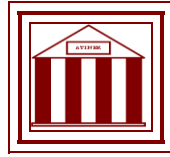# Athens Institute for Education and Research
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The Acephalic Stage

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Abstract

Social groups potentially enter an *acephalic* stage in which the group 'annihilates' the leader as a prelude to an unmediated experience of community. Borrowed from cultural theorist Georges Bataille, the French term 'acephale' signifies the headless, both literally and figuratively, and is invoked to accentuate the disproportionate power relations between our elevated faculties of thought and our base aptitude for sensation and feeling. Here the term is intended to connote a stage during which a group sheds the narrative imposed upon it through the philosophy and techniques of its leader in the service of an experience of community based on nihilistic rejection. The ability of the leader to tolerate the sacrifice of his or her authority for this purpose is a necessary prerequisite for the group as it struggles to become more than the sum of its individual members. The introduction and discussion of this stage is embellished by a case example of a laboratory group as it passed through this stage.

This paper introduces the notion of an acephalic stage. The acephalic stage exists as a potential in the process of a social group. It is realized through a transgressive act that ruptures the integrity of the group and, in so doing, distinguishes between a collection of individuals who communicate and those who have achieved community. The terms used here to frame the group process – acephale, transgression, community - reflect a deliberate effort to apply the theoretical ideas of social theorist Georges Bataille within the clinical setting and, by extension, to suggest the relevance of these ideas to social life in general.

The acephale is a French term that denotes that which is headless, usually with reference to a human body without a head. The image of the acephale is occasionally invoked as a symbol that suggests a reversal of the usual, familiar relationship, that is, the dominance of the executive head over the servility of the base or body. Insofar as the acephale has overcome the dominant values and privilege associated with the head, it represents freedom from a restrictive hierarchy.

This might be understood as social freedom in the case of the acephalic societies discussed by anthropologist E. Evans-Pritchard (1967). When he encountered a 'primitive' acephalic form of political system among the Nuer of Africa he thought he had found a relic of humankind's earliest form of government. 'A Nuer tribe might be called acephalic in the sense they recognized a common rule of law but it would be hard to recognize any person with recognized responsibility for coordinating public activities throughout the tribe' (Mair, 1972:117).

Although the acephale is invoked to represent our earliest form of social life, it serves equally as a potent symbol for our future. A future, in the words of Nietzsche (1968:9) that is characterized by a necessary transitional stage of nihilism to come when 'the highest values devaluate themselves'.

Influenced by early anthropological accounts as well as Nietzsche, Marx, Hegel, and a wide array of other literary and scientific sources, Georges Bataille constructed his own theory of social life around the figure of the acephale. Best known as a social theorist, surrealist, and pornographer, Bataille first unearthed the symbol of the acephale in his study of medieval Gnosticism. There he sought to associate the base figure of the acephale with that which is sacred: 'Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced…the psychological process brought to light by Gnosticism had the same impact: it was a question of disconcerting the human spirit and idealism before something base, to the extent that one recognized the helplessness of superior principles' (1985: 51). Developing his focus upon the subversive power of base matter, Bataille first set out to rewrite the body in articles entitled: The Solar Anus; The Big Toe; Rotten Sun; Mouth; and The Pineal Eye. Bataille's exploration eventually led to the coalescence of a secret society whose journal, entitled Acephale, published its own mission statement. Among its goals were to:
'Realize the universal accomplishment of personal being in the irony of the animal world and through the revelation of an acephalic universe, one of play, not of state or duty;
Take upon oneself perversion and crime, not as exclusive values, but as integrated within the human totality;
Fight for the decomposition and exclusion of all communities - nationalist, socialist, communist, or churchly - other than universal community' (1986: 79).

It was no random exercise that led Bataille to form the secret society Acephale. Rather, the inspiration grew from Bataille's preoccupation with the restrictive aspects of contemporary social arrangements that offer a highly limited and culture-bound

definition of what it means to be human. This led to interest in the secret society as a social form 'to which recourse is always possible when the primary organization of society can no longer satisfy all the desires that arise' (Caillois, 1988: 149). Bataille here is echoing a similar sentiment expressed earlier by Simmel (1950) who suggested that 'the secret society emerges everywhere as the counterpart of despotism and police restriction, as the protection of both the defensive and offensive in their struggle against the overwhelming pressures of central powers – by no means of political powers only, but also of the church, as well as of school classes and families' (p. 347). The image of the Acephale bears an affinity to the secret society. They both express a social experience that cannot be accounted for or contained by conventional sociological narratives.

