

JEAN-LOUIS AUCREMANNE

Maladjusted Childhood : geste Aichhorn's Response

Aichhorn's topicality

The book by A. Aichhorn to which I refer, *Jeunesse a l'abandon*, was written in 1925.¹ One might consider it out of date. But the problem is that there's hardly any psychoanalytic work being done now in this domain. It isn't that the problem of delinquency or «abandon,» of *Verwahrlosung* as Aichhorn calls it -- in other words, the «loss of the truth» -- no longer exists. On the contrary, but one hardly hears of clinical or educative experiences enlightened by psychoanalysis with so-called «antisocial» youths, for example, those currently found under the guardianship of the Youth Protection Agency.

In parallel, the interest, and thus the research, in the domain of clinical criminology (in Belgium, at least) has all but disappeared from universities much more preoccupied, it seems, with a sociology of crime and the treatment of criminality.

In the same way, Lacan's text «Introduction theorique aux fonctions de la psychanalyse en criminologie»² is rarely cited in contemporary psychoanalytic literature, if not for the occasional up-date or critique of it. In this writing, Lacan salutes the «ingenuity and patience that one admires in the initiatives of a pioneer like Aichhorn, [who] never lets it be forgotten that their form must always be renewed to surmount the resistances that the aggressive group cannot fail to deploy against any recognized technique.»³ Here, one sees Lacan's interest in the innovations of technique in this Viennese experience, like his interest in the English innovations in psychiatry of Bion and his colleagues.

But without doubt those are indeed delicate fields. Would the social group confide its «antisocials» to the analysts whose program subverts the good old recipes «surveillance and punishment?» Would an institution bathed in analytic ideology accept to work with these youth «under constraint» with a population rather aggressive with regards to the «psys?» However, this is what Aichhorn did.

Youth in abandon

Who did August Aichhorn work with? Here's what he said on it:

By youth in abandon I mean not only all the types of young delinquents or dyssocial youths, but also all sorts of neurotic and problem children and youths. A precise discrimination of these categories is difficult, the passage from one to the other is fuzzy. In practice, these different cases are well known to the special education teacher»

As one sees, the ultimate criteria of the definition of the group is in definitive «practice,» which is to say that he resorts to the position of the subject's antisocial choice rather than a diagnostic structure. Aichhorn himself says: «For our children, we frequently skirt the borders of psychiatry, cases at the limits of neurosis or psychosis, and we also find cases practically at the limit of normal.»

This sort of «fuzziness» sufficiently indicates that Aichhorn doesn't give himself any precise idea of a diagnostic, while he gives plenty of precious indications on the differences between those whom he treats and what psychoanalysis had already been able to shed light on, in relation to neurosis above all.

Thus, Aichhorn speaks about the «discontents of the totem» as Eric Laurent calls them:⁴ it is an entirely «trans-clinical» name that designates social insubordination, whether by opposition, transgression or «detachment» (run-aways, vagabonds). Of course, from this point of view we wouldn't have any trouble placing in this vast category a more recent figure, designated also by an antisocial trait: the drug addict. Or more precisely the young-addicted-delinquent, who has become today's emblem of social danger. This figure draws on itself repression or its opposite,

depending on which face of the phantasm one chooses; love medicine or right-wing crusade, depending on if one puts the accent on the suffering or on the position of the victim of a failed social structure.

Evidently, taking into account that these people present themselves at first as social symptoms rather than in terms of subject symptoms, we wouldn't be extrapolating too much in remarking that Aichhorn's antisocial youth and a good many addict-delinquents today are the «same,» with the social success of drugs added. This should already attract our critical attention to what contemporary, social commentators willingly describe: they are delinquents because they are addicts...

Our attention is drawn to the similarities in the circuit followed by the antisocial of 1925 Vienna and a good many «addicts» of today. Aichhorn situates the problem, logically enough for the conceptualizations of the epoch, in the function of the ideal ego:

We find the reason for certain manifestations of antisociality when we have recognized that the ideal ego itself might not possess certain traits prescribing to the ego a social conduct or it might erect exigencies contrary to these rules, or again it might not erect any rules at all.

