

The Politics of Psychotherapy New Perspectives

*Edited by
Nick Totton*

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Introduction

The ontological structure of the human being imposes insurmountable constraints upon any form of social organization and any political project.

(Castoriadis 1999: 409)

Upstream runners and instream waders

There is an old Buddhist story (or if there isn't, there should be): two monks are walking beside a fast-flowing river. Suddenly, they hear a shout and see a man being carried helplessly downstream. Wading into the water, they manage to pull him out and are tending to him on the bank when they hear a woman's voice and realize that she too is struggling in the torrent. Again, they manage to pull her out; but then they see a whole group of people being swept along. One of the monks is about to wade in for the third time when he realizes that his companion is not with him; instead she is running upstream as fast as she can. 'Where are you off to?' he demands. 'These people need help!' Without slowing, the other monk shouts over her shoulder, 'I'm going to find the bastard who's throwing them in!'

This pretty much sums up one central justification for bringing politics together with psychotherapy: that it is not possible properly to understand, or address, individual suffering (people being carried downstream) without looking at the context of power relationships in which it occurs (someone throwing them in). There are some complexities embedded in the story, however. It is fairly clear what the 'upstream runner's' position is: it is less important to relieve immediate drowning than to identify and resolve underlying causative factors leading to drowning. But how would the 'instream wader' respond?

He might argue that what happens upstream is none of his business: he is trained and specialized in rescuing drowning people, not in abstruse analysis of how they got there. (For an explicit statement of this view, see Johnson 2001a, b.) He might say that, as a compassionate human being, he is compelled to try to save the drowning, whatever the reasons for their being there (and he might prefer to supply life jackets rather than pull them

out of the water). He might take the view that, if someone is drowning, it is ultimately for internal rather than external reasons: if someone hadn't thrown them in, they would have jumped in themselves, or found another persecutor to do the job for them – and besides, they could always learn to swim! Another possible argument is that people get in deep waters because they are unwilling to adjust to reality and stay away from the bank.

The 'instream wader' might go further: he might suggest that if someone is indeed throwing people in, the real question is *why*. Given time, he might develop a theory (in the moments between rescuing the drowning) that those who throw people into rivers have themselves been thrown in at an early age and have a compulsion to repeat their own trauma; or alternatively, that the wish to drown others is an inherent aspect of human subjectivity. In fact, some of these ideas might appeal to the 'upstream runner' as well, and she might feel the need to sit on the bank and think about it all for a while. Meanwhile, struggling people are being washed downstream ...

The politics of psychotherapy

The point I want to emphasize is that *all* these positions are *political* – in the sense of 'political' on which this volume rests: that is, related to issues of power and control in human society (see Totton 2000: 1–2). If we move from the river to the therapy profession, the view that psychotherapy has no business with the social causes of distress is just as much a political stance as the view that we do indeed need to examine those social causes. In more general terms, it represents a position on citizenship: that the job of the individual citizen is to stick to their last and leave politics to the 'experts', apart perhaps from election time (if the experts let us hold elections). It may well also incorporate an individualist and/or fatalist view of suffering – that people have a hard time because of their personal makeup/human nature/original sin.

All psychotherapists have a political view of their work; because all psychotherapy rests on a theory – explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious – of *how people should be*. In assessing and working with clients, one is inevitably drawing on a sense of what is a desirable and appropriate state. Is happiness the goal for human beings? Or calm acceptance of the unsatisfactory nature of life? Is happiness attainable through following our own star, or through adapting to the society around us? Should we strive to be useful to others, or concentrate on fulfilling our own potential? One can hardly do psychotherapy without some way of positioning oneself around these and many other questions – even if one's position is that people should be supported in whatever goals they set for themselves. This, just like any other position on these questions about human nature and its needs, is a position

not only about individual goals, but also about social and political ones; there is no line to be drawn between the two.

As I argue in Chapter 7 in this volume (and in Totton 2000), conservative political stances manage a smart piece of camouflage by presenting themselves as non-political: since they support the status quo, they can disappear into the default position, so to speak; what is, is natural, because it is. This is no more than sleight of hand, however – in the context of therapy as much as anywhere else. The view that the current situation is one to be approved and encouraged is as political as the opposite view. There have been times in the history of psychotherapy when its job was generally understood as being to support the status quo, and help clients adjust to it (for instance, in the USA in the 1950s); and times when its job was generally understood as being to challenge the status quo and help clients resist it (for instance, in the USA in the 1960s). In both cases, therapy was following and legitimating a powerful social trend.

I hope to have established that psychotherapy, far from being politically neutral, is shot through with political judgements. It is also a field of political *action*, a place where power is exercised and contested, as therapists try to affect clients' lives and clients acquiesce, resist or do both at the same time. (Again, this is argued more fully in Chapter 7.) If we add in the 'upstream runner's' view, that clients' problems can only be understood within a wider sociopolitical context, then there is surely serious need to explore the politics of psychotherapy – and also, perhaps, reason to be surprised that comparatively little work has been done in this field. (It would be more accurate to say that not a great deal of work has explicitly identified itself in this way. The recent creation of a journal, *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, has acted to crystallize a previously inchoate field, demonstrating just how much work is actually being done there.)

The psychotherapy of politics

But there are still further aspects of the interaction between these two fields. Not only – I would argue – do therapists need to examine the political nature of their professional work; there are also a number of ways in which psychotherapy as a field of knowledge and practice can contribute to the political sphere itself, both theoretically and concretely, and over a range of scales. In order to look at some of these within the space available, we will have to be willing to generalize enormously and to pretend that therapy is a far more monolithic enterprise than it actually is.

This imaginary, monolithic enterprise of psychotherapy, then, is perhaps uniquely able to address a central question of political theory: the articulation between macro and micro levels, between the social and the individual (Elliot 2004; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). It is clear that there is

something in human culture that corresponds to Marx's perhaps crude dichotomy between 'base' and 'superstructure' – that individual subjects correlate, in however complex a way, with the conditions set by the ensemble of social relations. Quite how this comes about, however, is very hard to describe adequately.

Psychotherapy contributes to this description through its intensive focus on what Muriel Dimen calls 'the personal and interpersonal tangles of domestic intimacy ... Social theory leads right up to the bedroom door, to the hearth of family and psyche. Then it stops, defeated by the messy, tangled intangibles of domestic life' (Dimen 2003: 40). Therapy crosses that threshold and involves itself centrally with the family, the field within which infants become adults, 'the place where psychic structure is formed' (Poster 1978). Using both historical reconstruction and here-and-now investigation, psychotherapy studies minutely the workings of families, their micro-politics, the processes through which children develop in certain directions and styles, the resistance as much as the acquiescence that forge subjectivity. The pioneering work of Wilhelm Reich (1975) mapped out how the family constellation gives rise to character structure, conceived essentially as a political position, a relationship to power.

One radical perspective on the relationship of individual and society, then, can be summarized as follows:

The encounter with the existing institutions is the encounter with the concrete Ego of the patient. This Ego is largely a social fabrication; it is designed to ... preserve, continue and reproduce ... the institutions which created it. These institutions are thus maintained not so much through violence and explicit coercion as through their internalization by the individuals in whose fabrication they participated.

(Castoriadis 1997: 131)

Powerful though this picture is, however, psychotherapy charts not only the internalization of institutions, but also the *externalization* of psychic structures giving rise to those same institutions. This much richer account of a mutual, dialectical co-arising of individual and society goes beyond the many attractive dualisms available to us (Dimen 2003, 2004) – including that between instream waders and upstream runners.

Teamwork?

Mutuality, in fact, is the keynote of the relationship between psychotherapy and politics. One can sum it up as follows: *Psychotherapy and politics each problematize the other, and each contribute to solving problems that the other faces.*

For example, politics identifies difficulties with the therapeutic project that we would often rather not consider – issues such as discrimination, prejudice, domination and hierarchy; while psychotherapy shows politics its own unconscious – the structures of projection and identification that scaffold it, the ‘motivational and affective bases of political action’ (Hoggett 2004: 80). Politics shows how the roles of both client and therapist are socially constructed (Gergen 1994) and how therapy constitutes a regulatory discourse of social control (Foucault 1980). Therapy responds that something crucial is missing from this picture – the actual suffering of the subject, and the therapist’s response to it (Burr and Butt 2000).

Through the mutual friction of therapy and politics, in fact, we start to uncover some of the deepest paradoxes in human experience; for example, the simultaneous reality and unreality of the self. Nikolas Rose suggests that ‘psychotherapeutics is linked at a profound level to the sociopolitical obligation of the modern self. The self it seeks to liberate or restore is the entity able to steer its individual path through life by means of the act of personal decision and the assumption of personal responsibility’ (Rose 1989: 253–4). By pulling someone out of the river, we simultaneously trap them within it, within the illusion of bourgeois personality. At the same time, however, therapy constantly and profoundly challenges this illusion, most directly through the very notion of unconscious process – which also throws into question the appearances of social and political life:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel.

(Zizek 1989: 45)

These are enormous issues, at the very edge of what can be spoken of. Psychotherapy and politics, in combination, offer new ways of speaking about them. As the chapters that follow show, they also offer important ways of exploring a whole range of significant themes in, between and beyond the two disciplines.

What follows

This book is divided into four loose and overlapping parts: 'Psychotherapy in the political sphere', 'Political dimensions of psychotherapy practice', 'Psychotherapy, the state and institutions', and 'Working at the interface: psychotherapy in political action'. The first part opens with a blazingly inspirational chapter by Andrew Samuels – really the founder of contemporary thinking about psychotherapy and politics (Samuels 1993) – bringing together many of the themes Samuels has highlighted over the last decade and a half: the stuckness of contemporary politics, the need for 'resacralization', the nature of political energy and political style, the shortcomings of therapy that keep the world away from its couch and much more. Samuels' chapter, as much as this one, is an introduction to all that follows.

What does immediately follow is Sandra Bloom's incisive take on a live issue of current psycho-politics, the concept of societal trauma. Whatever its shortcomings (Bracken 2002; Haaken 1998; Leys 2000), trauma is a tenacious, recurring and explanatorily powerful model in psychotherapy. Its extension to the social field is equally powerful, offering fresh traction on the whole question of social violence. Bloom applies her great learning to illuminating current issues around the so-called 'war on terror'. My own chapter on conflict, competition and aggression then surveys some of the approaches to this area from therapists of various schools and takes up the idea of societal trauma, asking how the cycle of retraumatization might have originated; it also considers some of the practical initiatives from within psychotherapy for addressing conflict in society.

Next, Hilary Prentice and Mary-Jayne Rust contribute a beautiful and passionate piece on perhaps the most recent psycho-political formulation, ecopsychology, which asks: how have we allowed the world to get into its current state of mess? How can we tolerate, even largely ignore, the environmental catastrophe surrounding us? How can we mend our relationship with the world and come more deeply to feel and express our love for it?

Part II is focused less on the movement from psychotherapy into politics and more on the energy flow from politics to psychotherapy. It opens with Chess Denman's brilliant synthesis of several major issues around sexuality and gender in psychotherapy – one can only gasp at how she tackles a vast theme in a small space without sacrificing subtlety and nuance. In a very real sense, gender and sexuality are where psychotherapy started; and the 'sexual politics' project has always drawn heavily on therapy for its inspiration. Yet therapy itself is affected by the universal tendency to confusion and trance around this issue and can use Denman's bracing precision as a wake-up.

Judy Ryde's chapter on 'working with difference' takes race as its primary focus, but, as she points out, much of it applies equally to other differences, such as gender or sexual orientation – or indeed (I want to inter-

polate) the ordinary differences between any two human beings. From an intersubjective perspective, Ryde maps out strategies for recognizing and respecting difference and understanding its impact on the therapy relationship. Her chapter is a model of how therapy can creatively take on political imperatives within the context of its own concerns and understandings.