Conventional notions of society posit that groups exist functionally to optimize reproductive success against the threat of death. To this end, the leader fulfills an executive organizational function that includes administering, preserving, and representing the integrity and vitality of the group. In contrast, Bataille argued that this functionalist notion of society based on survival is specific to the scarcity and accumulation model of capitalism. He points to anthropological studies of the Aztecs and the Kwakiutl as illustrating other possible social arrangements that are organized instead around the notion of Expenditure (see Bataille 1986: 116 and 1988: 45). By privileging this notion of Expenditure, the group is then seen as an opportunity for each member to expend themselves and their individual identities as they experience what Bataille refers to as community. Again, contrary to conventional wisdom, this is not a vision of group as a defense against death but rather a vehicle through which death may be met and experienced – particularly if what is meant by death is the dissolution, the potentially orgiastic dissolution of individual and private boundaries within and into the collective (varying explorations of Bataille's notion of community may be found in Mitchell and Winfree, 2009; Hegarty, 2000; Nancy, 1991; and Blanchot, 1988).

According to Bataille, the expenditure par excellence for achieving community is sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of the leader. This ultimate act enables the unmediated experience of community possible when individual boundaries dissolve. Although Bataille references prehistoric societies, the modern ramifications for community may be observed when a leader is sacrificed symbolically, as in the ritual celebration of crucifixion; metaphorically, as in Freud's (1912) primal Oedipal slaughter scenario; or literally, as in the case of the historical encounter between the French aristocracy and the guillotine. Above all the sacrifice has to be non-productive, non-directed by functional aims that would tie it to a goal devised by a higher purpose. This would defeat the egalitarian prerequisite to the experience of community where, in the words of Canetti (1984) 'all are equal there, no distinctions count…suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body' (pp. 15-16).

The specific social techniques by which Bataille's notion of community is achieved consist of play, eroticism (sex without a reproductive purpose), festival, and sacrifice. In earlier human social arrangements, as noted by Durkheim (1995), community consisted of all these activities performed simultaneously on sacred occasions (what Durkheim famously refers to as 'collective effervescence') – all characterized by their excessive nature in strong contrast with the rest of tribal life which was relatively profane and based on production. The opportunities for an experience of this type in modern times for any group (including one such as ours here today) are now limited to non-existent. Yet my experience as a clinician working in groups has presented me

with an opportunity to explore the contemporary relevance of Bataille's vision of community based on Expenditure.

In each group I have been a participant/observer in, there is a process that culminates in a moment during which the group members may elect to collectively terminate the authority of the group leader. This is an inevitable outcome of the realization that the leader cannot 'satisfy all the desires that arise.' Whether the leader is complicit or not, this excising of his or her authority reverberates through the group as an unmediated experience of its collective existence. This group sacrifice of its leader, along with the accompanying pattern of hierarchical governance, I refer to as the Acephalic stage.

The ensuing post-leader experience belongs to the headless body, or what Bataille would refer to as the base or big toe; what Nietzsche (1967) might speak of as the herd; or what Kristeva (1982) would refer to as the abject. There are many more potential outcomes to this process than I can possibly address here (I refer the reader to de Heusch (1982), Foucault (1977), and Girard (1979), to name but a few). What is of concern in the current context is whether or not the group experience of the acephalic stage holds the potential for an experience of community, that preeminent experience of the collective beyond the individual, as defined by Bataille. Any question of this stage as a therapeutic goal (see Noys, 2005) mitigates against the prerequisite possibility of an experience emerging from non-productive Expenditure.

Case example

An Experimental Laboratory Group (the details of this case example are all taken from a paper co-authored by one of the group participants, Dr. Arnold Rachman (1999) entitled An Experimental Group Experience with a Silent Group Leader as well as conversations with the deceased group leader and co-author, Dr. Alexander Wolf).

