchically speaking, the man or woman on the throne, who bears the traits of any and all human beings, embodies and actualizes, albeit paradoxically and ambivalently, this very same dream of stability. At the heart of it all, says Winnicott, is a woman (or a man) who has, or does not have, the ability to exist without reacting to provocation until one's death, when a hereditary successor takes over this responsibility.

A terrible burden, adds Winnicott, to have not only to survive attacks without retaliating, but to be long-lived – staying alive as a trustworthy object of love and veneration – and survive as a dynasty, in a potentially infinite series of heirs that will guarantee the continuity of the nation's life. A burden exacerbated by the fact that, at every moment, amidst all kinds of claims, demands, attacks and tokens of veneration, there is, in the life of a monarch and of the royal family, unparalleled exposure to individual and group lonesomeness.

Once the monarchy is established, the social world opens up, and remains open as a space/time that exists by itself, not as a place of fear, complaisance or defeats, but as a place to live on one's own and do one's own things. When this doesn't happen, the social world can still be sustained, but only by daydreaming or fantasizing. Or by mere ideology. An essential trait of the mother who survives is that she does not react to or fight back the baby's greedy voracity. This voraciousness is destructive only if the mother allows herself to be provoked and retaliates. Similarly, the constitutional monarch must not react to attacks of a personal or even political nature; this is because his or her personality is not implied in any constitutional function. Furthermore, the monarch's political views must not be publicized or legitimately treated as above political struggles.

In a country that is not very big, that is an island, has no borders except the sea, no neighbors (except the Irish!), and an almost unbroken thousand-year monarchical history, it is possible to maintain a political system in which the government can be periodically destroyed

while the monarchy remains indestructible. Another decisive strength of the British democracy – which is, in an essential respect, a reflection of the royal family's affairs on the social fabric – is that it allows the subjects to see the queen as a mother, or the king as a father, who takes care of everyone.

Dreams pertaining to royalty are not always protective – far from it. Over every Brit hangs an enduring and vital question: Did God save the queen/king? The threat of death, betokened in this doubt, is immediately concealed by an equally traditional exclamation, "The queen/king is dead, long live the queen/the king!" A Briton's dreams with queens and kings refer not only to their survival as reliable providers of care and services, but also to the individual life of the sovereign and to the continuity of the dynasty.

Where there is life, there is death. Winnicott understands that the traditional exclamation does not conjure, in the deepest sense, death itself, but death in the unconscious intent of the subjects. Like every human, the Brits cannot leave alone that which is good. They must *have* what is good (in this case, a reliable monarchy) and, at the same time, be able to destroy it (ultimately, by executing the king or queen). How to understand this paradox?

Not by means of any kind of death drive. Winnicott, as a model for analysis, uses the initial part of his theory of maturation, which deals with the inherent destructiveness of the primitive love impulse, the fire of life that animates and illuminates, but also, depending on environmental conditions, burns and destroys. In early life, what is good is the mother who survives the excited and greedy use both by the awake baby, accompanied by unconscious ideals and fantasies, and by the sleeping baby and its dreams of destroying her. If she doesn't react, as usually happens, she survives and is loved and valued. For she passed the test: unprotected, she allowed herself to be ruthlessly used by primitive impulses and the ideas that elaborate and accompany them.

Later on in the maturational process, the entire family undergoes the same type of test, and a conflicted, paranoid figure emerges: "I am the King of the Castle; you are the dirty rascal." Later still, among adults, the monarchy is exposed to the same trial. If the king or queen remains on the throne, in the position and posture of royalty, despite the dreams and unconscious fantasies of the subjects, and despite the personal traits of the monarch and the dynamics of the royal family's life (births, deaths, marriages, divorces, businesses, scandals), then it is because the royalty exists by its own right and has attributes that are real, not dreamed or fantasized, nor imposed by the hoi polloi. And because it is stable, if interrupted it tends to re-establish itself.

King Charles I was indicted, convicted and executed for high treason in 1649, the monarchy was abolished and England became a republic. Cromwell imposed a state of

exception, dissolved Parliament and made himself Lord Protector of England. After his death in 1660, the monarchy was restored and the eldest son of Charles I was crowned King Charles II. This leads us to think, says Winnicott, that Cromwell helped the English see that a good dictator can be worse than a bad king.

It is precisely here that the principle of heredity comes into play. The man (or woman) who sits on the royal throne, with institutionally defined functions, not by their own choice or ours, nor by political vote, nor by merit, nor by medieval divine right, but simply by heredity, by the uninterrupted series of generations of one's family, of the royal dynasty. This is his or her destiny, comprising public and strictly private aspects, recognized and valued by most Britons.

The thousand-year history of the Island's monarchy can be quickly destroyed, in various ways – by misbegotten theories of individual and social human maturation, by invasive journalism, or by those who see the monarchy only as a fairy tale, or a theatrical performance of the royal court. Regardless, the survival of the British constitutional monarchy depends not on psychology, or political theories or political propaganda, but on the preservation of the abstract and factual conditions that made possible its emergence and preservation as a cultural object, that is,

on its own inner qualities as a way of structuring social life and on its place in the political arena alongside Parliament;

on the dreams and unconscious potential of the British peoples, on their capacity to keep open the potential space between individuals and the national society, where the monarchy is created and recreated as a cultural object, and on the dreams of each one that overlay the external reality;

on the struggles in behalf of the monarchy itself that marked the history of England;

on the man or woman who occupies the position of royalty and on the nature of the royal family;

on sheer luck;

on the overall psychiatric health of the community, with a not too big proportion of people resentful of deprivation or ill from privations in early relationships;

on the fact that Great Britain is an island (more precisely, a group of islands); and so on.

Some of the struggles involving the monarchy, which occurred in the potential space of the British peoples, marked the history of its development and continue to this day, are incomparably portrayed in the *Histories* of Shakespeare, the poet. Histories not of the court's histrionic mise en scène , but of the universal theater of the world, of the world-setting, where

all men and women are mere actors with their own stage entrances and exits, and perform a wide variety of roles according to their maturational stage – that of babies, students, lovers, soldiers, judges and elders. And, in the midst of it all, also the role of English monarchs, such as that of Henry V, for example, hero of national unification (*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers*) or that of Richard III, antisocial usurper of the crown, forcefully deposed (*A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!*).

Winnicott is not sentimental about royalty or the royal family, but he takes the monarchy seriously, for it is the result of the maturational process of the individuals and peoples of Great Britain over the course of a history that is theirs alone. Without the monarchy, Winnicott asserts, Britain would be a very different place to live. Yet, he leaves out another question: Would the alternative to monarchy be better or worse? He does not propose monarchy as a recipe; it cannot be exported, just as democracy cannot. Both are cultural creations of essentially local collective histories, which nevertheless can be understood in terms of the general theory of human maturation.

The article ends with a note of thanks to queen Elizabeth. At the present – it was 1970 – we are fortunate, says Winnicott. All Britons can benefit amply from the current efforts of the queen, which are inseparable from the great honor and privilege of her being on the throne of this land, a land that is not very big, that is surrounded by the sea, and that once inspired a song: "A Nice Little Tight Little Island."

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