My own chapter (7) on power in the therapeutic relationship follows on well from Ryde's, being also concerned with issues of difference – how the asymmetric roles of therapist and client can combine with social and individual expectations to create severe power imbalances. My suggestion, however, is that rather than seeking to eliminate such power issues (although we should, of course, try to minimize them), we need to centre our work on them, bringing to light clients' deep wounds around power and powerlessness.

Part III opens with Petruska Clarkson's coruscating intellectually and personally engaged analysis of the law and ethics in relation to psychotherapy, which challenges much received wisdom and calls for a personal ethical commitment by each individual practitioner, rather than reliance on institutional wisdom. As my own chapter (9) on therapy institutions underlines, such wisdom may be in short supply: the organizations that administer psychotherapy and counselling often function well below the average level of awareness shown by individual practitioners. I consider some of the reasons that therapy institutions are so often fractious, power hungry and fundamentally stupid and look at one or two attempts to challenge them.

John Lees and Dawn Freshwater use discourse analysis in a case study of one large institution, the British National Health Service, as it interacts with psychotherapy. Many of the issues they uncover are very widely relevant: the medicalization of therapy, the rise of 'evidence-based practice' and the alienation that can accrue for both client and practitioner. These phenomena are most apparent within what is, after all, a medical institution, but they are fast coming to dominate the practice of psychotherapy in every context.

The final part of the book seeks to ground us with four examples of 'psychotherapy in political action'. In Chapter 11, Arlene Audergon and Lane Arye describe their work in Croatia with survivors of vicious ethnic conflict; with vivid humour and deep compassion, they bring out the intensity and difficulty of this sort of work, also outlining the approach of process-oriented psychology, currently perhaps the most politically committed form of psychotherapy. In a classic piece of writing, Emanuel Berman then describes the campaigning work of Israeli psychotherapists opposed to Israel's policies on Palestine, incisively responding to some of the criticisms of therapists making themselves politically 'visible' and illustrating his arguments with clinical examples.

Jocelyn Chaplin's account of the Bridge Project in West London demonstrates that social activist projects of the 1970s can survive into the 21st century – and flourish! She also describes some of the ways in which this feminist counselling project has had to change and adapt over the years of its existence. Chaplin's chapter is centred around reinstating the deceptively simple concept of equality at the centre of psycho-political thinking. In the final chapter Katie Gentile and Susan Gutwill bring us right up to date with an account of activist US therapists' response to September 11th and the ensuing 'war on terror'. With great openness and honesty, they describe both the struggle against dominant political attitudes and the difficult internal dynamics of the group; creating a valuable resource for any group of therapists trying to take a radical position in the face of resistance from society, from their professional institutions and from their own internalized oppression.

I want to thank Shona Mullen and three anonymous referees for sharpening up the original proposal; and Colin Whurr and his team for offering a first home to the journal *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, which is proving so fruitful for this new(ish) discipline. There are many other topics, and many other authors, who could well have been represented here. These chapters, I feel, however, give a remarkable introduction to the field and a good base for further exploration.

1 Politics on the couch? Psychotherapy and society – some possibilities and some limitations

Andrew Samuels

As Robert Musil (1937: 17) put it:

I am convinced not only that what I say is wrong, but that what will be said against it will be wrong as well. Nonetheless, a beginning must be made; for the truth is to be found not in the middle of such a subject but around the outside, like a sack which changes shape every time a new opinion is stuffed in, but grows firmer all the while.

The intention is to test and explore the boundaries that exist (we have been told) between therapy and politics, between the inner world and the outer world, between being and doing and even between what people still call ‘feminine’ approaches to life and ‘masculine’ approaches to life, no matter how problematic those words are.

This chapter is divided into a number of sections. It begins by addressing the questions, Why me? Why here? Why now? Then there follows a discussion of how, particularly after the 2004 US presidential election, politics in the west can be understood as changing in the direction of what I call ‘transformative politics’. Third, the question, ‘Can therapists really make a difference in the world today?’ is asked. Fourth is a markedly experiential section entitled ‘The inner politician’. I conclude with a few reflections on therapy, politics and spirituality.

Introduction: why me, why here, why now?

The bases for these remarks, which are grounded in clinical work with individuals, also lie in my involvement with a number of political organizations and recent political developments. I have carried out consultations and conducted workshops in Britain, Europe, the United States, Japan, Brazil, Israel, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. These activities are designed to see how useful and effective perspectives derived from

psychotherapy may be in forming policy, in creating new ways of thinking about the political process and in resolving conflict. It is difficult to present therapy thinking so that mainstream politicians, for example, a senior US Democrat senator or a British Labour Party committee, will take it seriously. And the problem is only slightly reduced when the politicians and organizations are alternative or activist.

I have also been involved in the formation of three organizations in Britain that are relevant to the themes of this chapter. One is Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, an organization intended to help therapists and counsellors use their knowledge and experience to intervene as professionals in social and political matters. The second organization is Antidote, a psychotherapy-based think tank co-founded with Susie Orbach. It fosters multidisciplinary work and links are sought with people working in fields other than psychotherapy. Antidote has undertaken research into psychological attitudes toward money and economic issues and is also involved in trying to apply ideas about emotional literacy/intelligence to politics.

The third organization is called the St James's Alliance. Based at a beautiful Wren church in Piccadilly in central London, it consists of individuals from fields as diverse as politics, economics, ethics, religion, nongovernmental organizations, activist and pressure groups, the media and psychotherapy. It attempts to incorporate psychological, ethical and spiritual concerns into the political agenda and to facilitate dialogue between various single-issue and pressure groups. In the past, these groups were unsympathetic to other groups' goals – poverty workers did not have time for animal rights activists, for instance, and neither group seemed interested in the problems of the Middle East. But in a suitably facilitated environment, it has been possible to find whole areas of common ground in relation to politics and there are so many emotional and spiritual similarities to share. This is an experiment in gathering and using the shards of political energy that are normally split up and dissipated.

Politics in many western countries is broken and in a mess; we urgently need new ideas and approaches. Psychotherapists, along with economists, social scientists, religious people, environmentalists and others, can contribute to a general transformation of politics.

Today's politicians leave many with a sense of deep despair and disgust. They seem to lack integrity, imagination and new ideas. Across the globe and in response to the challenge, a search is on to remodel politics. Psychotherapy's contribution to this search depends on opening a two-way street between inner realities and the world of politics. We need to balance attempts to understand the secret politics of the inner world of emotional, personal and family experiences with the secret psychology of pressing outer world matters such as leadership, the economy, environmentalism, nationalism and war.

Our inner worlds and our private lives reel from the impact of policy decisions and the existing political culture. Why, then, do our policy committees and commissions not have psychotherapists sitting on them as part of a range of experts? This is not a call for a committee of therapists, but just as a committee will often have a statistician present (someone whose role may not be fully appreciated by the other members), there should also be a therapist at the conference table. We expect to find therapists offering views on social issues that involve personal and familial relationships or matters to do with mental health but they may also have ideas to contribute on the 'hard' issues of war, violence, poverty and the economy.

Is it possible to imagine a world in which people are encouraged to sharpen their half-thought-out, intuitive political ideas and commitments so as to take more effective political action? There are probably buried sources of political wisdom in many people, particularly those who do not seem likely to function in such a way. I have come more and more to see that one does not have to be politically active or knowledgeable and talkative about politics to have something creative to say. Poets and mystics, introverts, those who eschew politics and those who are ashamed at what they take to be their own ignorance often know something that the more overtly political do not. These anti-political citizens are a great aid in finding out how secret things, childhood experiences, intimate relationships, fantasies (including sexual fantasies), dreams and bodily sensations, may be reframed and turned to useful political ends.

Thinking about those who usually do not say much, I find that they make a profound contribution to what I call 'political clinics'. These are large-group events, often composed of persons who have nothing to do with therapy and psychology at all but come together to explore their emotional and feeling-based reactions to major political themes such as terrorism, the troubles in Northern Ireland, the conflict in the Middle East, racism and homelessness. I have discovered that those who say 'I am not interested in politics' are often deceiving themselves, caught in a reaction formation. As the political clinic unfolds, it becomes clear that they are indeed extremely interested, knowledgeable and wise about politics but have always doubted, because they have been taught to doubt, that the emotional reactions they are experiencing are a legitimate part of political process. We in western countries are taught, not to deny that we have emotions about politics, because that would be impossible, but to put those emotions rather low on the scale of what we value in official political debate and political discussion.

Sometimes at the conclusion of these political clinics, we start to talk in terms of citizens as 'therapists of the world' who have a large set of usable countertransferences to the political cultures in which they live. This idea constitutes an intellectual challenge to much psychological theorizing about citizens, especially in psychoanalysis, wherein the citizen is regarded

as a kind of baby, who has a transference and a collection of fantasies toward the 'parental' society in which he or she lives. Turning that around, so that the citizen is seen as a kind of therapist or parent figure for the society, can have a radical, uplifting and empowering effect, overturning the tradition especially in psychoanalysis (for example, Richards 1984) in which the citizen is seen as the baby and society as the parent. This claim, that the citizen is capable of being the therapist (parent) of the world, is one that embodies many possibilities as we struggle to work out what functions citizens might perform in a society in which their voices are distorted by the mass media and their internal lives unfold in a highly fraught political climate dominated by corporations and cartels.

Transformative politics

Politics is slowly changing in western countries and we are at a very interesting moment in political consciousness. What used to be an elitist insight about how everything is secretly political is now becoming an element in mass awareness. For years now, feminists, academics, intellectuals and some therapists and analysts have lived happily with the idea that our personal, psychological and private worlds are full of political tensions, dynamics and energies. But, actually, this has been a superior form of knowing, a political gnosticism. We knew that politics has expanded its definition to include all the private stuff, but the masses did not. They have continued to be taught (but many now accept it less) that politics means official politics, party politics, congressional or parliamentary politics, power politics, the politics that money can buy and so on. What helped to accelerate the democratization of the personal-is-political insight were the huge eruptions of feelings about certain events or political trends in recent years, turning those events into what can be called archetypal or at least numinous experiences: I am thinking of disparate phenomena, ranging from grief at the death of Princess Diana, to global anger at the role of the United States in world politics, to intense debates about the role of women in societies across the planet. The most ruthlessly successful contemporary politicians (such as Tony Blair) have perceived this move into general awareness of the elitist, gnostic, private knowledge about how politics has changed and they now couch their utterances in the language of the emotions.

Another way in which politics has changed is that it has become more of a transformative process. By this I mean that engagement in political activity and processes of personal growth and development are seen increasingly as the same thing, or at least as the two sides of a coin. If one interviews people active in post-Seattle politics, in the environmental movements, in certain sectors of feminism or the men's movement or in ethnopolitics, one sees that what they are doing is in many respects self-

healing in a positive sense that is familiar to psychotherapists. So politics starts to carry an overtly psychological, transformative burden. Sadly, this kind of transformative politics is not only progressive and left leaning, but it can also be spotted in many right-wing and reactionary movements, as the recent US election showed.

A third way in which politics has changed is that there is now something that can be called 'political energy' to be considered along with political power. Political power is what you would imagine it to be: control over resources such as land, water, oil – or indeed, information and imagery. Especially today, the issue of who controls information and imagery (for instance, on the internet and on television) is almost as important as the issue of who controls oil or water. Political power is held by those you would expect to hold it: men, white people, the middle and upper middle classes and those who run the big institutions of finance, the military and the academic and professional worlds, including the world of mental health.

