

# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGS OF OUR CURRENT POLITICAL CULTURE: VIEWS FROM LATIN AMERICA

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper, written by a Latin American historian and psychoanalyst, accounts for the factors responsible for current United States foreign policy, which is contributing to the intensification rather than the amelioration of dangerous political and military tensions throughout the world. It offers an interdisciplinary analysis of the growing contradictions in United States class society that represent the context for the particular ways that the traumatic events of 9/11 were experienced by citizens and used by the Bush administration in its manipulation of the public's fears and anxieties for its own ideological ends. It shows how primitive mental states among both leaders and citizens have profoundly thwarted the ability of the country to sustain democracy and national security at home or to fashion a strategy to diminish antagonisms toward the world's only superpower. The author analyses the history of exploitative United States attitudes and policies toward Latin America as the backdrop for assessing the prevailing critical views throughout the subcontinent of the United States 'war on terror', which is seen in part as the continuation of the drive to expand geopolitical and military control throughout the Global South.*

**Key words:** trauma, death anxiety, impunity, subjectivity, Manifest Destiny

My understanding of the psychological meanings of our current political culture as perceived from Latin America emerges from a tapestry of experiences I have had as a psychoanalyst and a historian of Latin America who has spent over 3 decades studying and writing about the traumatogenic political and economic conditions that pertain throughout the region and their

psychological impact on men, women and children. I was most recently in Latin America in November 2003, having returned to Buenos Aires to interview psychoanalysts and other participants in the spontaneous popular movements that arose in December 2001, when Argentina experienced a complete economic meltdown. I went to Rio de Janeiro, as well, where for

the second time I participated in an international psychoanalytic congress called The Estates General of Psycho-analysis, the first meeting of which had been held at the Sorbonne in Paris in 2000. I will return to these experiences later, as they reveal important aspects of the psychological meanings of our current political culture as seen from Latin America.

I begin my analysis with a summary statement of my understanding of the relationship between psychic and social reality, a theoretical perspective that underlies what I have to say. For many scholars of social theory and psychoanalysis it is futile to speak of psychic and external reality as if they were two separate registers. From the beginning of life, they argue, subjectivity is fashioned out of the intimate interplay between the imaginary dimensions of the unconscious, characterized by representations, drives and affects, and the sociosymbolic order, composed of asymmetrical relations of power and force. Freud emphasized that our earliest experiences are rooted in dependence on parental authority and that the formation of the super-ego constitutes such a powerful identification with authority because it is saturated with the vicissitudes of sexuality and aggression. In other words, subjectivity is constituted from the beginning of psychic life in an identification with and a resistance to authority so deep seated that it is destined to be repeated throughout life, not only within the family, but in one's relationship to the larger social group – the sociosymbolic order (Elliot, 1999). This perspective provides the context for my exploration of individual and group experience with respect to the psychological meanings of the current political culture in this country.

When I say 'current political culture' I am referring to the period since September 11 2001, which I think we can all agree

represents a watershed in many ways, not the least of which was the rupture of the sense of exceptionalism experienced by people in this country. Americans had presumed that the politically motivated violence ubiquitous in the world happens to *other* people, to *other* citizens in *other* countries, not to us, not to Americans. In fact, this conviction was shared by those people in other countries who have been victims of political terror; what they lost was a sense of hope related to the belief that at least one place on earth was free of the terrorist violence from which they suffer. Such was the case for many Latin Americans, who have been the victims of a long history of politically motivated terror. Indeed, the very date of September 11 was retraumatizing to many Latin Americans and provoked a profound identification with the innocent victims killed in the Twin Towers and with the American people in general. I say retraumatizing because for the past three decades throughout Latin America, September 11 had already come to symbolize terrorism, only in this case, a different kind of terror, one that was planned, implemented and perpetrated by the state rather than a fundamentalist political organization. Like many of our southern neighbors, as I watched horrified as the planes crashed into the Twin Towers, my immediate associations were with that other September 11, when Chilean democracy was overturned by a bloody military coup in 1973. Ever since then, September 11 has become a symbol of the era of state terror from the 1970s through the 1990s, when many countries in Latin America were taken over and ruled by ruthless military dictatorships that kidnapped, tortured and murdered hundreds of thousands of men, women and children.

