

## EDITORIAL

One of the hottest topics in the field of psychotherapy and politics is societal trauma. Over the last few decades, the once peripheral theory of individual trauma has moved steadily towards the centre of therapeutic awareness. It has showed itself to be a powerful clinical and theoretical tool for understanding the experience of many, many people. (How this process has replayed a parallel development in the years after World War I, especially in the work of Sandor Ferenczi, is a fascinating but separate story.)

More recently, the question has repeatedly been asked: if so many millions of people worldwide have had their lives structured by trauma – psychologically, neurologically, physiologically – what are the implications for society as a whole? How do traumatized individuals, with their burden of dissociation, hyperarousal and denial, come together into a group, and what distortions affect the functioning of that group?

However, societal trauma is not just ‘individual trauma writ large’, as Elliot et al. remind us later in this issue – not just the statistical aggregate of repeated instances of terror, deprivation, loss, sexual and physical abuse. This would be serious enough. But societal trauma also describes structural changes on the macro-level that result from events like war (especially civil war), famine, totalitarian rule, plague,

ethnic cleansing: erasures and mutilations in the social contract itself, as the holes ripped in the fabric of civil society are filled with malignant substitutes for real bonds of love, care and responsibility – substitutes that are passed on like viruses to society’s children and become a permanent part of social reality.

These traumatic adaptations are not just features of the present or the future: they have already happened in our society’s past. The ‘real bonds’ have always existed in struggle and competition with malignant patterns of relationship, which psychotherapists (and others) have often taken to be inbuilt and inevitable aspects of human existence. There is now a growing movement of thought that argues (as Suttie, Reich and others did several decades ago) that cruelty and malice are perhaps not truly part of our instinctual structure, not *causes* of catastrophe, but rather the *effects* of collective adaptation to trauma that was initially natural rather than human in origin. Is this naïve optimism? Or is the opposing ‘tough realism’ itself in fact a traumatized compensation? The debate is only just beginning.

*Psychotherapy and Politics International* is lucky enough to have received several important contributions to this debate. The current issue opens with two powerful and thought-provoking papers, each describing practical therapeutic work with communal

trauma in a different area of Europe: one, by Mitch Elliot and others in Northern Ireland, and the other, by Arlene Audergon in Croatia. Although written very differently and using different terminology and models, these two papers turn out to complement and support each other. Over the next three issues, PPI will also be serializing a major new theoretical work on societal trauma: Sandra Bloom's 'There's an elephant in the room: the impact of trauma on individuals, institutions, and societies.'

Stepping back a little further, there is perhaps an even wider theme that links not only these two papers, but also the other three main contributions to this issue. This is the theme of polarization: the creation of the Other and of Otherness, and the complex psychological and political functions of Otherness. Muriel Dimen takes this directly as her subject, in a deep-reaching discussion of dualism and its alternatives. Mary-Jayne Rust questions the polarization between 'human' and 'natural', and how this articulates with a range of Othernesses in our cultural perspective; and Hal and Sidra Stone, in a

calm, honest and deeply felt open letter to President Bush, challenge the political polarization to which he is committed and ask him to reflect on its psychological sources.

To develop what Mary-Jayne Rust calls a 'sustainable psychotherapy', we surely need to move our thought beyond polarized dualities. But this is harder than it sounds – the first half of this editorial, for example, is posed in terms of a duality between 'real bonds' and 'malignant patterns of relationship', which is perhaps ultimately unhelpful. As Dimen, in particular, suggests, we may need to discipline ourselves to a more spare, provisional and pluralist use of value judgements; to a tolerance for contradiction that creates 'possibilities for multiple answers to old questions, varied solutions for varied problems on psychic and social fronts alike.' Might it be, in fact, that addiction to certainty and totalization is itself a response to trauma, to a sense that we are unendurably vulnerable to contingency? If so, then many aspects of both psychotherapy and politics (not to mention theoretical production) will need to be reconsidered.