Political energy is different. It is almost the opposite of political power. Political energy involves idealism and an imaginative and visionary focus on certain political problems with a view to making a creative impact on those problems (not necessarily with the goal of solving them). Political energy seeks more political energy, attempting to build to critical mass. It is different from political power because those who have political energy, imagination, commitment, idealism and real compassion almost by definition lack political power. Conversely, in contemporary societies, those who have political power tend to lack political energy. This is a fundamental and radical claim that I am sure will be much disputed.

Indeed, the very idea of political energy will upset some intellectual applegarts, because most analysts cannot entertain this notion. In their view, energy does not exist; it is only a mechanistic 19th-century way of looking at things. But there seems to be a possible middle position in which energy, in the sense of psychic energy, is maintained simultaneously both to exist and not to exist.

Jung suggested that, contra Freud's conception of libido, there is a neutral form of psychic energy that can run down various biological, psychological, spiritual and moral channels. My proposal is that there is also a social channel and that a subset of the social channel will have to do with politics and political energy. As indicated just now, I use the term energy in both a metaphorical and a literal sense.

Jung's idea that there is a specifically moral channel for psychic energy is extremely interesting, resonating with much evolutionary, ethological, genetic and psychoanalytic thought – Klein's idea of an innate superego; Winnicott's insistence that children have an inborn sense of guilt and hence are not born amoral; Milner's counsel that we stop seeing morality solely as something implanted in children by parents and society. Freud

foreshadowed this train of thought with his remarks about the innate disposition of the self-preservation instincts to become more socially oriented (Freud 1905: 176). (See Samuels 1989: 194–215 for a fuller discussion of ‘original morality’.)

People with political energy are doing something rather new and different in the western world today in comparison with what those who have political power are doing. This thought can be liberatory if you are working in a small neighbourhood group, in a social and political project with limited resources and support or with people who have been abused or if you are trying to build an environmentally informed movement for sustainable development and worldwide economic justice. If you are doing any or all of these things, then you probably do not have much power and it is very easy to judge yourself the way that the conventional political world might judge you: as a waste of time and space when it comes to real politics.

But the very notion of political energy is intended to shift this way of thinking. Very often when I talk about this, people say (as they did, for example, at a conference in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in 2000), ‘Yes and we wonder what would happen if our country valued political energy as much as it values political power.’

If political energy is not to be found in the sites of official politics, then where may we find it? Politics has left its home base and gone out into the world to redefine itself and find other and new places to settle. I am not advocating removing political energy from moribund formal institutions; this has been happening in western societies anyway over many years in one of the most significant sociocultural and collective psychological shifts to take place in the developed countries since the end of World War II. A striking feature of the past 20 years in such societies has been the spontaneous growth of new social and cultural networks. More and more people are now involved in such networks, increasingly aware that what they are doing may be regarded as political. The contemporary elasticity in our definition of politics is not something that has been worked out by intellectuals. Neither has there been a concerted effort to achieve such a shift, because the new social movements operate in isolation from each other. Yet, as we have found in the St James’s Alliance discussed previously, they have something psychological in common. They share an emotional rejection of big politics – its pomposity and self-interest, its mendacity and complacency. They share a *Weltanschauung* and set of values based on ideas of living intelligible and purposeful lives in spite of the massive social and financial forces that work against intelligibility and purpose. Such new social changes include environmentalism; the formation of groups working for the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities, animal liberation, complementary medicine; spiritual and religious groups devoted to paganism and neo-paganism; rock and other kinds of music and art; finding God in the

new physics; an explosive growth in the participation in sports; organic farming; and psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and counselling.

Elsewhere (Samuels 1993) I referred to the social movements as participating in a 'resacralization' of politics. Sacral means holy and the intent was to pick up on the attempt to get a sense of purpose, decency, aspiration and meaning back into political culture. When I consider attempts by analysts and psychotherapists to do their bit, I have no alternative but to count us as part of this general, worldwide resacralizing movement. Psychotherapists may want to be different and special, but in our attempts to work the borders between psychotherapy and society, we are part of something bigger, even if the rhetoric sometimes feels too New Age-y. Psychotherapists tend to share with other resacralizers a sense of disgust with present politics and politicians. In political clinics, this is often an actual physical disgust involving the gagging reflex, an ancient part of the nervous system that is absolutely necessary for survival in a world full of tangible and metaphorical toxins.

Let me conclude this section by accepting that a transformation of politics is not going to happen in any kind of simple or speedy way and, indeed, may not happen at all. There is an impossibility to the whole project because the social realm is as inherently uncontrollable as the drives and images of the inner world and the unconscious. Once human desire enters a social system – as it always will – that system cannot function predictably. There are no final solutions to social questions. The social issues that face western societies are as incorrigible, as unresponsive to treatment, as the psychological issues that individuals face.

Moreover, many will dispute that the cumulative public significances of these movements is positive. It can be argued that the proliferation of new networks and cultural practices is merely a further symptom of social malaise, a selfish retreat into personal, individual preoccupations, reflecting an abandonment of the aspiration to truly political values. It can also be pointed out that reactionary, fundamentalist, religious movements can be seen as attempting, in their own rather different terms, a form of resacralization. But what gets highlighted when religious fundamentalism is brought into the picture is the vastness of the energy pool available for the political reforms that are urgently needed.

Can therapists really make a difference?

Although I am enthusiastic about psychotherapy's role in the refreshing of political culture, I am also somewhat sceptical. So my answer to the question 'Can therapists really make a difference?' is both 'No' and 'Yes'. Let us deal with 'No' first, with the pessimism. James Hillman and Michael Ventura (1992) wrote a book called *We've Had a Hundred Years of*

Psychotherapy – and the World's Getting Worse. It is fairly clear what they were getting at: that psychotherapy makes little or no impact on an unjust world and that persons in therapy are cut off from taking responsibility for ameliorating injustice (cut off from their political energy by therapy, which takes all available psychic energy for its own project of personal exploration). Yet I think that a much more accurate title for their book would have been *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy, Trying to Improve the World, but the World has Stayed Pretty Much the Same*, because it is not new for psychotherapists to want to do something in relation to the world (Foster *et al.* 1996; Totton 2000). Freud wanted it, Jung wanted it and the great pioneers of humanistic psychotherapy, such as Maslow, Rogers and Perls, all wanted it as well. All these people and their followers invited the world into therapy, but the world didn't show up for its first session. There are good reasons that the world didn't show up, other than mere resistance. One reason is that therapists so much want and need to be right. (Me, too – this shadow issue of the analyst's maddening rectitude is not one I pretend to have fully dealt with.) Therapists want to reduce everything to the special knowledge that they have. This kind of reductionism gives therapy a bad name when it comes to political and social issues. For example, I remember reading in the *Guardian* an article, later the object of intense ridicule, by a Kleinian psychoanalyst about the phallic symbolism of cruise missiles going down ventilator shafts in Baghdad. My Jungian colleagues are just as bad when they tell us that the military-industrial complex is all the responsibility of the Greek god, Hephaestus. The world will not listen to that level of explanation from psychotherapists and is right not to. The priority for psychotherapists is to embark on multidisciplinary work.

But other issues besides therapy reductionism have stopped us from being useful outside a few specific areas such as psychoanalytically influenced social casework or, in some countries, child welfare legislation. Overall, there is a fairly bad record to own up to. Psychotherapists have colluded with oppressive regimes in Nazi Germany, the former Soviet Union, Argentina and South Africa. We have been involved in dubious activities such as sending soldiers suffering from shell shock and battle fatigue back to the line of battle in both world wars. There is also the ever-present collusion of many psychotherapists with all manner of normative and oppressive practices, ranging from the psychopathological stigmatization of lesbians and gay men (which still continues in many implicit ways in a wide range of locations: Davies and Neal 2000; Magee and Miller 1997). And therapists all over the world easily join in right-wing politicians' attacks on father-lacking lone-parent families. According to the right-wing reading, these families, totally responsible for spoiling our wonderful world, only need a father or father figure to come back and sort them out. I love fathers and was one of the first to write about what good-enough fathers actually do, especially with their bodies, to further the sexual, aggressive

and spiritual development of their children (e.g. Samuels 1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2001). But I utterly loathe the damaging idealization of fathers that so many western politicians have gone in for, backed by complacent analysts, therapists and other mental health professionals.

Then there is the problematic matter of psychotherapy's implicit claim that western androcentric, middle-class values and ways of thinking hold and have value universally and are superior to/should be imposed on the values and ways of thinking of non-western cultures (M.V. Adams 1996; Kareem and Littlewood 1992; Luepnitz 1988). Clearly, these unspoken assumptions reflect the typical caseloads of analysts and therapists, especially in private practice, in many countries (but see Altman 1995). The treatment of women in much psychoanalytic thinking and practice has also been damaging to some. The rise of feminist and gender-sensitive psychotherapy has had an important impact in ameliorating this situation (for example, Eichenbaum and Orbach 1982). And what a lot of therapists and analysts say about men is also beginning to receive the same kind of critique that definitions of and generalizations about women used to receive.

Another reason that people are not so likely to listen to therapists who want to make a difference in the world is that therapists are completely crazy in their own professional politics and the way they organize themselves radiates that craziness. No profession has been quite as subject to splits as the therapy profession; no profession has so frequently used personal demonization and pathological pigeonholing to deal with and get rid of troublesome outsiders and those who question from within (Turkle 1979).

As I continue to look at why we world-oriented therapists do not have a client, I note that – for reasons I do not fully understand even now – the therapy world has tragically split its clinical project off from its sociocritical project. Frankfurt school writers and Lacanian theorists rarely talk of clients or in an ordinary way about people: mothers, fathers, families, marriages, dreams, symptoms, sexuality, aggression, the inner world of the imagination. And when we read most clinical texts, the external world is hardly mentioned. Much therapy still seems (or claims) to take place in a political vacuum. There are several delusional aspects of this virginal fantasy about what we do. One delusion is that there are no politics going on in the session itself, whereas many clinicians know how the power dynamics and imbalances of the typical therapy setup cannot be wished away by reference to parental transference or the law of the father. These power imbalances often involve the denial of difference of any kind between therapist and client, the bending of the client to the moral will of the therapist and the ongoing scandal of sexual misconduct (Samuels 1996).

Another delusion is that it is not possible to find a responsible way to work directly with political, social and cultural material in the clinical session. There is not sufficient space here for a full discussion of this topic

(but see Samuels 1997, 1999a). Succinctly, my position is that it is time to think *together* about how we can change our practices and our thinking about clinical work in order to incorporate these taboo themes. To explore empirically what has been happening at the interface of psychotherapy and politics in the actual session, I surveyed 2000 analysts and therapists of many schools worldwide about which political issues their clients mentioned in therapy, how frequently the clients raised such issues, whether such mentions were increasing or decreasing and how the therapists reacted. Approximately 700 responded. I also asked the respondents about their own political views and histories. The survey revealed that the therapy profession is far more politically sensitive than one would think and that politics is a welcome theme in a significant minority of clinical offices. (It underlined the importance of shopping around for and interviewing a potential analyst or therapist.) The answers to the questions about which political and social issues are raised (published in Samuels 1993, 1994) also made it clear that clients are raising economic, environmental and gender-political issues (including issues that do not seem to affect them personally) in their therapy sessions much more than they used to. The respondents clearly wanted to honour and respond to this development, but almost all admitted that they lacked training, helpful texts and general encouragement to do it on a regular, professional, reputable basis. In fact, many felt that it would be regarded as bad practice, even though they wanted very much to engage more expertly with such material when clients bring it to the session.