So we could say that out of their own historical experience, Latin Americans were predisposed to identify with the people of the United States in the aftermath of *our* own September 11 tragedy. But something happened to erode that compassion and to remobilize historical antipathies toward this country that have existed for well over a century among our hemispheric neighbours to the south.

To understand how this shift in perspective occurred, we need to interpret the nature of the political culture and the group psychology that has characterized this country in the past several years. In the initial period after 9/11, American citizens were caught off guard, shocked and confused. Why us? Why here? How did we become the innocent victims of such a monstrous attack? How could anyone want to do something so bad to us? As an ostensibly puzzled President Bush put it, 'But why do they hate us? We are so good.' Of course, this was a cynical question; Bush really wasn't interested in an answer. And as it turned out, at least until recently, neither were the majority of United States citizens, most of whom were whipped into a patriotic retaliatory frenzy that admitted no self-reflection, no critical inquiry. However, many Latin Americans would have been happy to offer Bush an explanation. For even while the terrorist attacks constituted a crime against humanity, the imagery of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – symbols of free market globalization and United States military might – represented a macabre yet dazzling statement – or enactment, in psychoanalytic terms – of the causes of international antipathy to the United States, if only its leaders and citizens were willing to interpret the message. Unfortunately, that was not to be the case.

Why not? From my perspective, the Bush

administration developed a course of action that, while being depicted as a justifiable *defense* against aggression, represented an escalation of a tradition of United States global expansion and aggressive diplomatic, military and corporate policies toward countries throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America (Johnson, 2004). I think it was a foregone conclusion that this administration's response to the horrendous terrorist attacks would escalate unilateral United States military and economic policies abroad. Government priorities foreclosed the possibility that in the traumatic aftermath of the unprecedented attack on this country the public would be presented with a leader(ship) capable of modelling restraint and the capacity to tolerate the anxiety, fear and rage stimulated by a crisis situation. Our leaders were not prepared to provide a reflective and analytic stance, although ideally September 11 could have provided the stimulus for the creation of what Winnicott would call a new potential space or Bion would see as container for the purposes of considering important questions. Critical reflection about the 9/11 crisis might have expanded US options to include diminishing the cycles of violence in the world. Such a reality-based complex stance would represent the political equivalent of moving, in psychoanalytic terms, from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, from primitive splitting and projection to the development of integrative and reparative capacities.

This process could not occur because the neoconservative agenda that was already in place before 9/11 took advantage of a traumatized citizenry to implement a broad range of social, political and economic objectives it had been working on for years. Through policies based on secrecy and deception, the Bush administration has

expanded the executive branch of government at the expense of our constitutional system of checks and balances. It has promoted economic policies that redistribute wealth upward from the majority of American citizens to a small ruling elite, all the while securing consensual support for its policies through a broad-based strategy of perpetuating fear and insecurity that predisposes most people to relinquish critical thinking about the general impact of their government's priorities. Moreover, Bush's bellicose actions in Afghanistan and Iraq fulfilled traumatized citizens' fantasies of being rescued by a strong leader through whom they could realize wishes for revenge. Identification with the aggressor (leadership) served to minimize an otherwise overwhelming sense of vulnerability. The government's simplistic discourse, which bifurcated the world into good and bad, civilization versus barbarism, the Christian world versus Evil, provided citizens with the means by which they could identify with an all-powerful goodness while projecting all that was bad onto a demonized other. Rationality thereby being diminished, many people were swept away by the Bush administration's daily overdose of the patriotic ideological mass media blitz that diminished their capacity to recognize the ways in which their safety and welfare were being assaulted from powerful domestic as well as foreign sources. In the post-9/11 climate, the United States government's aggressive posture escalated to include the unilateral right to declare pre-emptive war and to threaten nations that have attempted to acquire nuclear capacity; all the while it was initiating plans to develop a new generation of 'baby' nuclear bombs and to militarize outer space.

Bush's policies also represent a clear and present danger for life as we have known it

in this country. Let's take one example to illustrate the dramatic challenge to United States democracy, a democracy Bush purports to be exporting by force: the Supreme Court is currently considering three important cases, all of which, if decided in the government's favor, will extend executive power beyond any precedent in United States history. If, for example, the Supreme Court decides that the President can unilaterally declare any American citizen on American soil an 'enemy combatant', that individual can be imprisoned forever without any due process. This policy, which is being practiced right now, if made the law of the land, would eviscerate the fourth, fifth and sixth amendments, would shred the constitution and civil liberties, and would legitimate the trend toward totalitarianism in this country. Why are people not out in the streets? Why are people not paying more attention? I suppose there are many possible answers, including the familiar one that many citizens are willing to give up individual freedoms for security in this ever more dangerous world.

