

Plain transcript of: »Sources of Creative Power«

Lecture X[2] (S-II)

4/16/54

Part II [Solon]

... or city or society or community in all the world. In myth already turns up a human person who does not want to be a tyrant, who creates the tradition of Athens where much later **Pericles**, the great statesman of the Periclean Age will say to Persians, ›I am not satisfied with ruling over slaves; I want to govern free men.‹¹ ›I am not satisfied with it‹ means that the discovery of the creative quality of the statesman to govern tax free men – that means to reach an agreement of free will, and that this is the great creative political power in man and not the power to enforce his rules on others. To reach agreement – that means to build a community with and not to enforce a uniformity or a unity of order is the creative achievement. In that sense **Theseus**, the mythical figure, is the first; **Solon** the real statesman and philosopher is the second; and **Pericles** the statesman of Athens in its decline already, is the last of those statesmen who had understood that it is beneath the dignity of a creative political human being to want to rule others because it is too easy. It can be done by bull-heads like the **Minotaur**. We have seen the Minotaur in the myth always as that monster that **Picasso** still paints – namely, the one that violates women. Well, bull-headed monsters violate women and it means they are after satisfaction and not after fulfillment. If one is after fulfillment it means that one is one's self to a certain degree, is empty and has to be fulfilled by the other. This can only be a free act. Satisfaction we can all reach, but satisfaction is a negative thing and satisfaction is finally boundless, limitless and never satisfied and absolutely destructive. So, the bull-headed monster is not only this bloody dilettante of love who thinks he has only to satisfy himself; the Minotaur is also the bull-headed bully, the bull-headed man who is a tyrant; the one who wants to impose arbitrarily on everybody – the tyrant that the king of Crete was and whom Theseus has defeated, coming back, applying this principle now to domestic politics – still in the

¹ Reference unclear.

myth. How consequently the myth thinks here – and not wanting to be the bull-headed man of Athens, the tyrant of Athens. This was perhaps the myth that nourished Solon because Solon did this thing historically, or Solon was the man who nourished this myth. We do not know who nourished whom. Anyhow Solon did exactly that thing. He first liberated Athens because the island of [Salamis](#) that is before Athens had to be conquered because it rules the port of Athens. The citizens had made a decision – [Plutarch](#) calls it a law, let's call it an order – that everyone who proposes new war against Salamis should be beheaded. Solon nevertheless made propaganda for the war against Salamis, prevailed, conquered Salamis, and after that he went back to Athens as a simple citizen. He didn't take advantage. Then this state of affairs in Athens became unbearable. Athens became more and more a society like [Ephesus](#) of Heraclitus has been a society – namely where everybody of every class pursued his interests – and there came citizens who thought that if the interests would be justly balanced that then a community could be founded. They were all Marxists. They did not know that the social principle is an entirely different principle from the political principle and that there is no such a thing as a synthesis of interests; that there is only such a thing as a law that curtails individual and social interests and if that is not there, no community is there, and whatever class will rule – even if the class promises to become the class that makes us free of all classes and leads us into a classless society – what it will achieve in the end is only a more class-bound society because out of the social sphere no real change in freedom can ever come. The social sphere is the scientific sphere and has nothing to do with freedom whatsoever. It can only be ruled by freedom and defined by freedom; it never can produce it. The wonderful dream of [Karl Marx](#) in the 19th Century when everything again seemed to be lost that there might be a chance that out of the social context

and its interests might come a new and final freedom. This dream has led to its opposite and absolutely logically so because there is no such mystical, mythical element in the social affairs of man. Man has to build freedom himself and not to have it built for him by so-called laws of history which he can proceed according to. Freedom is never given – by nothing and by nobody. That Solon understood to the full. He is the one whom we have to go back in order to find the fundamental oppositions of the social sphere, of society, and of the political sphere – of society and community. When they made him the tyrant, the dictator of Athens, in order to give them laws he did so and he went very cleverly about his business. He promised the poor that they would get richer and he promised the rich that their richness wouldn't be taken away from them because he knew how to handle classes. As soon as he was in the saddle he devised laws that had a social point. The social point was that most of the old debts were abolished because the debts prevented the poor citizens of Athens from becoming real citizens, to use their rights as citizens. On the other hand, he curtailed the wishes of the poor, who would also, of course, socially – namely, let's have social equality, let's divide everything, everybody the same amount of money. And Solon knew this is the destruction of freedom too because it does mean that nobody will strive anymore and we will just use everything up. So he curtailed that too. In the end when the laws were there, nobody was satisfied – neither the rich nor the poor – but they liked the laws to a certain degree but they were entirely dissatisfied and the social trend again ruled the city. Solon stepped back and he was supposed to be. He praised himself, saying, ›I had the opportunity; I could have been the tyrant forever. I had every power in my hands here and I let it go. And I knew why.‹² He knew why he let it go – because he did not want to impose. Then he goes on travel, then his friends [Peisistratos](#) becomes the first tyrant. He had opposed Solon, because

