

Ruth C. Cohn, *Es geht ums Anteilnehmen. Perspektiven der Persönlichkeitsentfaltung.*
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Translated from the Dutch version by Phien Kuiper

Prejudices and Enemy Images

In a peace week of the reformed church in Schlieren/ZH (in Switzerland), I went to lead a group with the theme: 'Prejudices and enemy images: how can I, how can we reduce them?' On the same theme, I wanted to write a 'Kulturforum' for the Berner Zeitung (BZ)*. I postponed writing because I was tired and turned on the television.

It happened to be: 'Chile - how much longer?' A documentary about daily life in Chile under Pinochet; a 1985 reportage by David Bredbury, shot in secret. The film helped me on my way to my deferred resolution.

From the screen, metal awards and rifles, boots and immobile soldiers' faces glittered. They passed in dense rows to cheering and grimly silent onlookers. This is how I had seen them in Nazi Germany; and this is how they passed by on many films, staged and real, then and now. Also in strange streets, in strange countries.

A scene: a 14-year-old boy addresses the mourners at his father's grave. The father was killed on the dictator's orders. The boy implores the people to continue the struggle for which his father had to die. The calls for revenge, for justice flowed together from this boy's passion without tears; a passion that left no room for loving grief.

The scenes alternate rapidly: scenes of misery, violence, rebellion, solidarity. A bomb falls on a business premises in the well-to-do part of town. All sorts of voices intermingle: 'Those were the communists, the terrorists! A Chilean would never do that!' A young man contradicts: 'I live in a quarter where everyone is poor. There they say something else: the bomb was planted there on Pinochet's orders. They claim we did it.' And then he adds: 'I don't believe anyone. I don't know who really did it.' That's how (or pretty much how) he said it. No one knows, but everyone knows that people are disappearing and being tortured.

A woman shouts 'They are murderers, murderers! There's no talking to that. Don't you see that? They killed my father and made my husband disappear. I will give my last drop of blood to avenge them!' So (or so it seems) she screams with a tearful face. She staggers. Hands come to her aid to support her.

Tear gas, dogs, blows with rifle butts, boots in stride, images of torture, luxury restaurants, great receptions, government speeches, all this Chilean film shows. A film shot in secret in Nazi Germany, in Stalin's Russia, in Botha's South Africa, in Khomeini's Iran could look just like this, or at least very similar.

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Enemy images: how can I, how can we reduce them? Enemy images produce enemies, and enemies hold their enemy images, across all borders and through the ages.

Enemy images: the other one does it, the bad one. 'We are good. We wouldn't even dream such a thing!' Is it essential to enemy images that we project the bad onto others because we dare not dream the bad or admit our dreams? We must finally learn that no one is free from ugly feelings and thoughts except when he represses them; then they bubble up from the darkest corners of the soul - as projections that we direct at others or as ugly acts that we justify by rationalizations

instead of dreaming them. Dreams and daydreams are a divine gift that can help us avoid choking on evil and not actually doing it. When we dream about evil, we have time to think about it carefully and decide what to do with it.

'Communists they were, terrorists, no Chilean would do that!' - And this on seeing the orgies of violence by Chilean policemen and soldiers seen on the streets and taking place behind walls, more than we can imagine.

The presenter said everyone should form their own opinion about the film. I believe some viewers condemned Pinochet and some agreed with him: 'It is good that he exterminates communists and terrorists; then there can finally be peace, without this scum.' And 'scum' could be the communists here, and somewhere else the Negroes or the Jews or the Turks or the Fascists or the Catholics or the Amis or the Soviets - or ????

Most prejudices arise and harden by generalizing a few examples to an entire category of people. This way of doing things is originally functional. Neither children nor adults learn from experiences alone. Children first identify with the feelings and opinions of adults. Only slowly do they learn to form opinions about what they have not experienced themselves. Example: an urban child asks, "How does milk get from the bottle into the cow?" They explain to him that it is the other way around. The child believes it, even though he has never seen an udder, any more than milking cows and filling bottles.

We too believe maps, books, historical narratives that we have not seen or experienced ourselves. We have faith in many and in much. But trust too can be a pre-judgement that needs to be corrected. When a person or a culture can no longer be trusted and gives misinformation, distrust becomes a necessity of life.

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I knew as a German-Jewish child that anti-Semitism existed. Anti-Semitism came from the Christians. That had to be Jesus' fault, because after all, without him there could have been no anti-Semitic Christians! When I later studied the New Testament, I understood that Jesus himself was a Jew, who was not against Judaism, but against abuses. His followers, too, were Jews. There were different parties in Palestine then, as there are everywhere now. If this simple fact were so taught everywhere, the prejudice would subside, the prejudice perpetuated by the generalizing phrase: 'The Jews put Christ on the cross!' After all, it was not the Jews but a party of Jews who wanted to get rid of this reformer. By the way, the crucifixion was carried out by Roman soldiers! Many prejudices I had as a child I have overcome; however, they are scarred when I read or hear, for example, the adjective 'Christian' before the word 'charity'. If Christian charity exists, is it different from Jewish, Hindu, atheist, Indian charity?

We can reduce prejudices and enemy images if we experience the world with waking senses and clear feelings and thoughts; and if we set our adult judgements against the pre-judices we have adopted and against the projections we use to justify ourselves. Every time we become aware of the reality of our inner and outer worlds, we reduce the burden of traditions of prejudice and of self-deception'.

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