However, I believe a more psychodynamic explanation captures the heart of why a significant percentage of the people continue to stubbornly support Bush's aggressive policies, in spite of the fact that they are intensifying hatred toward and isolation of the United States and thereby increasing the threat of more terrorist attacks. For me, the explanation has to do with the assault on the quality of life for the majority of people in this country, the current phase being but the most recent in a pattern that has characterized the past several decades and is responsible for provoking psychological defenses that converge with the official agenda of the Bush administration. In brief: the prevailing discourses of freedom and democracy have been contradicted by the

lived reality of most citizens. Just below the surface of a culture that prides itself on being the world's example of equal opportunity, social justice and civil liberties, deep inequities constitute the experience of the majority of people. Today, the wealthiest 1% of all households control about 38% of national wealth, while the bottom 80% of households hold only 17%. Middle-income families with children have added 20 hours of paid work per year to make ends meet, even while acquiring more indebtedness. The median male wage in 2000 was below its 1979 level, although productivity and thus profits have increased during that time by 44.5%. Today there is less mobility out of poverty and fewer families are financially prepared for retirement. These trends are due in large part to corporate downsizing, capital flight, deindustrialization, the shift from productive to speculative investment, and the elimination of the protective functions of the state. These policies have negatively affected the middle and working classes, the unemployed and the chronically poor. In the wealthiest country in the world, one in five children lives below the poverty line. Adolescents are poorer and more often being raised in chaotic families by neglectful or abusive parents, who are themselves overworked or unemployed. Young people today are more likely than previous generations to suffer alcohol or drug addiction. For the first time in the nation's history the next generation will have less opportunity and a lower standard of living and will be exposed to more social violence than their parents' generation.

The assault on a sense of security, stability and hope contained in these trends, with their demoralizing psychological effects, are often manifested in the increasing acts of aggression and violence among the population and reflected and reinforced by a

violence-saturated mass media culture. In the most recent period, exposes of government lies, corporate greed, corruption and exports of United States jobs, elected representatives' incompetence, and official neglect of genuine homeland security simply crystallize these long-term trends. I believe they help to explain another dimension in addition to acute trauma of the public's experience and reactions to 9/11.

My view of this phenomenon is related to Robert J Lifton's concept of death anxiety. From early on in life, argues Lifton, we struggle for vitality and, ultimately for symbolic immortality. Early experiences with separation, loss, and fears of disintegration represent death equivalents. In this sense they are precursors of imagery, symbolization, and meaning connected to 'a life-death model or paradigm'. Lifton's concept of psychic numbing, which he developed from his clinical work with Hiroshima and Auschwitz survivors, refers to people's reaction to extreme trauma in which they distance themselves from a traumatic experience that is incomprehensible and that they have little capacity to deal with symbolically. The challenge is gradually to put together the shattered psyche, balancing the need to reconstitute one's former self with the need to metabolize the traumatogenic experience. If this working through is not accomplished there is a perverse quest for meaning that includes the exploitation of other people psychologically. As Lifton puts it, in response to traumatic situations that are not integrated, 'we reassert our own vitality and symbolic immortality by denying [others] their right to live and by identifying them with the death taint, by designating them as victims.' In other words, destructiveness entails the projection of death anxiety onto others, who become its

container. Lifton adds that human beings cannot kill large numbers of people except by claiming a virtuous motive, 'so that killing on a large scale is always an attempt at affirming the life power of one's own group' (Caruth, 1995).