There is a big difference between a mutual exploration of some huge external event that has dominated everyone's lives (such as the terrorist attacks on September 11 2001) and struggling to develop ongoing, ordinary ways of working in the session with the client's political selfhood (and that of the therapist) as it has evolved over a lifetime. Although it can be a fascinating and important moment in any therapy, responding to the impact on the analysis of a moment of high political drama that has affected everyone is not the same as extending what we regard as contemporary good practice to include all aspects of work on the political dimensions of experience. For example, the Psychoanalytic Dialogues' symposium entitled 'Reflections on September 11, 2001' (2003), although moving and insightful, did not refer to an ongoing need to develop clinical principles by which to explore the transformative aspects of what I call political discussion within the sealed vessel of an ordinary therapy relationship. Such work might include (but not be restricted to) the following:

- 1 exploration of the role played by the joint immersion in the social order on the part of analyst and client in making relationality possible in the first place, whether at a conscious level or at that of unconscious-to-unconscious communication: citizenship facilitating countertransference

- 2 considering the functioning of nonpersonal fields that cause distress in individuals who are not personally affected, for example, economic injustice, species depletion, domestic violence (my experience being that the strongest imaginable affects, disturbances in self-image and psychological conditions such as depression involve aetiologies at least partly rooted in such nonpersonal fields)
- 3 refining technique so as to work out ways of managing states in the analyst that are difficult to manage due to the presence of political viewpoints in the client that feel offensive, upsetting or disagreeable to the analyst (we all work with people whom we sometimes find unpleasant and we can build on this capacity so as to encompass our responses to what we find personally unpleasant in the political positions held by the client).

The inner politician

Where did your own politics originate? I think this is a question worth asking. What influence did your mother have on the politics you now have? Or your father? And what about differences between your parents in political outlook? Some people have been influenced in their political development by significant others in their lives, such as teachers, clergy, older friends at school. Were you? Your gender is really very significant in the kind of attitude to politics that you have and your sexual orientation is equally important. Lesbians and gay men live more closely to the political aspects and nuances of life than straight people do. Class and socio-economic factors are obviously central, too, and so is ethnic, religious and national background. In western societies, the feeling of being oppressed by a domestic tyrant, whether male or female, or of seeing other family members as oppressed, can give rise to a sharp sense of injustice and embryonic revolutionary feelings.

Sometimes when I talk to people about what has formed their politics, they start to speak about an event or moment that they remember, their first political memory, the first time they became aware that there is a political system with power at its core, including disparities of wealth and influence. Did you explore these first political memories with your own analyst?

Another way to look at the notion of the inner politician is to imagine a political energy scale on which 10 stands for political fanaticism, even martyrdom and zero stands for absolute passivity, a total lack of interest in politics. Where would you place yourself right now in your life – what level of political energy do you have? Play around with the scale. When you're with people of the same sex, does the energy level go up or down or stay the same? Is it higher at home or at work? Are there some issues that send it skyrocketing and some that bring it down? Think of the last big

interpersonal disagreement or fight with someone you love. Could it be that there was a different level of political energy at work in each of you?

Let us take this thinking right into the traditional heartland of psychotherapy. What was your mother's level of political energy compared with yours, or with your father's? What was your level compared with the typical level of those from the street or neighbourhood where you grew up?

Continuing to sketch the inner politician, I come to the question of political style. I have noticed in my conflict resolution work that those in conflict are often operating not only with very different levels of political energy, but also with very different political styles. Hence, in my work as a political consultant, I am using the idea of conflicting political styles in many settings. My inspiration in overall terms was Jung's model of psychological types: extroversion, introversion, thinking, feeling, sensation, intuition. As in life generally, for a variety of reasons (some having to do with personal backgrounds, some with inborn political constitutions), people live out the political aspects of themselves in different ways. Some are violent terrorists; some are pacifists. Some want empirical backup for their ideas; others prefer to fly by the seat of their pants. Some definitely enjoy cooperative political activity; others will suffer the nightmare of working in a group only because they passionately believe in the ends being pursued. As we begin to work out a psychologically driven transformative politics, let us not make the mistake of insisting that everyone do it in precisely the same way. If we are to promote political creativity, we need to value and honour diverse political styles and types and to think of ways of protecting such diversity. (I am indebted to Muriel Dimen [2002, personal communication] for the observation that political style and self-state have something in common as approaches to the diversity of personality.)

As I mentioned, the notion of political style is useful when addressing conflict, whether interpersonal or within organizations, or even between nations or parts of nations. Just as introverts and extroverts suffer from mutual incomprehension, people who employ a particular political style often have very little understanding of how others or other groups are actually doing their politics. This is not to say that political content *per se* is irrelevant, only that there may be more that divides opponents than their different views.

One might list words that evoke images of differing political types as follows, in a spectrum ranging from active styles to passive ones: warrior, terrorist, exhibitionist, leader, activist, parent, follower, child, martyr, victim, trickster, healer, analyst, negotiator, bridge builder, diplomat, philosopher, mystic, ostrich.

When working on questions of political style, it is not necessary to encourage anyone to stick to just one style. In fact, the opposite is true. The context in which the politics in question is taking place needs to be borne in mind. Some people will use one political style in one setting and quite

another in a different one. A negotiator at work may be a terrorist at home. Some may have a superior political style, an inferior political style and auxiliary styles, to borrow the words of Jung's typological schema. Thus, a warrior may have neglected her philosopher or a diplomat his activist.

This approach was partially fashioned on the basis of my work with a mixed group of Israeli Arabs and Israelis of Jewish background in Jerusalem in the early 1990s. It became clear that, aside from the obvious irreconcilable differences in how the Middle East political scene was understood, there were individuals on both sides of the divide who were participating in the group in very similar or identical ways. I pointed this out and re-organized the spatiality and seating plan of the group along style lines rather than content lines. There were discernible improvements in comprehension and even, to a limited extent, in goodwill. The warring factions were presented not with an analysis of what they were saying (that came later), but with a panorama of the ways in which they were saying it, that is to say, with the style of politics they were using.

I have also found the same approach useful in addressing organizational and theoretical disputes in the psychotherapy field and, most recently, in work with senior administrators in Britain's beleaguered National Health Service.

Psychotherapy, politics and spirituality

Attempts are constantly made to improve things in the political world, usually by redistributing wealth or changing legislative and constitutional structures or defusing warlike situations. It is not that nothing is being tried to make things better. Equally vigorous attempts are made to resist and to contest such changes and most social systems have a gigantic, impersonal capacity to resist change anyway. But projects of reform are valuable and necessary and generate their own psychological changes. For example, the consequences of fair and effective minimum wage legislation or devolving power to the regions of a country or amending the constitution would have effects that would show up on any national emotional audit.

But a materialist approach deriving exclusively from economics or one that depends solely on altering the structures of the state will not refresh those parts of the individual citizen that a psychological perspective can reach. Our disappointment at liberal democracy's failure to deliver the spiritual goods and our growing realization that there are limits to what can be achieved by economic redistribution or altering constitutional structures, strengthen my overall argument: something is missing in contemporary western politics, something that involves a calamitous denial of the secret life at its core. We can change the clothes and shift the pieces around, but the spectre that haunts materialist and constitutional moves in the

political world is that they only ruffle the surface. They do not (because alone they cannot) bring about the transformations for which the political soul yearns.

The perspectives advocated here may never, ever be applied to our political culture. Everything psychotherapists and analysts have said or done may fail to make one iota of difference in the condition of the world. So I conclude with a few words about failure by Samuel Beckett, who lived and struggled as intensely as anyone with what it might mean to be a good-enough citizen, involving a profound acceptance of the need to go on in the face of not being able to go on: 'No matter. Fail again. Fail better.'

2 Societal trauma: democracy in danger

Sandra Bloom

Introduction

The overly simplistic explanations of human behaviour that guide so many organizational and political decisions regularly fail to take into account one of the most important determining factors in human experience – the presence throughout human history of exposure to overwhelming, repetitive, multigenerational traumatic experiences and the potentially negative impact of those experiences on individual, group and political processes.

The last 20 years have seen the birth of a new way of understanding human behavioural pathology from a complex biopsychosocial and existential viewpoint that we call ‘trauma theory’. Trauma theory establishes a more coherent, scientifically grounded and complex chain of cause and effect for human behaviour that enables interconnections of meaning between individuals, groups and political systems without necessarily sacrificing centuries of established wisdom. Trauma theory makes it clear that individual, social and political policy decisions are intimately connected to people’s experience of – and exposure to – traumatic experience. The field of traumatic stress studies has arisen out of advocacy and a global movement toward guarantees of basic human rights and for those working with trauma survivors, the personal and the political are irrevocably connected (Bloom 2000).

Trauma theory is grounded in an exploration of the evolved biological responses to overwhelming stress. Failing to recognize that as human beings we are still profoundly affected by our evolutionary roots, including the powerful evolutionary pressure of group behaviour, puts us at the mercy of unconscious forces that can be exceedingly destructive. Leaders and the people they lead may be guided – or driven – by rational self-interest, by economic considerations, by greed and the other deadly sins. But deeper, instinctual forces also drive individual and group behaviour. The study of traumatic stress has expanded our understanding of those unconscious – or

less than fully conscious – forces that impact individuals and groups and may also help shed some much needed light onto the political stage as well.

In this chapter, we will look at the parallel processes that develop between stressed individuals, the groups that they form and the societies that result. Leaders stand at the interface between these levels of social organization, representing, simultaneously, their own development as individuals and the needs, both conscious and unconscious, of the group or groups they represent. Under conditions of great stress, the behaviour of leaders will be greatly determined by the impact of stressful conditions on them and the people they govern. Likewise, crisis provides an opportunity for leaders to actively manipulate the emotions and behaviour of the group to help them carry forth their own agendas.

The parallel-process nature of traumatic reality is a particularly important issue in today's world where entire cultures may be profoundly traumatized. Trauma shatters basic assumptions and in the unstable period immediately after such an event, individual, organizational and national decisions may be made that alter destinies and fortunes (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Since September 11 2001 the United States has offered an opportunity to witness the post-traumatic uses and abuses of fear at the hands of people in power and the threat that this poses for democracy. In the long term, the negative impact of exposure to trauma can severely impair individual and organizational skills necessary for the exercise of democratic processes.

Understanding the impact of acute trauma

Individual response to immediate danger

The stress response is a total body–mind mobilization of resources (Horowitz 2003). Powerful neurochemicals flood our brain and body in service of survival. Our attention becomes riveted on the potential threat and our capacity for reasoning and exercising judgement is negatively impacted by rising anxiety and fear. Decision making becomes dichotomous and extremist, providing us with a minimum of possible options for action and thereby increasing the odds of survival by decreasing the time it takes to actually make a decision (Janis 1982). In this heightened state of aggressive preparedness, defensive action is more likely to be violent. Taking action appears to be the only solution to this extraordinary experience of tension, so we are compelled to act on the impulses that often guide us to aggressively defend ourselves rather than to run away (Bloom 2003).

More closely resembling our animal ancestors, we become less attentive to words and far more focused on threat-related signals in the environment – all the nonverbal content of communication. As fear rises, we may lose

language functions altogether as the verbal centres of the brain become compromised: a phenomenon recognized as ‘speechless terror’ (Van der Kolk *et al.* 2001). Without language, we can take in vital information only in nonverbal form – through our physical, emotional and sensory experiences – elements Bion termed ‘beta elements’, by which he meant the sensory impressions that remain in their raw state, unsymbolized and unable to be thought about or sublimated (Biram 2003). As the level of arousal increases, ‘dissociation’ – the loss of integrated function of memory, sensation, perception and identity – may be triggered as an adaptive response to this hyperaroused state, physiologically buffering the central nervous system and the body by lowering heart rate and reducing anxiety and pain while simultaneously shutting off troubling feelings, memories or thoughts about unfolding events, including even ethical standards for behaviour. This internal state of ‘freeze’ helps to temporarily reduce the overwhelming nature of the stress response and allows us to stay calm and function rather than experience emotions that are more than we can bear.