From a theoretical point of view, we know that the work of Lacan allows us to clarify this operability of the ideal ego, but for this one must have recourse to the symbolic order. In the text on criminology, this operability is conceived of on the model of a dialectic. Lacan situates antisocial conduct in the suspension of this dialectic, which must drive the subject to assume his/her role in the symbolic:

Thus the aggressive tension integrating the frustrated drive each time that the failure of adequation to the «other» makes the resolute identification abort, this determines a type of object which becomes criminal in the suspension of the dialectic of the ego.⁵

Thus Lacan might have brought a little clarification on the difficulty faced by the authors of that era (Aichhorn, Friedlander, Glover) to distinguish the structure of a «neurotic character» insofar as criminal from that of neurosis «where the tensions remain latent in the symptoms.» Lacan proposes a distinction that opposes «reflection» and «expression»: «the 'neurotic character' is the reflection, in the individual's conduct, of the isolation of the familial group which these cases demonstrate to be always in the

antisocial position, while neurosis rather expresses these anomalies of structure.»⁶

This situates things for neurosis. Without making case presentations, Aichhorn evokes psychosis, but in an agitated form where pulsional motion is less a return of the unsymbolized repressed than a direct expression of a conflict with the symbolic.

Aichhorn's knowledge and know-how

The revolutionary, yet simple and logical, thesis that Aichhorn supports is to emphasize that there are consequences for those who break away from the totem, from the ideal ego: transgression doesn't eliminate guilt, nor the appeal to punishment. There he follows Freud's teaching in which guilt and the need for punishment are unconscious. In this case, the push-to-crime, the push-to-infraction is motivated by a secret appeal to punishment. This makes Aichhorn say, «If we punish the child, we respond to his request.»

This is where one of the major resorts of his practice and ethic is inscribed: it concerns refusing to respond to this appeal, to this request for punishment. In the most modern vocabulary, we say there is a jouissance of punishment, and it concerns abstaining from contributing to this if one wants a means of action on this repetition from a different perspective. In practice, this evidently gives one an inverse position from that of a disciplinary institution.

There are two positions that Aichhorn extracts himself from explicitly: to take pleasure in the rule, in other words, in punishment, and to take pleasure in the confession. This, negatively, indicates that his desire is elsewhere. This choice is not supported by the myth of a universal efficiency of psychoanalysis. From this point of view, Aichhorn is very modest. Moreover, he doesn't situate his action as psychoanalysis, but as an «application» of psychoanalysis to re-education. He doesn't say that this works better; he even goes so far as to hint that for certain people severity is more efficient, and that for others, nothing works. Some things are irreducible.

Thus, in the choice of psychoanalysis for Aichhorn there is a role to be taken up, which doesn't retreat before the subjective logic of the delinquent: it isn't a question to break or to dominate, but, first of all, to

know something about it. This role to be taken up and the desire to know can be discerned: a subject might just not submit to the norm, and the question is to know why before envisioning a corrective action. But he knows he cannot simply demand this knowledge; it is necessary to manoeuvre, create certain conditions which are even on the order of asceticism, to obtain it.

Returning to two points of his asceticism evoked above -- the refusal to take pleasure in knowledge or the law -- concerning knowledge, this seems clear enough in his expose on the transference. He doesn't aim at confession. He specifies to his interlocutor that he has the right to be silent about what he doesn't want to talk about. Better yet, he recognizes that these subjects have all the best reasons to mistrust and lie, and Aichhorn doesn't obfuscate them. For the rest, they lie, like everybody else in the world. Without doubt they lie a little bit more, for reasons linked to their history and situation. But in social life, he says, «each of us promenades his mask.» «Most of us from tender childhood feel the need to appear as our entourage demands.» Aichhorn goes even further: he who has been able to compose a mask in infancy, will better confront real life. To show oneself as one is, is to finish in failure. From this point of view, Aichhorn doesn't play the Good Samaritan or the idealist; he knows that the subject supports himself with fictions. From the moment he knows that the lie is there from the start, he invites us to not retreat, for «to reject the child in the name of this postulate (that he lies) is equal to a capitulation.» Thus he specifies that he doesn't interrogate the youth on any set theme because he knows that the subject's position, his «preoccupations» will deliver themselves up as well in an imaginary story or an anecdote.

The dialogue situation is in this way open to displacements in every sense of the term: in an office, in the street, in the tram or during an activity. Displacement that we might recognize today as a displacement of the signifier. What is thus restored in the situation of speaking is the very principle for a speech act, to wit, to displace itself. And this displacement itself runs counter to the fixation of *jouissance* or the accusing finger of *jouissance*.

Setting out from a postulate that recognizes the speaking being's status as lie and the fiction as truth, Aichhorn anticipates what Lacan specifies as the half-saying of the truth. Inverse to aiming for avowal, one aims for what structurally is impossible to say, to wit, *jouissance*.