In this sense, then, 9/11 has symbolically constituted a relief, a diminishing of persecutory anxiety of living in a culture undergoing a deterioration from *within*, a kind of implosion whose symptoms include the erosion of family and community, the corruption of government in league with the wealthy and powerful, the abandonment of working people by profit-driven corporations going international, urban blight, a drug-addicted youth, a violence-addicted media reflecting and motivating an escalating real-world violence, the corrosion of civic participation by a decadent democracy, a spiritually bereft culture held prisoner to the almighty consumer ethic, racial discrimination, misogyny, gay-bashing, growing numbers of families joining the homeless, and environmental devastation. Is this not experienced as a kind of societal suicide – an ongoing assault, an aggressive attack – against life and emotional wellbeing waged from within against the societal self? If so, 9/11 has permitted a respite from the sense of internal decay by inadvertently stimulating a renewed vitality via a reconfiguration of political and psychological forces: tensions within this country have yielded to a wave of nationalism in which a united people – *Americans* all – have stood as one against external aggression. At the same time, the generosity, solidarity and self-sacrifice expressed by Americans toward one another immediately following 9/11 and the sacrifice of young Americans in Iraq in the more current period serve to reaffirm our sense of ourselves as capable of achieving the 'positive'

depressive position sentiments of love, empathy and self-sacrifice for the group. Fractured social relations are promised symbolic repair. The threat to our integrity as a nation and, in Winnicott's terms, to our sense of going on being, can be displaced from the web of complex internal forces so difficult to understand and change and projected onto a simple and identifiable enemy from outside of us, clearly marked by their difference, their foreignness and their uncanny and unfathomable 'uncivilized' pre-modern character. Aggressive impulses can be projected onto an easily dehumanized external enemy, where they can be justifiably attacked and destroyed.

This country's response to 9/11, then, in part demonstrates how persecutory anxiety is more easily dealt with in individuals and in groups when it is experienced as being provoked from the outside rather than from internal sources. As Hanna Segal has argued, groups often tend to be narcissistic, self-idealizing, and paranoid in relation to other groups and to shield themselves from knowledge about the reality of their own aggression, which of necessity is projected into an enemy – real or imagined – so that it can be demeaned, held in contempt and then attacked (Segal, 2002). The anti-terrorism discourse presents the fundamental conflict in the world as one between civilization and fundamentalist terrorism. But this 'civilization' is a wolf in sheep's clothing, and those who speak for it reveal the kind of splitting Segal describes: a hyperbolic idealization of themselves and their culture and a projection of all that is bad, including the consequences of at least in part the terrorist underbelly of decades-long United States' foreign policy in the Middle East and Asia, onto the denigrated other, who must be annihilated. The United States government, tainted for years by its

ties to powerful transnational corporate interests, has recreated itself as the nationalistic defender of the American people. In the process, patriotism has kidnapped citizens' grief and mourning and militarism has hijacked people's fears and anxieties, converting them into a passive consensus for an increasingly authoritarian government's domestic and foreign policies.

Of course, it would be a mistake to conclude that nothing should have been done to seek legitimate justice against those responsible for the 9/11 atrocities. For they, as well as those whom they define as the enemy, contribute to the dangerous political and cultural polarizations of the world today. And it would be folly to let our understanding of the conditions that have helped to produce Islamist fundamentalism blind us to the threat it poses. However, the United States government's decision to widen the arc of violence to combat terrorism is producing another generation of terrorists whose sense of outrage leaves them, from their perspective, no apparent alternative to fundamentalist fanaticism. I believe that this policy endangers our survival. Understanding the conditions that breed hatred, envy and vengeance has the potential for expanding the options of what needs to be done, not only militarily, but most important, politically and economically, to repair the conditions that continue to foster such malignant states of mind.

In order to see how this United States response to 9/11 has been perceived in Latin America, we need now to briefly look at the history of the United States government and corporate capital in the establishment and maintenance of terrorist governments throughout the subcontinent, of which the Chilean military regime that carried out the coup on September 11 1973 was a prominent example. Latin American

military dictatorships violently assumed guardianship over unjust social and economic institutions whose legitimacy had been challenged in the late 1960s and early 1970s by a variety of progressive political movements that sought to reform them. In each case, it was clear to Latin American citizens that the United States public and private sectors played a role in the overthrow of their democratically elected governments and in the maintenance of repressive regimes. In the case of Chile, for example, after Salvador Allende, the Socialist candidate, was elected President by the Chilean people in 1970, the United States set about sabotaging his nationalist and redistributive programmes by eliminating economic but not military aid, refusing Chile IMF and World Bank loans, pressuring allies not to trade with Chile and pouring CIA funding into a right-wing oppositional movement that eventually implemented the military coup on September 11 1973, which ushered in 18 years of state terror in that country. The United States remained a faithful ally of General Augusto Pinochet's regime until Chilean and international pressures made it clear that the return to democracy was unavoidable.