Each episode of danger connects to every other episode of danger in our minds, so that the more danger we are exposed to, the more sensitive we are to danger. With each experience of fight–flight–freeze, our mind forms a network of connections that is triggered with every new threatening experience. If people are exposed to danger repeatedly, their bodies become unusually sensitive so that even minor threats can trigger this sequence of physical, emotional and cognitive responses. We can do nothing to control this reaction – it is a biological, in-built response, a protective device that only goes wrong if we are exposed to too much danger and too little protection.

When overly stressed, human beings cannot think clearly; neither can we consider the long-range consequences of behaviour. It is impossible to weigh all the possible options before making a decision or to take the time to obtain all the necessary information that goes into making good decisions (Janis and Mann 1977). Decisions tend to be based on impulse and on a perceived need to self-protect. As a consequence, such decisions are inflexible, oversimplified, extremist, directed towards aggressive action and often very poorly constructed (Janis 1982). This tendency toward extremist thinking will be exacerbated in those individuals who have strong authoritarian personality traits because they are unlikely to examine existing evidence, think critically about what they are experiencing, or reach independent conclusions (Altemeyer 1996). This state of extreme hyperarousal associated with stress serves a protective function during the emergency, preparing us to respond automatically and aggressively to any perceived threat, preferentially steering us toward action and away from the time-consuming effort of thought and language.

Group response to immediate danger

Under severe stress, if our powerful fear-driven emotional responses are not buffered by others through social contact and physical touch, our central nervous system is left exposed to unrelenting over-stimulation. This reaction can do long-lasting harm to our bodies as well as our psyches. As a buffer against such danger, human beings developed a network of attachment relationships, living in extended kinship groups throughout most of our evolutionary developmental period. Our capacity to manage overwhelming emotional states is shaped by our experience with early childhood attachments and is maintained throughout life by our attachment relationships. This development of extended social networks increased the likelihood that vulnerable offspring would be protected and, in combination with our expanding intelligence, made hunting and food gathering far more successful. Threat triggers an increase in social bonding. Under threat, human beings will more closely bond together with their identified group, close ranks and prepare for defence of the group.

A leader rapidly emerges within such a group, a complex process that is an interaction between the individual characteristics of the leader, the needs of the group and the contextual demands of the moment. Under such conditions, the vast majority of human beings become more suggestible to the influence of a persuasive, charismatic, strong, assertive and apparently confident leader who promises the best defence of the group, thereby containing the overwhelming anxiety of every member of the group (Cohen *et al.* 2004). In this manner, stress favours authoritarian social structures because, as research has demonstrated, individuals who are high in authoritarian traits are more likely to readily submit to legitimate authority figures (Altemeyer 1996).

In this state it is difficult for the members of a stressed group to discern the difference between a confident, intelligent leader and an arrogant blowhard and those with authoritarian dispositions are unlikely to question anyone who has the outer trappings of legitimacy. This is particularly true when a social group is at a point in its history when it has lost confidence in the old solutions to life problems, generating a state of helplessness and uncertainty (Werbart 2000). Decisions are made quickly, often autonomously, by the leader with relatively little input and the input that the leader receives is likely to be significantly coloured by the pressure everyone feels to conform to standards of group cohesion and unanimity. As stress increases, the leader is compelled to take action to reduce the threat while the followers simultaneously become more obedient to the leader in order to ensure coordinated group effort.

However, even with stern authoritarian leadership, individual and group conflict and competitive strivings are always present in a group and pose a threat to rapid, unified action. Therefore, efforts must be made to

minimize the normal tensions, conflicts and aggressive behaviours that inevitably arise and that are exacerbated by the stress response itself. The group solution is to find an external enemy on which the group can project its own negative emotions and desires in service of group cohesion. The aggression of those individuals with strongly authoritarian personality traits can be most easily directed by authority figures against any perceived enemy (Altemeyer 1996). The greater the consistency between this psychosocial need and actual events, the easier it becomes to define friend and foe. The greater the perceived differences between 'us' and 'them', the greater the ease in labelling the enemy and doing whatever it takes to defend 'us'. The greater the previous injury experienced by the group at the hands of the enemy, the easier it is to flame the fires of revenge. Under conditions that provoke fear of death, stereotyped images of the enemy are likely to be even more fervently clung to by a threatened group (Schimel *et al.* 1999; Volkan 2002).

When danger is real and present, effective leaders take charge and give commands that are obeyed by obedient followers, thus harnessing and directing the combined power of many individuals in service of group survival. The basic programming for social functioning is 'tit-for-tat' and therefore, within the human species, a desire to seek revenge for real or perceived injury is a powerful motive force. The leader mobilizes the shared group need to wreak vengeance and directs these powerful forces toward attack on the perceived enemy. Longstanding interpersonal conflicts seem to evaporate and everyone pulls together toward the common goal of group survival, producing an exhilarating and even intoxicating state of unity, oneness and a willingness to sacrifice one's own well-being for the sake of the group. This is a survival strategy ensuring that, in a state of crisis, decisions can be made quickly and efficiently, thus better ensuring survival of the group, even while individuals may be sacrificed. Fears of mortality are buffered through a strengthened allegiance to whatever ideological framework the culture endorses, be it religious, philosophical or political and anyone who threatens to undermine or criticize that framework is considered deviant, if not dangerous, and is likely to be forcefully extruded from the group (Bloom 2004a, b; Pyszczynski *et al.* 2003).

When fear becomes chronic

Individual response to chronic threat

The human stress response is an evolutionarily designed survival strategy that is extraordinarily effective under the conditions for which it was originally designed. The tragedy is that human beings are no longer particularly well suited to the environments we have created for ourselves,

environments within which our most dangerous enemies are frequently members of our own families, while the institutions we have created to sustain and protect us often turn out to be the engines of our own destruction.

The tragedy of this magnificent evolutionary success for the individual emerges most fully when a human being is repeatedly traumatized, particularly when that exposure begins in childhood. Under such conditions, these evolutionary mechanisms that are so adapted to human survival become dangerous threats and impediments to further growth. After prolonged and/or repetitive exposure to serious stressors, the brain becomes hypersensitive, a state now recognized as *chronic hyperarousal*. In this state, people may perceive danger everywhere, even when there is no real danger, because their body is signalling the arousal response to even minor provocation. As a result, their ability to think clearly and rationally can be chronically and erratically impaired.

Although the fight-flight-freeze state of physiological hyperarousal serves a vital survival purpose in times of danger, when hyperarousal stops being a state and turns into a trait, human beings lose their capacity to accurately assess and predict danger, leading to avoidance and reenactment instead of adaptation and survival (Perry and Pate 1994). Prolonged hyperarousal can have disastrous physical effects as our biological systems become progressively exhausted. Hyperarousal leaves us physically and emotionally exhausted, burdened with hair-trigger tempers, irritability and a tendency to perpetuate violence. Our need to rescue ourselves from this untenable physiological state means that we will do anything, use any device, to calm ourselves down. If we cannot get relief from our fellow humans, we will turn to any substance or behaviour that does bring relief.

Childhood exposure to trauma, particularly repetitive exposure to interpersonal violence such as sexual abuse, has even more dire consequences than when an adult experiences a traumatic event for the first time. Children's brains are still forming. The release of powerful neurohormones, particularly during critical and sensitive moments in development, is thought to have such a profound impact on the developing brain that the brain may organize itself around the traumatic event in a 'use it or lose it' strategy (Perry *et al.* 1996). High-quality decision making may never develop and, instead, extremist thinking prevails, frequently accompanied by a willingness to uncritically accept the opinions of established authority. Attention to threat remains chronic and therefore all kinds of information not considered threatening are unlikely to be integrated or synthesized. Aggression becomes chronic and may become the preferred method for dealing with any kind of stress, even the stress of uncertainty or confusion. Dissociation may also become chronic, with progressive fragmentation of important mental functions and bodies of information paired

with an inability to put feelings into words (*alexithymia*) and a tendency to act out distressing feelings instead (Krystal 1988).

Perhaps the most tragic element of the human response to chronic threat resides in the human capacity to adjust to adverse conditions, the consequence of which may be to inadvertently repeat a traumatic past. Fear precipitates the compulsion to fight or flee but when you can do neither, the biologically induced state of hyperarousal with its accompanying feelings of fear and aggression is toxic to mind and body. Like animals in a cage, with enough exposure to helplessness, human beings will adapt to adversity and cease struggling to escape from the toxic situation, thus conserving vital resources and buffering the vulnerable central nervous system against the negative impact of constant overstimulation (Seligman 1992). But later, rather than change situations that could be altered for the better, we will change our definitions of 'normal' to fit the situation to which we have become adapted, regardless of how controlling, abusive or repressive these conditions have become.

'Traumatic reenactment' describes the lingering enactment and automatic repetition of the past related to a history of trauma. It has long been recognized that 'history repeats itself', but never before have we so clearly understood *why* history does so. The very nature of traumatic information processing determines the reenactment behaviour. As human beings, we are meant to function at our maximum level of integration and any barrier to this integration will produce some innate compensatory mechanism that allows us to overcome it. Dissociating traumatic memories and feelings is life saving in the shortterm, but prevents full integration in the long term because the nonverbal images, feelings and sensations remain un-integrated. Assigned no category, no context, no point in time, these fragments of experience intrude on consciousness without warning, haunting the victim who thus remains trapped between the past and the present.

We are destined to reenact what we cannot remember (van der Kolk and Ducey 1989). And, as the reenactment unfolds, the adaptations we have made to cope with the original stressful events compel us to perceive the reenactment as perfectly 'normal' and human beings resist changing anything that feels normal (Bloom in press).

Group response to chronic threat

The tragic nature of human evolution emerges in social systems when groups of individuals develop a group identity – family, tribe, organization or nation – and then are repeatedly threatened by internal or external forces, thus arousing the conditions that lead to family wars, tribal wars, civil wars and international wars. Human beings are fundamentally emotional creatures, innately endowed with a biological system that is hard-wired for affective experience. Put human beings together in groups

and this effect is multiplied as a result of the powerful force known as 'emotional contagion' (Hatfield *et al.* 1994). A fundamental developmental challenge for all individuals and for all human groups is to learn how to appropriately manage emotional arousal.

How does a group normally 'manage' emotional states? It does so through the normal problem solving, decision making and conflict resolution methods that must exist for any human group to operate effectively. Although most organizations within our society function in a fundamentally hierarchical, top-down manner, in a calm, healthy, well-functioning system there is a certain amount of natural democratic process that occurs in the day-to-day operations of solving group problems, making decisions in teams and resolving conflict among members of the organization. For 99 per cent of the time our species has been on this planet, we lived in small hunter-gatherer clans of 40–50 people and in these groups, the ratio of adults to children under six was at least three to one (Perry 2002). Containing powerful emotions and resolving conflicts within the group were necessary for group survival and in such close quarters as we lived, children had frequent opportunities to watch adults develop effective skills.

The more complex the work demands, the greater the necessity for collaboration and integration and therefore the more likely that a system of teamwork will evolve. For a team to function properly, there must be a certain level of trust among team members who must all share in the establishment of satisfactory group norms. These are the norms that enable the group to: tolerate the normal amount of anxiety that exists among people working on a task; tolerate uncertainty long enough for creative problem solutions to emerge; promote balanced and integrated decision making so that all essential points of view are synthesized; contain and resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise between members of a group; complete its tasks.

For groups, as for individuals, emotions routinely inform the thought processes of the group and are critical to group learning and judgement; therefore group emotional processes must be constructively managed and contained. This is frequently the critical job of leadership. The more at ease the leader is with promoting democratic processes and transparency while minimizing the potentially negative impact of hierarchical structures, the more effective the group problem solving is likely to be. In exerting democratic leadership he or she is thereby reducing the abusive use of power while promoting more creative problem solving and diverse input, enabling the evolution of far more complex strategies. The greater the availability of conflict resolution techniques, the greater the willingness on the part of all group members to engage in, and even welcome, conflict as a stimulant for creativity and change. When there is less conflict avoidance there are likely to be far fewer longstanding and corrosive buried resentments.