² Reference unclear.

like the famous philosopher or wise man, *Anacharsis*, who was a non-Greek. It is told in the legend that he was supposed to have visited Solon and said to him, ›You really believe that those laws of yours, those paper laws of yours, those written laws will be enough to create a community that keeps back the wickedness of men. You fool! You really believe that?‹ Then Anacharsis went to the assembly of Athens and said , ›That's a fine state of affairs. The wise men speak and the fools decide.‹ Peisistratos was of the same opinion. This is an eternal opinion against political freedom – that there cannot be such a thing as political freedom. And there is the eternal other opinion of free men – that it has to be tried again and again. So Peisistratos became the tyrant of Athens but he didn't hurt his friend Solon – although Solon made himself very unpopular and now said – formerly he had only said that the greatest thing that political man can achieve is to give laws and then step back. Now there is an even greater thing to be achieved. If tyranny is established once, there is even a more glorious thing: to kill tyranny, to abolished it. Though he was not molested – partly because of his old age – but mainly for another reason. This Peisistratos has been the first enlightened despot we have ever heard of. He kept the laws of Solon and finally his successors were overthrown and from then on the free republic of Athens lasted till the time of Pericles. And that is the flower of this city based on the laws of Solon. We cannot consider the laws themselves here, only the basis of those laws. What he did was to break the principle of society itself in essence [?] namely, to make the distinction that no birth or richness, no certificate of birth or family, coming out of a good family had any say in the right of citizenship. He equalized a little bit the wealth of Athens but only a little bit in order to leave incentives – but he established an iron law: namely the law that no political privilege could ever be developed from the fact of social privilege. On the contrary: social privilege had always to be watched by the whole citizenry if it is not on its way to

establish a political privilege and it has always to be diminished even as a social privilege. He made the law that social privilege means not a political privilege but an added political duty and that the Athenian citizens should proceed according to that. They proceeded only too fast in later years: namely, democracy in Athens after the oligarchy had really been overthrown and the balance wasn't there any more, became mob rule and the rich – that means the ones who earned money and brought it into the country – were systematically ruined by the Athenian citizens and finally poverty became the master of Athens and the city and the state were ruined. Unbalanced social interests are even worse than social interests that claim to be the ruling ones and a state – and Solon means by a state, the community – can be ruined by both. And Athens has finally been ruined by its oligarchy as well as by its democracy because the laws of Solon could not forever prevail. They could not because they were loose laws. There he also was clever, he knew that laws have to be changed. He wanted written laws so they could be changed. His principle was equilibrium of social forces in the community renewed again and again under the point of view of political freedom of every citizen. As soon as any social unbalance occurred that was infringing upon the political right and the political freedom of a single citizen, he wanted those laws changed. So what he created was really the law in the Heraclitean sense – an ever changing reasonable thing which starts with the status of lawfulness: namely, that laws can be changed but only in the framework of lawfulness. As soon as somebody wants to change laws by unlawful procedure – namely, by breaking the status of lawfulness, by violence, – then he destroys lawfulness and with it the republic, with it the free community because the free community rests not on laws – that a free community creates – it rests on lawfulness and every revolution in that sense, social revolution, overthrows this lawfulness. Lawfulness can only be claimed (?) by a state of affairs – that means by a free community – which gives the guarantee that laws can be constantly changed

by the free assembly and the free will of citizens in agreement. As soon as this cannot be done any more and there are laws that cannot be changed, in Solon's concept that already would be the beginning of tyranny and then he would say, ›Break it. The most glorious thing before us is to abolish tyranny.‹ This fine distinction is the one he discovered and made and it is the one we all have forgotten through all our history. Lawfulness has been guaranteed to us only by the divine law of the Jews, the formal law of the Romans, and that made every state in the western world contain at least a little bit of freedom, that is true, but the full concept of freedom, we have not understood and used political freedom. If we had done so, then we would have not run the risks we are running now everywhere. Then the world would not have fallen into the illusion that a right and scientific handling of the social factors could guarantee us freedom. We had lost the political sense. The tragedy is that one of the great statesman talents of our age, one of the greatest historians also, a man who discovered economical laws without which we cannot do in science, Karl Marx, was also the one who knew least about politics, he had no idea any more what that might be. He had lost the sense of that completely and that is not his fault; it is the fault of Western political thinking which is not political thinking, which is in the beginning already either theoretical philosophical speculation about social events and finally sociology – and Marx is the founder of sociology. (Sociology might be a great science but it is a science. It can handle only things that are; it cannot handle things as they can be. It cannot handle men and men have to handle themselves in freedom.) We have lost the foundations of all politics by losing this original Greek insight. The experiment of Athens from Solon to Pericles – I might say from Theseus to Pericles – has in an essential sense been in vain for us. We have not understood. That is why we are going back to it, to this origin of things political where the distinction was made first and the eternal proposition that a free republic can only hold