Another example is the case of Argentina, where the domestic ruling elites, the Church, United States corporate interests, and the military feared the wide-ranging opposition among Argentine citizens to a fundamentally inequitable class system. On March 24 1976, the military carried out a brutal coup and launched that country's seven-year long Dirty War, during which it murdered and disappeared over 30,000 Argentine citizens. The United States was a staunch ally of the Argentine dictatorship, a fact that Argentine citizens were reminded of on a daily basis because of the Ford company's generous gift of

hundreds of unmarked Ford Falcons that were used by the military and paramilitary forces to pick up people arbitrarily on the streets, in restaurants, stores, their own homes and on university campuses, only to secretly take them away to clandestine concentration camps, where they were never heard from again. Indeed, the Ford Falcon became the sinister symbol of the state's policy of disappearing people.

Similar histories of United States interventionism abound. In Los Angeles alone, tens of thousands of immigrants who live and work among us from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, for example, are refugees from horrendous military and paramilitary repression during the 1980s and 1990s that was supported and funded by the United States. This country's foreign policy goals included the prevention of any alternative model to free market capitalism from arising in the hemisphere to challenge the hegemonic political, economic and military role of the United States. Thus efforts such as those by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua to create welfare state capitalist governments modelled after the Scandinavian countries were labelled 'communist' and targeted for elimination.

Today, the Bush administration's covert actions in various countries in Latin America, including Haiti, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina, have the aim of maintaining United States access to key natural resources and political influence in the region. Although they are overshadowed for people in this country by the administration's policies in the Middle East, they do not go unnoticed by Latin Americans. Indeed, the present interventionist strategies of the United States in Latin America have reinforced profound anxieties among many Latin Americans about this country's policies throughout

the world. The United States has consistently opted for strategies that have attacked the sovereignty of nations and caused increasing misery for the majority. It has consistently repressed movements for social change, a pattern that predates the era of state terrorism. The United States Doctrine of National Security was developed at the beginning of the Cold War in the late 1940s and provided the ideological basis of United States policy, which included military aid and training to Latin American militaries. It called for the use of violent repression throughout Latin America in the struggle against 'subversion', which it defined in an all-inclusive manner: '[those] actions, violent or not, with ultimate purposes of a political nature, in all fields of human activity within the internal sphere of a state and whose aims are perceived as not convenient for the overall political system.'

But the assumptions underlying the national security doctrine can be found in the history of United States policy toward Latin America dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, when a rapidly industrializing United States sought expanding markets and raw materials in the region justified by an ideology known as Manifest Destiny. The Euro-Americans, who composed the corporate and governmental elites, viewed Latin Americans in racist stereotypes, reflecting the same process of dehumanization that had legitimized their exploitative attitudes and treatment of non-European racial groups in this country. Characterized by a kind of narcissistic grandiosity born of their successful position at the helm of one of the world's most powerful and aggressive capitalist economies, they energetically devised a foreign policy to extend their political and economic influence throughout Latin



America. Manifest Destiny depicted Latin Americans as dark-skinned, mixed-blood peoples, naturally unruly childlike creatures who needed the United States to intervene in their internal affairs to 'help' them put their houses in order: 'God has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead to the regeneration of the world . . . We are trustees of the world's progress, guardians of its righteous peace' (Burns and Charlip, 2002).

Although over time the linguistic representations of Latin America gradually grew more subtle and sophisticated, nonetheless, the ideological justifications for United States action have continually revealed primitive splitting into good and bad, with the projection of all that is bad onto Latin Americans. As Michael Rustin points out, the vilification by dominant groups of the objects of exploitation allows them to perceive themselves as wholly good. 'The most active process . . . is the projection of negative, repressed, or inaccessible aspects of the individual and social self. Cultures of domination, founded on greed, cruelty, and exploitation of weakness, will have many such hateful states of mind to get rid of somewhere' (Ruskin, 1991).

So, for example, the United States government and corporate leaders have consistently depicted this country as a force for 'political stability', while the Latin Americans have been portrayed as inherently unable to achieve stable electoral governments without the intervention of their northern neighbour. This country has always represented itself as the defender of democracy, even while repeatedly overthrowing elected reformist governments that it has seen as antithetical to its interests.