1. The Laboratory Group: A group of twelve psychotherapists assembled for the second half of a year-long laboratory group experience as part of an intensive training program in group therapy. The group included four women and eight men; by professional discipline, seven social workers, two psychologists, and three psychiatrists. The group was preparing for the second half of a group experience defined by the training institute as 'an experimental situation …set up to elicit and explore various interpersonal and group phenomena. The process is intended to provide a means of integrating emerging personal reactions from this group experience with basic concepts in group psychotherapy.' This particular group experience was to be led by guest Alexander Wolf, MD, a luminary in the world of group psychotherapy and the founder of group psychoanalysis. The group was very excited at the prospect of learning how to do psychoanalysis in groups by the founder of this technique and so they entered the experience with great expectations (see Wolf, 1949-1950). The group was scheduled to meet for fifteen sessions.

2. The Experiment: The leader of the group asked the group member to consider and suggest alternate formats for the group experience rather than the focus on psychoanalysis in groups which they were expecting. The leader wanted 'to do something experimental' and admitted to being 'bored with doing the same old thing.' Most members 'apparently suppressed their resentment, disappointment, or frustration, etc. and acquiesced to the leader's request…The will of the leader dominated over the will of the group.' This planning stage covered a period of two sessions.

3. The Presentation of Silence: The third session commenced with great anticipation that the leader had decided upon a proposed format. During this session the leader remained silent for the duration of the meeting. The group engaged in trying to determine what the new format would be, not realizing that absolute silence, though including some non-verbal facial communication, reflected the leader's decision.

4. The Response to Silence: Gradually, 'the group…began to accept the reality that the leader's silence was becoming permanent…One group of members, the smallest number, seemed to accept the leader's silence. Another subgroup of members, mostly females, was verbally and physically upset by the leader's silence. Several of them pleaded with the leader to speak. One openly wept at his unresponsiveness.' The largest subgroup of members became very angry at the leader and 'encouraged the group to interact without depending on the leader's response.' During this period, 'several members developed plans to retaliate against the leader.' This culminated in two members deciding to lock out the leader from a session. This period roughly spanned five sessions.

5. The Acephalic Stage: The members locked out the group leader from the session. For this purpose one of the members came prepared with a lock. 'The group came early to the tenth session in order to execute their plan. Eight of the twelve group members entered the group room and remained throughout the regularly scheduled session. Activity in the room consisted of laughter in besting the leader, curiosity about the leader's reaction to being locked out, anxiety about aggressing against the leader, fear of retaliation by the administration against the class, and anger for the members who did not participate…*A sense of triumph pervaded their interaction*' (Emphasis added).

6. The Leader Survives: The leader returned and 'the silent group experience lasted for four more sessions after the lock-out.' This period was characterized by a flurry of inspired interpretations to somehow account for the negation of the leader. Some felt it brought the group together and 'allowed a creative peer-oriented solution to the deprivation and frustration of an unresponsive leader.' Others felt the group 'acted-out' rather than internalize the experience as a cold rejection. Despite the force and diversity of interpretive efforts, the leader remained silent. 'A sense of loss, depression, and malaise then developed in the group.'

Conclusion

Much can be said about the impact of the leader's silence as a choice to be simultaneously absent and present (see Cohler, Epstein, and Issacharoff, 1977; Wolf and Schwartz, 1960). This is blatantly manifest in author/group member Rachman's use of this experience to theorize and, in so doing, affirm his and the group's psychoanalytic identity. That is, the theorizing activity of the group over the last four sessions and Rachman's (1999, 2003) published analyses that tirelessly extend over years following the event may be seen as attempts to recover the rational, productive activity of the leader presiding over an educational experiment. This insight-oriented, rationalizing, theorizing activity stands in sharp contrast with the fleeting, irrational gleeful experience of non-productive community that revolved around the termination of the leader. The tenth session lock-out of authority is characterized by laughter, curiosity, fear and aggression; precisely the *esprit de corps* of festival that Bataille insists is fundamental to an actual sense of community. Insofar as this experience serves no useful purpose and even entails the dissolution of personal and professional identity, it is both invigorating and threatening.

Finally, the survival of the leader to live for another four sessions with the group in silence signals the end of this brief moment of community; all that remains is a collective 'sense of loss, depression, and malaise.' The experience of community that was, with all its potential for unknown and unforeseen possibilities, only recedes further with each effort to recollect and rationalize it; lying, waiting for the foretold 'twilight of the idols' when our banal preoccupation with re-producing customary categories gives over once again to the impulse to sacrifice that which is held in greatest reverence and esteem.

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