The second point is the suspension of the repressive or normative response as rule of conduct in the work. Facing violence, Aichhorn gives as rule of conduct an extreme tolerance, only intervening when the youths risk wounding themselves or others. This manoeuvre results in

what he calls «a melting of the values upheld until then» by the youth. Recall that, in effect, Aichhorn's thesis is that the youth expects aggression in return. But here, the educator in his calm becomes «the fixed point from which the chaos can be oriented.»

This remark shows us the structuring effect that this attitude excites. We can read this effect, thanks to Lacan, as that of the signifier which is an exception, and for which the other signifiers come to represent the subject. This «polarizing» effect has two faces: Aichhorn, following Freud, calls it ideal ego, which polarizes the imaginary register, but the «signifier which is excluded» gives it symbolic logic. After all, it must be remembered that in the Freudian myth of Totem and Taboo, the father's position of exception has two faces: the father who takes pleasure in all the women and the dead father.

Of course, from the pleasure father to the dead father there is but one operation of murder. So goes the myth, but it must be recalled that the myth's resort is symbolic. The dead father takes with him the secret of his jouissance: «the dead father is he who has charge of the jouissance,» Lacan says.⁷ Thus the dead father is also the one represented in little statuettes such as Silene counted his precious secret, to which Alcibiades compares Socrates in *The Banquet*.

In sum, Aichhorn replaces the veil on the jouissance, to constitute a trustworthy ideal ego. He reestablishes confidence in the signifier for these subjects. In this operation, one sees the realization of separation from a jouissance frozen in an imaginary relation (generally with parental figures). In several ways, Aichhorn indicates how he came to «half-say» to the youth what he knows about what (which jouissance) he suffers, all while sending him back to a response that restores this jouissance in the symbolic register (as gift or debt, which is to say, forbidden).

It is clear that this isn't an analysis. If the analytic light serves to locate the impasse of a subject, one cannot say that from their question it's up to them to regasp the cause, but perhaps the educative intervention allows them at least to separate from the frustration where it is fixed, and restore it in a social ideal where it remains veiled.

In groups of particularly aggressive children, Aichhorn notes that to follow this line of conduct, the aggressions become less and less real, but become more and more play.

In other words, they pass to make-believe, not without passing through a crisis that he calls «raging tears,» making manifest what one might recognize as the inverse of the aggression, which is to say, a patent

impotence, the structural impotence of the subject to possess his being, not even by aggressing his fellows.

What ends?

If one can recognize in Aichhorn a pioneer of analytic orientation in the work called re-education, one must however measure the gaps in relation to current practices in the Lacanian optic.

I noted in passing the clarification that Lacan brought regarding the operative of the ideal ego: to take up again the paternal function and castration. It must equally be noted what this can provide as to diagnostic, according to whether or not the subject can be located in relation to phallic signification.

However, the clinical orientation is indeed the terrain introduced by Aichhorn, when he insists on the fact that the «diagnostic moment» is first and unavoidable to begin the work with youths.

Finally, what does Aichhorn advise? «Render the youth apt to the culture,» he says. Elsewhere, on the chances for success of his enterprise, he says, «We simply aren't afraid to let our youth grow up and mature.» There is a little touch of optimism which comes no doubt from Aichhorn's phantasm as much as from a theoretical lacuna. He lacks recognition of the death drive as principle of culture, and that it isn't simply a superstructure prolonging the reality principle in the social condition of human life. In short, he lacks a critical conception of culture, and he sins through an excessive confidence in goodness which, up to a certain point, hides from him the impossibilities with which the signifier confronts the subject.

¹ A. Aichorn. *Jeunesse a l'abandon*, (1925). Privat, Toulouse, 1973.

² Jacques Lacan. «Introduction theorique aux fonctions de la psychanalyse en criminologie» (1950). *Ecrits*. Seuil: Paris, 1966; p. 125. [Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology]

³ *Ibid.*; p. 142.

⁴ Eric Laurent. «Institution of the Phantasm, Phantasms of the Institution.» *Courtil Papers*; pp.

⁵ Jacques Lacan. *Op.cit.*; p. 141.

⁶ *Ibid.*; p. 133.

⁷ Jacques Lacan. *Le Seminaire, Livre XVII, L'envers de la psychanalyse*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Seuil: Paris, 1991; p. 143.