The recent period has been characterized by United States pressure for Latin American nations to accept what George

Bush Sr. called the New World Order and what many Latin Americans call the culture of impunity. In this regard, several years following the return to democracy in Argentina, Hebe de Bonafini, president of the human rights organization, Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, criticized the imposition of the conservative free market economic model referred to in general as globalization (known in Latin America as neoliberalism): 'The tortures, the murder, the genocide, were for one thing only: to apply an economic plan that would bring misery to the majority of the people . . . Economic repression is the strongest form of repression . . .' (Hollander, 1997). Bonafini was referring to the fact that from the 1980s on, under civilian governments that replaced military regimes, cultures of impunity emerged within the corporate globalization agenda: *impunity* in the sense that, by and large, the former military officers and torturers, never having acknowledged their crimes, have been able to live freely among their victim/survivors, frequently retaining their privileged political and economic positions; *impunity*, as well, with respect to the intensification of the misery, exploitation, and poverty of the majority of Latin Americans. While the corporate media and United States government proclaim that globalization brings progress and economic advantages to all, in reality increasing disparities both among countries and between social classes within countries are the rule. Transnational corporations have grown in size and concentrated their capital to such an extent that they frequently represent more concentrated wealth than sovereign nations. For example, the gross domestic products of the following United States-based transnational corporations and Latin American countries are approximately equal: Argentina and Wal-Mart stores

(\$296 billion); Chile and Oracle (\$121 billion); Colombia and IBM (\$201 billion); Jamaica and Phone.com (\$8 billion); and Cuba and Juniper Networks (\$16 billion) (Morgenson, 1999).

In this context, I would like to return to the subject of my recent trip to Argentina and Brazil. There I had an opportunity to share my understanding of the psychological meanings of what has transpired in the United States since September 11 and to learn about their views of the current political culture in this country. I shall briefly recount several telling experiences by way of illustration. In Buenos Aires, I was invited by psychoanalytic colleagues to speak about what is happening in this country to a mixed group of professionals, intellectuals and workers in the cultural centre of a factory called Grissinopoli. This factory, which produces breads and various kinds of crackers, is one of about 200 'liberated factories' in and around Buenos Aires that were taken over by the workers when, following the economic meltdown in December 2001, the bosses fled the country, absconding with their capital and leaving indebted businesses and workers who had not been paid for months. The Grissinopoli workers, like thousands of their counterparts, occupied the factory and began to run it themselves. Most were women and they constituted themselves into a cooperative called The New Hope. A group of psychoanalysts interested in working with people engaged in social struggles have facilitated a progressive change both psychologically and socially for this group of workers, who have undergone a shift from a passive and submissive relationship to authority to one of assertion of their right to take control over their own lives on behalf of themselves and their families. The analysts

played a pivotal role in the construction of a mutually supportive and creative relationship between the factory workers and the surrounding community and helped to establish a cultural centre within the factory that has functioned to bring together Buenos Aires' intellectuals, professionals and artists, as well as Grissinopoli factory workers (Hollander, 2004).

It was in this environment that I presented my paper on the psychology of the current political culture in the United States. In the very rich discussion that followed, what stands out most was the repeated expression of surprise and appreciation that someone from the United States was thinking in a critical fashion similar to their own about the psychosocial aspects of the response of the United States to 9/11. While they all recognized that the United States has every right to find and prosecute those responsible for the terrorist attacks, they believe that the United States must also take seriously the reasons for the growing resentment of its global reach. Many pointed out that with more than 700 United States military bases around the world and aggressive policies aimed at controlling most of the earth's energy resources regardless of whose country they happen to be located in, the United States has contributed to the growing tensions throughout the world that threaten international stability. And even though they had experienced their own version of our 9/11 several years ago when a terrorist attack on the Jewish Cultural Centre in Buenos Aires killed and wounded hundreds of innocent victims, they expressed anger and fear about the United States' declaration of the unilateral right to practise preemptive war, its withdrawal from international treaties ranging from children's rights to arms

agreements to environmental protection and global warming and its active pursuit of extending NAFTA, which has demonstrably hurt United States and Mexican workers, to all of Latin America.

They were surprised to hear that I held similar views. In spite of the sophistication and international contacts of the literati in the audience, as of November 2003, few were aware of the dissident voices in this country, attributable perhaps to the success of the corporate media until recently in keeping invisible the growing divergence from consensus politics in the United States.