In groups under stress, however, this healthier level of function is likely to be sacrificed in service of facing the emergency. Militaristic hierarchies can respond more rapidly and mobilize action to defend against further damage. Leaders give orders and followers follow those orders, uniting a group as one. Problems occur, however, when this emergency state is prolonged or repetitive, problems not dissimilar to those we witness in individuals under chronic stress. Groups can become chronically hyperaroused, functioning in crisis mode, unable to process one difficult experience before another crisis has emerged. Hierarchical structures concentrate power and, in these circumstances, power can easily come to be used abusively and in a way that perpetuates rather than attenuates the concentration of power. Transparency disappears and secrecy increases under this influence. Communication networks become compromised as those in power become more punishing and the likelihood of error is increased as a result. In such a situation, conflicts tend to remain unresolved and tension (and resentment) mount under the surface of everyday group functioning. Helplessness, passivity and passive-aggressive behaviours on the part of the subordinates in the hierarchy increase while leaders become increasingly controlling and punitive. In this way, the organization becomes ever more radically split, with different parts of the organization assuming the role of managing and/or expressing different emotions that are then subsequently suppressed. This is not a situation that leads to individual or organizational health but, rather, to increasing levels of dysfunction and diminished productivity.

The chronic nature of a stressed atmosphere tends to produce a generalized increased level of tension, irritability, short tempers and even abusive behaviour. The urgency to act in order to relieve this tension compromises decision making because group members are unable to weigh and balance multiple options, arrive at compromises and consider long-term consequences of their actions under stress. Decision making in such groups tends to deteriorate with increased numbers of poor and impulsive decisions, compromised problem-solving mechanisms and overly rigid and dichotomous thinking and behaviour. Interpersonal conflicts that were suppressed during the initial crisis return, often with a vengeance, but conflict resolution mechanisms, if ever in place, deteriorate under stress.

Problem solving is also compromised because, under these conditions, group members are likely to turn to leaders who urge action and, in this condition of tension, virtually any action will do to alleviate the immediate need to respond. Extremist thinking tends to dominate discussion. Leaders may become increasingly autocratic and dogmatic, trying to appear calm and assured in front of their subordinates while narrowing their circle of input to a very small group of trusted associates. As the leader becomes more threatened, sensing the insecurity of his decisions and his position, these small groups of associates feel increasingly pressured to conform to

whatever the leader wants. In this process, judgement and diversity of opinion are sacrificed in service of group cohesion and, as this occurs, the quality of decision making becomes progressively compromised, an insidious process that has been termed 'groupthink' (Janis 1983).

Under conditions of chronic threat, escalating control measures are used to repress any dissent that is felt to be dangerous to the unity of what has become focused group purpose, seemingly connected to survival threats. This encourages a narrowing of input from the world outside the organization. It also encourages the development of split-off and rivalrous dissenting subgroups within the group who may passive-aggressively or openly subvert group goals. As group cohesion begins to wane, leaders may experience the relaxing of control measures as a threat to organizational purpose and safety. They may therefore attempt to mobilize increasing projection onto the designated external enemy who serves a useful purpose in activating increased group cohesion while simultaneously aggressively suppressing dissent internally. But the suppression of the dissenting minority voice has negative consequences. As dissent is silenced, vital information flow is impeded. As a result, the quality of problem analysis and decision making deteriorates further. If this cycle is not stopped and the group allowed opportunity to recuperate, the result may be a group that becomes as rigid, repetitious and ultimately destructive as do so many chronically stressed individuals (Bloom 2004a, b). In the process, the group will have lost the democratic processes that are so critically important to the ability of the group to respond to complex, ever-changing environments.

The erosion in previously held democratic norms within a group does not happen overnight. There is an insidious process of adjustment and readjustment as control measures are instituted, the numbers of rules and regulations are increased and punitive measures for responding to infractions in these rules are instituted. Because the change is gradual, not sudden, the entire group adjusts to the adverse conditions that are always created in the name of 'safety' or 'security' from some perceived negative environmental force or in order to exert 'control' over negative influences within the corporate body itself. As the changes are accepted they become the new social norms and therefore the very definitions of normal, expectable conduct within the social group change, even while actual behaviour is becoming increasingly aberrant and even ineffective. When someone mentions the fact of the changed norms, about the differences between the way things are now and the way they used to be (when the organization was more functional), the speaker is likely to be silenced or ignored. As a result there is an escalating level of acceptance of increasingly aberrant behaviour toward subordinates and leaders within the in-group as well as the out-group(s). Meanwhile, the past becomes romanticized and calls for stricter 'moral values', defined as the repression of freedoms perceived as dangerous, rise. This necessitates a call for 'purification' from

whatever forces are considered to be contaminating group unity (Volkan 2002). Those who believe that the present reality could be changed for a freer, more just and progressive future are first ignored and ridiculed, then labelled as divisive and even dangerous malcontents who should be censured or are simply called naive, absurd 'utopians', wishing for a society that can never exist.

Within a social framework we call memory 'history'. Some modern philosophers believe that all memories are formed and organized within a collective context. According to them, society provides the framework for beliefs, behaviours and the recollections of both (Halbwachs 1992). Later, present circumstances affect what events are remembered as significant. Much of the recording and recalling of memories occurs through social discussion. This shared cohesiveness of memories is part of what defines a culture over time. Shared language also helps a society organize and assimilate memories and, eventually, forget about the events. Individuals are destined to reenact what they cannot remember and so, too, are groups. There is reason to believe that maintaining silence about disturbing collective events may have the counter-effect of making the memory even more potent in its continuing influence on the organization or society much as silent traumatic memories continue to haunt individuals (Pennebaker *et al.* 1997).

Organizations can forget the past just like individuals do and the more traumatic the past, the more likely it is that a group will push memories out of conscious awareness. Corporate amnesia has been defined as the loss of collective experience and accumulated skills usually through the trauma of excessive downsizing and layoffs (NewsBriefs 2000). Analogous to the division in individual memory between verbal, explicit and situational, implicit memory, literature in the corporate world refers to explicit and implicit (or 'tacit') corporate memory, the latter referring to vital, organizationally specific knowledge that is cumulative, slow to diffuse and rooted in the human beings who comprise the organization, in contrast with the explicit corporate memory that is embodied in written documents, policies and procedures. It is this valuable tacit memory that is profoundly disturbed by the loss of personnel in downsizing (Hazell 2000).

Groups can also distort memories of the past as individuals can. Organizations may selectively omit disagreeable facts, may exaggerate or embellish positive deeds, may deny the truth. They may manipulate linkages by focusing on one cause of an event while ignoring or denying other causes. They may exaggerate the misdeeds of an enemy or competitor and minimize the group's own misdeeds toward that very competitor or simply blame 'circumstances' and thereby minimize their own responsibility (Baumeister and Hastings 1997). Groups may engage in what has been termed 'organizational nostalgia' for a golden past that is highly selective and idealized and, when compared to the present state of affairs, surpassingly better. It is a world that is irretrievably lost, with all the sense

of inexpressible grief associated with such loss and the present is always comparatively poorer, less sustaining, less fruitful, less promising. In this way the organizational past – whether accurately remembered or not – can continue to exert a powerful influence on the present. In fact, one author has noted that: ‘Nostalgia is not a way of coming to terms with the past (as mourning or grief are) but an attempt to come to terms with the present’ (Gabriel 1993: 132).

Critical events and group failure change us and change our groups, but without memory – without history – we lose the context. Studies have shown that institutions do have memory and that once interaction patterns have been disrupted, these patterns can be transmitted through an organization so that one ‘generation’ unconsciously passes on to the next norms that alter the system and every member of the system. But without a conscious memory of events also being passed on, organizational members in the present cannot make adequate judgements about whether the strategy, policy or norm is still appropriate and useful in the present (Menzies 1975). This process can be an extraordinary resistance to healthy group change.

An organization that cannot change, like an individual, will develop patterns of reenactment, repeating the past strategies over and over without recognizing that these strategies are no longer effective. With every repetition there is, instead, further deterioration in functioning. Knowledge about this failing is available but it tends to be felt before it is cognitively appreciated, but without the capacity to put words to feelings a great deal of deterioration may occur before the repetitive and destructive patterns are recognized. Healthier and potentially healing individuals enter the group and may even vie for leadership, but are rapidly extruded as they fail to adjust to the reenactment role that is being demanded of them. Less autonomous individuals may also enter the organization and are drawn into the reenactment pattern. In this way, one autocratic and abusive leader leaves or is thrown out only to be succeeded by another.

Reenactment patterns are especially likely to occur when events in the past have resulted in behaviour that arouses shame or guilt in the group’s representatives. Shame and guilt for past misdeeds are especially difficult for individuals and groups to work through. The way a group talks to itself is via communication between various ‘voices’ of the corporate body. If these voices are silenced or ignored, communication breaks down and is more likely to be acted out through impulse-ridden and destructive behaviour.

Conclusion

Endangering democracy

An evolutionarily based, biological understanding of human behaviour has broad implications for national and international leadership. The world is now so obviously interconnected and ecologically interlinked that destruction of others is, in an increasingly real sense, self-destruction. The need to address repetitive crises is of global concern since every crisis presents us with complex dilemmas. Yet under conditions of national and international stress the quality of thought processes is likely to deteriorate to dichotomous 'good and evil' thinking. All that is required to mobilize aggression and hatred against those defined as enemy is the incitement to vengeance paired with sufficient fear to disarm coherent thought processes. Unable to engage in complex decision making, governmental problem solving becomes compromised, making it more likely that we will turn to leaders who appear strong, decisive and who urge immediate action and a satisfaction of the growing lust for violent action. Unfortunately, such leaders are likely to be charismatic authoritarians, frequently right-wing fundamentalist authoritarians. Authoritarianism is known to increase under the threat of violence and when such an ascendance occurs, critical thinking, the ability to collaborate with others and the search for nonviolent solutions to complex problems are likely to evaporate (Altemeyer 1996).

In a time of national tension, virtually any action will do to alleviate the immediate pressure to respond. Under conditions of stress, we are more likely to be swayed by the influence of a group we are identified with and pressures for conformity increase at the moment when we are most desperately in need of diverse opinions. This leads to an increase in territoriality and aggression that, to some, may feel satisfying in the long run but is likely to compound existing problems. Although intended to decrease the sense of danger and insecurity, premature and poorly considered action tends to increase danger. As leaders focus exclusively on physical security, we may sacrifice other forms of safety and well-being in order to achieve an elusive sense of physical security that remains threatened. Unfortunately, focusing on only physical safety while ignoring the other domains of human existence that constitute sustained security tends to procure exactly what we seek to avoid – more danger.

Using violent means to achieve nonviolent ends is oxymoronic action bound to involve a group in the escalation of ever more dangerous forms of offensive behaviour. As a species we cannot escape our evolutionary heritage, tied as it is to our biological makeup. We can, however, learn to more effectively understand and manage our impulses, desires and instincts.

3 Conflict, competition and aggression

Nick Totton

Introduction

Since its foundation, psychotherapy has discussed conflict between human beings. The themes of those early debates are little different from contemporary discussions, which perhaps suggests how little has been achieved. They boil down to three questions about aggression (without which neither conflict nor competition would be serious problems):

- Is aggression an innate human trait, or is it the product of specific conditions?
- Is aggression wholly negative, or does it have positive aspects and expressions?
- Can therapy contribute either to minimizing aggression or to supporting its positive aspects?