itself by balancing its social forces again and again and again and in complete lawfulness and freedom. This experiment will go on forever. People will try it again and again and again the ›Anacharsis‹ and the ›Peisistratos‹ will come and tell us that it is not possible. Athens went down and the Republic of America might be in danger to go down because of the social forces that break loose and try to establish political privileges; and those are not only Wall Street and the big money interests, those are the unions as well who try to establish political privileges on the community. That will always happen; it has always happened; and it will always happen again and again and they have to be counter-balanced, those forces, by the political forces of citizens who know what they want: namely, that they will not lose their freedom and not lose their lawfulness whatever the social requirements of anybody might be and however just they are because above social justice which cannot be justice anyhow it can only be a different displacement of rights, no justice, above that political justice has to be enthroned which watches that men do not lose their freedom and their political creativeness for the sake of their interests of the moment; that they do not lose sight of political freedom and the higher things in life because they pursue their social interests and individual interests blindly and to the detriment of all of the community. The concept of the community as distinguished from the concept of society has been lost in Athens and in Greek thinking itself very early. Aristotle is not an Athenian. He comes as a philosopher to Athens. As a scientific mind Aristotle knows most of all the Greeks about different constitutions in all the world. He was interested as all the Greeks were. He had assembled the material, he wrote masterpieces, but as soon as he goes to the fundamental analysis of what politics might be and on what it is based, then he says the most anti-Greek things that can be said: namely, the family is the kernel, the nucleus of the state. That is just what Solon had abolished. That is one of the

reasons why Athenian women and Greek women, but especially Athenian women, have never been allowed citizenship and have never been allowed a word in politics because the statesmen who founded this state were too sure that if the men already are permanently ready to take the interest of their family, their class, their tribe, their personal interests first, the women would be more so. Just because Solon had divided the state, the community, this new theory absolutely severed from the people, the classes, the tribes, and the family – namely, all naturally given things all things men are born into and driven by, all things that carry compulsion and put the political sphere only in the free agreement of men as to their common will how things SHALL be and how things shall be run in the higher interests of human creativeness and that this could only be done by people who were most free from falling back into these certain natural conditions – namely, to say ›But my boy has to go to college, and if this law is abolished it means that my boy cannot go to college, so let's make a pressure group.‹ Instead of considering before what does it mean to a community if a pressure group is created – what does that mean? Solon draws exactly that line and ruthlessly the Athenians after him enforce it and try to break law by law-changing any hold that the former tribes of the Athenian city and families might on the government, any kind of privilege, any possible influence is ruthlessly broken in order to put every issue anew before the Athenian assembly of free men and to ask them, as Anacharsis said, ›The wise men speak and the fools decide.‹ Yes, that is so in politics. Without that no politics is possible. The wise men, the statesmen have to stand there and to suppose that the opinion of every Mr. Smith is worth as much as their opinion is in politics. It isn't; it is by no means – and Mr. Smith should learn that by learning responsibility, but one thing is sure: if Mr. Smith does not have the right to have his say, then we are in tyranny again and the statesman has to suffer it

as Pericles suffered who was cursed by an Athenian citizen who went back with him from the assembly after his speech and the discussion, cursed him, went home with him cursing him permanently, and it got dark in the meantime and when they were at the door of Pericles' house, he called his servant out, his slave, and said to him, ›Take a light and see this man home.‹ That is the statesman, the statesman who has first to break in himself the tyrant – who is in everybody of us – as Theseus broke the tyrant in himself first, as Solon broke the tyrant in himself – and first he has to prove that he can be one because it is very easy to say ›I don't want to be a tyrant if I don't have any opportunity to be one.‹ They all showed that they can be one, that they had the political ambition, that they really could convince people, that they really were leaders of people – and then they did not want to be rulers. To break the tyranny in one's self – as they all did up to Pericles – and as a few statesmen in America have done since, like [Lincoln](#), like [Washington](#). That is the quality of the statesman – first to break that in himself then he can proceed most clear-headedly and can become what Solon first tried to become: the impartial judge of the social interests of his time, not wanting anything for himself and knowing that the social interests have to be cleverly balanced again and again and again in order to provide that they will not swamp the political interests of man, that they will not destroy his freedom and the freedom of the community. This continuous task of the statesman, which makes his creativeness, which makes him one of the creatives like an artist, like a scientist, like a philosopher, a man who really has to invent new things again and again and again because the situation changes, but invents them according to a principle – to this principle of freedom and justice that is in this concept of the law of Heraclitus, of Solon, and later of Socrates or what Socrates later calls wisdom.