My experience in Rio was similar, quite dramatically so. There, at the Estates General of Psychoanalysis congress, over 400 participants from Latin America and Europe (there were two from the United States: my colleague and husband Stephen Portuges and I), gathered for four days to address the problems of the malaise of our time and how psychoanalysis can continue to be relevant to the various contemporary discontents from which human beings suffer. Unlike the majority of psychoanalytic meetings, the Estates General is concerned with social and political issues and how a psychoanalytic appreciation of the convergence between social and psychic reality can shed light on the psychological effects of living in an increasingly decentering and terrifying world. Indicative of this interest were two of the scheduled keynote speakers: the Italian philosopher, Antonio Negri, whose work on empire has made him an international authority and critical voice among intellectuals and political activists associated with the global justice movement, and Pakistani-born, London-based journalist, broadcaster, playwright and novelist Tariq Ali, whose latest books are *The Two Fundamentalisms* and

*Bush in Babylon*. The focus of their presentations and the discussions that followed was on the emergence of empire in the contemporary world and the dangerous contradictions that are being played out, especially in south-west Asia and the Middle East with Bush's preemptive and unilateral invasion and occupation of Iraq and his uncritical alliance with Israel. The rest of the dialogue during the congress was organized around themes related to the vicissitudes of subjectivity in the postmodern world; psychoanalysis, politics and the state; psychoanalytic experience and contemporary culture; and the mass media's production of new subjectivities and the social imaginary. Brazilian journalists were covering the plenaries and interviewing participants daily. One journalist interviewed Dr Portuges and me, prefacing her interest in our views as psychoanalysts by gently inquiring how it felt to be the only two North Americans in such an anti-United States political and intellectual climate. Our responses, which indicated our agreement with the consensus of the participants, were apparently so astounding that they made the front page of a major Rio newspaper the following day! Then came my presentation in the plenary on the mass media's production of new subjectivities and the social imaginary, in which I began by noting the appropriateness of my inclusion in this plenary because I am from California, where people clearly have a difficult time distinguishing between fantasy and reality given their recent election of the Terminator as the governor of the state. I then went on to analyse the most recent trends in the political culture in this country and to comment on the emerging role of dissident voices in the United States. I described how during the past year, in spite of the responses of citizens to our aggression-

saturated social reality, more and more people had developed a capacity for rebellious separation/ differentiation from public authority, and suggested that a transitional space within the public sphere had been widening to permit what Peter Fonegy calls 'mentalization' – a capacity to reflect along with others that in this context is promoting insight about our emotional reactions to troublesome developments in the social order of which we are a part. I argued that these developments represented a positive step in the dismantling of the psychodynamics that sustain a bystander population whose government is implementing policies in our name that have to be challenged. I ended by affirming that the global justice and peace movements had many important spokespersons and activists in this country, even if the corporate media was guilty of making that reality 'disappear'. To my surprise and embarrassment, I received a standing ovation. The reason I am describing this experience is because I believe it highlights the fact that people in other countries are very afraid that there is no diversity of opinion in the United States, that there is no countervailing influence that can impact on the direction of United States policy in the world. Later, as individual analysts came up to thank me for my presentation, they explained that their enthusiastic reception had represented a spontaneous expression of relief and excited appreciation that there are people in the United States who constitute an oppositional perspective to the prevailing political culture, which they find very threatening. One Brazilian analyst shook my hand, and with tears in his eyes, expressed gratitude for letting him know that there are *compañeros*, even in the 'belly of the beast' itself.

In conclusion, I would like to say that as citizens of the most powerful country in the

world, and especially perhaps as psychoanalysts, it is our social responsibility in the United States to commit ourselves to understanding the relationship between psychic and social reality, or to put it in the way I suggested at the beginning of this paper, to understand the complex nature of subjectivity as it is formed in relation to a sociosymbolic order composed of asymmetrical relations of power and force. As columnist Robert Sheer put it in a talk at the annual *Los Angeles Times* book festival, in which he expressed concern for the future of our democracy, 'the saving grace of this country is that brave individuals come forth to speak truth to power.' In that spirit, I believe we must each commit ourselves to the important task of independently making sense for ourselves – mindful of the ideological function of government and media discourse – of the psychological meanings of our current political culture so that we can function more effectively, not only in our professional lives, but as engaged citizens in our increasingly threatened democracy as well.

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