I shall examine the varied answers given to these questions by different theorists within the field of psychotherapy; and also look at the application of these answers to destructive 'isms', such as racism and sexism.

Is aggression innate?

Sigmund Freud saw aggression as both innate and dangerous. *Civilisation and Its Discontents* insists that:

men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved ... they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments are to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. ... *Homo homini lupus* [man is a wolf to man]. ... In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration.

(Freud 1930: 302)

In order to rein in aggression, Freud believed, civilization must repress sexuality and transform its energy into a sort of libidinal social cement. 'Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security' (1930: 306). He criticises communists for their social interpretation of aggression: 'Aggressiveness was not created by property. It reigned almost without limit in primitive times ... and it already shows itself in the nursery' (304).

Freud's most eloquent contemporary opponent on this issue was Wilhelm Reich, who believed that Freud wrote *Civilisation and Its Discontents* specifically to oppose his own position (Reich 1967: 44). Reich argues that human beings are exactly what Freud says they are not, beings whose 'deepest and most natural feelings' are 'natural decency, spontaneous honesty, mute and complete feelings of love' (Reich 1983b: 186); we are born to seek the 'natural pleasure of work and activity' (1983b: 8). The violence, malice and hatred that Freud interprets as 'primary mutual hostility', Reich ascribes entirely to culture's distortions: 'antisocial actions are the expression of secondary drives' – the intermediate character layer between our superficial, inhibited 'niceness' and our authentic core, 'produced by the suppression of natural life' (1983b: 7).

The contrasting positions of Freud and Reich, with correspondingly contrasting implications for political activism, are the poles between which most other interested psychotherapists have placed themselves. Reich's view of human nature attracted many radicals in the 1960s and 1970s, echoing the 1930s independent thinking of Ian Suttie, who argued in *The Origins of Love and Hate* (1936) that hate and destructiveness are secondary reactions when 'primal love' is threatened and that social and cultural life derive from love itself, not from sublimated sexuality.

Projection

Freud's version of aggression has influenced many attempts by therapists to understand social behaviour. Melanie Klein's theories, in particular, have been taken up by politically interested therapists; she outlines a complex alchemical sequence of introjections and projections, splittings and recombinations, through which the infant (and the later adult) attempts to manage what she sees as a terrifying 'innate conflict between love and hate' (1975: 180). We try to eliminate our own hate by treating it as *not* ours, but belonging to other people – whom we can then freely hate. 'First we project our destructiveness into others; then we wish to annihilate them without guilt' (Segal 1988: 51).

For Kleinians, the solution is the 'depressive position', where we can integrate our positive and negative feelings. In some ways, this is obviously an unfortunate name for a set of attitudes portrayed as positive and

creative; but it does accurately convey something about how Klein views adulthood, as a renunciation of deeply held wishes that she believes to be unrealistic. Reich's attitude then exemplifies the refusal to give up these goals (for an extended critique of Reich along just these lines, see Chasseguet-Smirgel and Grunberger 1986). Samuels strongly disputes the Kleinian view: 'The object-relations consensus suffers from a norm-making enmeshment with the numinous images of the bodily relationship of mother and infant, leading to the moralistic advancement of the depressive position as a nostrum for social and cultural ills' (1993: 285).

Klein links the depressive position with the task of 'reparation' – 'the variety of processes by which the ego feels it undoes harm done in phantasy, restores, preserves and revives objects' (1975: 133). These ideas have been used towards a psychotherapeutic politics that claims to be both radical and realistic, based on a continuous mature compromise between our loving and destructive impulses (Alford 1990; Young 1994: 133ff) and using as a key tool the concepts of projection and of 'projective identification', where not only are unacceptable feelings put onto someone else, but that person also *experiences those feelings as their own*. Social groups facilitate such processes: 'Group helps its members defend against anxiety by sanctioning the projection of internal persecutors outward onto a hated group. At the same time the group heightens individual anxiety' (Alford 1990: 18; cf. Hopper 2003).

These ideas can clearly help us to understand political phenomena such as leadership, scapegoating and xenophobia; we shall consider later how they can help us think about racism and sexism. Perhaps their most highly developed use in a political context has been by the 'psychohistory' movement, which argues that 'leaders are personalities able to become containers for the bizarre projective identifications of group-fantasies' (DeMause 1982: 138) and offers practical tools for analysing this material as it appears in political speeches, writings and cartoons (DeMause 1982: 193–230, 301–17).

Andrew Samuels perceptively critiques Kleinian politics:

The concept of projective identification, invaluable though it is in many respects, tends to feed into an approach to politics in which the irreducibly social nature of humanity has less prominence. This is because [it] just does not get hold of the collectivity of persons, of where they are already joined together on a psychosocial level, of where things are shared.

(Samuels 1993: 277)

This accurately describes how projective identification is often used. However, one can also see it as encapsulating our ambiguous status as simultaneously individual and collective, with feelings and ideas 'floating'

through a family, group or society, creating experiences of both community and alienation. An emphasis on *re-owning* projected material, as for example in Worldwork (see later), suggests the possibility of *non*-projective identification and real collectivity.

Racism, sexism and hatred of difference

The concept of projection is not tied to belief in innate aggression. If we hold that hate and destructiveness are acquired reactions to environmental pressures, we can still use projection and projective identification to understand how these forces operate. In fact, similar and overlapping concepts exist in other therapeutic traditions under different names – for example, the Jungian shadow or the Lacanian Other (see S. Clarke 2003 for an attempt at synthesis).

The black African Franz Fanon employed the concept of the Other in the first serious psychotherapeutic analysis of racism, *Black Skin, White Masks*, in the early 1950s (Fanon 1986), describing how white culture identifies the black man with the ‘dark’, ‘animal’ quality it fears in its own sexuality:

European civilization is characterized by the presence, at the heart of what Jung calls the collective unconscious, of an archetype: an expression of the bad instincts, of the darkness inherent in every ego, of the uncivilized savage, the Negro that slumbers in every black man.

(Fanon 1986: 187)

Fanon’s theory has led to a wider picture of how people can project onto difference a broad range of negative psychological material.

To the extent that we wish to believe that our violence, our greed, our exploitativeness, our passivity, our dependence is ‘out there’, not ‘in here’, then the ‘other’ group, the group that is ‘different’ can easily come to represent what Harry Stack Sullivan called the ‘not me’.

(Altman 2003: 96)

Kovel (1995: 218) describes a process of ‘segregated mental essences’ – difference as a means of separating out, a psychic ghettoization into different kinds of being: sex roles, gender roles, social roles in general. Along with other writers, notably Rustin (1991), Kovel has clarified the mechanisms involved and linked the psychological aspects of racism to its economic and political aspects – the payoff of racism. Kovel, Rustin and Altman all argue

that modern racism's real source is capitalist society's destructive effects on its members, leaving many in need of something onto which to project their own painful feelings.

This approach can be applied equally to other 'isms' that project negativity onto difference, for example, sexism and religious fundamentalism. Kovel argues that 'as the western mentality began to regard itself as homogeneous and purified ... it was also led to assign the negativity inherent in human existence to other peoples' (1995: 212) – women and children as well as non-westerners. What Altman says about blacks applies equally to many other groups:

To the extent that black people represent the objectified human being, the objectified part of all of us human beings, people defined as black become suitable containers for our sense of oppression and for all aspects of ourselves from which we wish to create distance, from which we wish to disidentify.

(Altman 2003: 96)

Slavoj Zizek's parallel Lacanian account shows how Nazi society used the Jews to represent the 'Real' that it could process:

Society is not prevented from achieving its full identity because of Jews: it is prevented by its own antagonistic nature, by its own immanent blockage and it 'projects' this internal negativity into the figure of the 'Jew'. In other words, what is excluded from the symbolic (from the frame of the corporatist socio-symbolic order) returns in the Real as a paranoid construction of the 'Jew'.

(Zizek 1989: 127)

He deepens our understanding of what is projected into the Other:

We always impute to the 'other' an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret perverse enjoyment. In short what really bothers us about the 'other' is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment ...: the smell of 'their' food, 'their' noisy songs and dances, 'their' attitude to work.

(Zizek 1993: 202–3)

Racism and sexism are not contingent features of our society, but essential to it, leading to 'a continuous reinstitutionalization of the material basis of racism [and sexism] and a continuous reproduction of racism [and sexism] itself' (Kovel 1995: 218–19), often in new forms and guises. These projections bind a tremendous charge, always liable to explode into violent

backlash if challenged. 'The situation in which the subject is split off from the object is highly unstable. The disavowed position is always there, requiring continual warding off' (Altman 2003: 96). The only way forward is to re-own the disavowed position, which is experienced as a threat to hard-won identities.

It is worth noticing that this understanding of 'otherism' also warns us against polarizing our own position as *against* any particular form of bigotry, however tempting this may be. Writers from a therapy perspective can fall into this trap as easily as anyone else:

The racist defence ... is part of the hatred of all that modernity brings – of its terrors and disconnections, of its promise and its fertile creativity. Racism, consequently, is not just anti-Semitic or anti-black; it is anti-world, anti-desire, anti-modernity itself.

(Frosh 1989: 243)

Stamp out intolerance, in other words!

Beyond the dichotomy

The argument over innate versus acquired aggression can seem very familiar: replaying a traditional debate over Original Sin versus Free Will. In failing to transcend the Judaeo-Christian paradigm, this argument may simply provide another dualistic screen for projection onto difference. As in the equally stuck nature–nurture debate (Ridley 2003), we need to find a way to answer 'both': aggression is both innate and acquired; we are born with a capacity, a potential to fight fire with fire, which will be expressed in different ways and degrees depending on our life circumstances.

This is plain enough: our capacity for rage lets us defend ourselves against attack, our assertiveness and competitiveness are part of any living organism. Recognizing this means withdrawing our negative projection *onto aggression itself*: acknowledging that, although aggression, competition and conflict can and do cause terrible harm, they are not intrinsically evil. For Wilhelm Reich:

Every positive manifestation of life is aggressive, the act of sexual pleasure as well as the act of destructive hate, the sadistic act as well as the act of procuring food. Aggression is the life expression of the musculature, of the system of movement.

(Reich 1983b: 156)

Fritz Perls correlates aggression with the natural processes of biting and eating (Perls 1969; Perls *et al.* 1973: 386). Aggression contributes to

discrimination – chewing things over and biting them off, swallowing and incorporating nourishment and spitting out what we don't like; hence, 'morality and aggression ... are essentially linked', both forms of discrimination between 'good' (for me) and 'bad' (for me). Survival and flourishing require aggressive assertion of our boundaries. 'It is not aggression, any more than sex, that is responsible for the neuroses, but the unfortunate organization of aggression that occurs in our institutions and families' (Perls 1955: 33–5).

Similarly Andrew Samuels says 'aggressive competition can be understood as lying at the heart of a pluralistic approach to politics' (Samuels 2001: 176), arguing that just as aggression in relationships is sometimes a clumsy attempt to reconnect, 'aggression, which is so prevalent in modern societies, often masks the deepest need for contact, dialogue, playback, affirmation' (2001: 198); aggression can be 'a politically reparative drive' (Samuels 1993: 56). These more positive versions of aggression imply a positive reading of conflict itself, on personal and political levels, as a necessary precursor to growth through its signal that the current situation is incomplete and needs to change. Thus for Arnold Mindell, 'engaging in heated conflict instead of running away from it is one of the best ways to resolve the divisiveness that prevails on every level of society' (Mindell 1995: 12).

Hence, paradoxically, one of therapy's key contributions is to *affirm* aggression, to *support* conflict, to *speak up for* competition – while also affirming, supporting and speaking up for the victims of alienated and destructive expressions of these qualities. This is the starting point of Mindell's 'Worldwork', perhaps the most dynamic and exciting therapeutic response to conflict so far: 'Value trouble. Accept nature. Make peace with war' (Mindell 1995: 241).

However, we still need an account of cruelty, of oppression, of what Berke (1989) calls 'malice'. How do healthy aggression and competition frequently become vicious and destructive dehumanization of opponents? It is insufficient to say, for example, that competition over resources leads to war; this assumes what it seeks to explain, human capacity for cruelty. Unless we fall back on the concept of innate aggression, a further explanatory tool is needed.

There is now a strong consensus within psychotherapy around the concept of individual and societal trauma (see Chapter 2). Trauma works in two ways to create destructive cruelty: first, through dissociation and disconnection from the world, it attacks empathy founded on embodied presence. And, second, traumatized people or societies try, through projection, to get rid of their own pain and oppression onto the Other, whoever that may be in each situation. I free myself from my internal destroyedness by destroying the enemy. We each have an internal reservoir of bodily violence in our experience of birth, available for this purpose (DeMause 1982).

Several people have studied specific social conflicts as responses to trauma: for example, the ongoing revenge scenarios and ethnic cleansings of former Yugoslavia (de Levita 2000), the similar if less extreme conflict in Northern Ireland (Elliot *et al.* 2004) and the role of collective Holocaust trauma in Israeli treatment of Palestinians (Bunzl and Beit-Hallahmi 2002). It seems that societal trauma can be transmitted through childrearing approaches based on violence, sexual repression and deprivation of tenderness (DeMause 1982; Prescott 1975) and through traumatizing birthing procedures (DeMause 1982; Reich 1983b). Analysing cross-cultural data, Prescott (1975) demonstrated that the physical affection withheld from children accurately predicts levels of adult physical violence, while repressive attitudes towards extramarital sex correlate with violence, authoritarianism and militarism. But if the concept of societal trauma is to be really effective, it needs a scenario for how the whole machine got kick-started – otherwise we are back with the Judaeo-Christian model of the Fall. Once in existence, aggressive, dominating, traumatized societies have a tremendous edge over more peaceful cultures. But where did they originate?

The best description so far of how aggressive, patriarchal societies might originate is the ‘Saharasia’ theory (DeMeo 1991). DeMeo argues that patriarchy developed in and spread outwards from the hyperarid belt encompassing North Africa, the Near East and Central Asia – ‘Saharasia’ - after c.4000 BCE, when a major ecological transition occurred from grassland forest to dry desert. Harsh and impoverished conditions required a psychosocial shift to a harsher attitude towards self and others (Turnbull 1972); once in place, trauma transmission through the mistreatment of babies and children would tend to maintain it, even when living conditions changed – just as individual trauma survivors respond as if still under threat.

Can anything be done?

If we accept this picture of aggression and conflict – accept, at least, that it is possible to form *some* picture of how our aggression has been distorted by trauma – then psychotherapy may have several important roles to play. It can develop and disseminate a model of how, individually and collectively, we project our own traumatic experience onto others as a way of trying to manage our pain and of how this is transmitted down the generations. This needs to be combined with explicit support for aggressive, assertive and competitive impulses as in themselves healthy and creative.

A second role for psychotherapy is helping survivors of conflict manage and heal their traumatic experience, so that it is not simply passed on generationally as a revenge imperative (de Levita 2000). Such work is already happening in many conflict areas, with groups (Chapter 11, this volume;

Audergon 2004, 2005) and individuals (Heinl 2001; Linden and Grut 2002); it no doubt needs expansion and development.

A third task is developing group process methods that enable conflict to be handled and resolved. The key to this is simple, yet difficult: if those in conflict can stay together for long enough to hear one another out, then resolution can and will begin to take place – first emotionally and, later, rationally. So the job of facilitation is primarily to offer a container that allows and encourages this to happen. The longest established and best known such structure is encounter, developed by Carl Rogers and others in the late 1940s. The essence of the encounter group is that it is *unstructured*: the facilitator does not tell people what to do:

Often there is consternation, anxiety and irritation at first – particularly because of the lack of structure. Only gradually does it become evident that the major aim of nearly every member is to find ways of relating to other members of the group and to himself [sic] ...

(Rogers 1973: 15–16)

(On a different theoretical basis, exactly the same is true of the classic analytic group.)

Thousands have been positively touched by encounter; the model has influenced and/or been appropriated by several other approaches and the name is now almost generic for many forms of group work, including some using more active facilitation. Encounter groups responded in the 1960s to a perceived ‘hunger for relationships which are close and real’ (Rogers 1973: 18); they were then used experimentally in specific conflict situations, on the theory that ‘open and honest communication, of feelings as well as thoughts’ could only be helpful. Encounter groups have been used in industry and business, in educational institutions, in churches, in government departments and in situations of racial conflict (Rogers 1973: 138–50).

The encounter approach has been sharply criticized by Jacoby (1977: 64) for acting ‘as if “the Person” existed in a no-man’s-land of free-floating interpersonal relations and not in a society’. Certainly one can question a style that claims to be equally applicable to all without distinguishing explicitly between different social positions and access to power, as if oppressive institutions can be cured not through structural change but through more ‘real relationships’ – as Jacoby sarcastically puts it, ‘not the dissolution of dehumanization but its humanization’ (1977: 64). However, Rogers stresses that encounter ‘is not simply a means of damping down tensions’, but a way of bringing them into the open so that the whole community has to address them (1973: 142). He emphasizes (1973: 88) that encounter groups can be deeply challenging for institutions.

In many ways similar is M. Scott Peck's community building. Peck defines 'community' as 'a group of individuals who have learnt how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure' (1987: 59); he speaks of the need to 'go beyond democracy' and 'transcend differences in such a way as to include a minority' (1987: 63), by employing our 'natural yearning and thrust towards health and wholeness and holiness'; this above all requires safety – 'when we are safe, there is a natural tendency for us to heal and convert ourselves' (1987: 68). Safety does not mean the absence of conflict, but 'a place where conflict can be resolved without physical or emotional bloodshed' (1987: 71).

Peck believes that 'the process by which a group of human beings becomes a community is a lawful process' (1987: 83). He defines four stages: 'pseudocommunity', when a group basically fakes agreement and avoids conflict; 'chaos', when conflict insists on emerging; 'emptiness', when in desperation or despair the group members drop their prejudices and assumptions, their need to solve and control; and 'community', rebirth out of a subjective 'group death'.

The deep learning is experiential: a group takes itself to community, with only minimal help from designated facilitators. Peck believes community building lets us move beyond our personal cultural values 'toward the notion of world community and the possibility of ... belonging to a planetary culture' (1987: 202). He criticizes the US governmental system as 'oblivious to the rules of community' and stuck in the fight model and the avoidance of communication wherever possible.

By far the most politically engaged therapeutic approach to conflict is Arnold Mindell's *Worldwork*: an approach to all group conflict situations, based like Mindell's work in general (Chapter 11, this volume) on the concept of 'dreaming', a fundamental process expressing itself in actual dreams and also in bodily symptoms, relationship conflicts and group conflicts. For Mindell, conflict indicates unprocessed dreamlike material – usually, some minority experience that is not being adequately represented. *Worldwork* introduces into the process 'deep democracy', which is 'the realization that everyone is needed to represent reality' (Mindell 1992: 155), 'the inherent importance of all parts of ourselves and all viewpoints in the world around us' (1992: 5) or 'our sense that the world is here to help us become our entire selves and that we are here to help the world become whole' (Mindell 1992: 96).

In *Worldwork* large groups of people meet, representing as wide a range as possible of situations and experiences. This can be within a neighbourhood, city or political situation; or seminars can draw hundreds from many countries, ethnic groups, classes, genders and sexual orientations (participants from disadvantaged groups get considerable financial support to attend). At first, everyone expresses the attitude they came with, whatever

this may be. Conflicts emerge, mirroring conflicts in the larger world – for example, between women and men, black and white, third world and first world, rich and poor, gay and straight – often generating much anger, grief, terror, outrage, frustration and despair. As each experience is attended to, acknowledged, accepted, fought against and worked with, hopefully new roles come into being. In theory at least, silent roles are every bit as important as noisy ones – those who feel helpless, who listen and feel, who create the space within which other people can be more visibly active.

This work is painful and demanding – sometimes terrifying, as several hundred people enter chaos. It takes nerve to ‘sit in the fire of conflict and not be burned’ (Mindell 1995: 18). But what is striking – and, of course, other group situations work similarly – is that, given the willingness to sit with what is happening, to support how people are acting and feeling, however unpleasant this may be, to maintain awareness to the point of completion – conflicts do tend to complete themselves, generating an extraordinary sense of mutual recognition and respect. The core recipe for conflict resolution is that people stay and listen. Clearly objective conflicts around power and economics cannot be resolved purely psychologically; but people can come away from such an experience and act differently in the world.

‘Deep democracy’ reframes of the concept of leadership:

If we understand the leader as just another role, we see that the power projected upon our leaders is apparent, not absolute, since real leadership comes from those who are aware of the process trying to happen in their community. The apparent leaders are representations of field roles, which are parts each of us can and sometimes must fill.

(Mindell 1989: 88)

In a Worldwork seminar, the leadership in the room shifts from person to person, often in very surprising ways. One facilitation task (and this, too, is a field role not always residing with the designated facilitators) is to notice where leadership is: sometimes with people who are being very quiet or frightened or apparently outside the action.

In a striking demonstration of its own principles, Worldwork, having unreservedly taken on the standpoint of oppressed minorities, then found the space to recognize that ‘mainstream’ experience also had to be validated if deep democracy were to mean anything:

[T]hose of us who want to facilitate should not fall into one-sided support of minority positions ... That makes the majority feel marginalized. The facilitator’s task is not to do away with the use of

rank and power, but to notice them and make their dynamics explicit for the whole group to see.

(Mindell 1995: 37)

Mindell explicitly recognizes a major problem in combining real political analysis with support for all parts of the situation:

The paradox of group process is this: to be useful, it must address everyone's social and rank issues. It's got to deal with the issue of who has the money. At the same time, a community dies if it focuses on only what is right or wrong about each side.

(Mindell 1995: 181)

Uncompromising in its support for minorities oppressed for their gender, colour, sexual orientation or economic position, Worldwork connects all these in a coherent analysis, which also criticizes some of the assumptions of psychotherapy:

It is devastating to assume, as some Western therapies do, that certain races and myths are more primitive than others. And most therapists assume that the only conscious human beings are ones who think about themselves all the time. Such apparently 'harmless' assumptions are so full of naive prejudices that it is not surprising that our Western therapies and group and organizational practices are not solving city and international problems.

(Mindell 1992: 4–5)

Worldwork is a so far unique attempt to apply psychotherapy in the sphere of political conflict without privileging the therapeutic over the political – without falling into the error, for which Jacoby criticizes Rogers, of treating conflict as something that occurs and can be resolved simply on the level of individual human beings, rather than that of social structure.

Conclusion

Conflict, competition and aggression are perhaps the most fundamental problems human beings now face (and also key elements in our attitude towards the rest of life on this planet). It would be naive for therapy to claim that it has solutions. It does seem likely, however, that some central concepts of psychotherapy have a significant role to play in getting to grips with these issues. Using other people and groups – and indeed the non-human world in general – as dumping grounds for our unwanted feelings, is plainly not the way to go; it also appears that in dumping what we do not

want, we are also getting rid of valuable aspects of our own being. By re-owning the Other we enrich ourselves.

History is indeed a long nightmare, a feverish sleep shot through by jumbled dreams of violence and abuse and, equally, by glorious dreams of freedom and peace. We are all, individually and collectively, punchdrunk from repeated traumatic blows to the head and body, and our confusion renders us unable to see where the blows are coming from and to protect ourselves. But we are perhaps finally coming to understand our situation; which allows us some faint hope of transforming it.