

protection of his baseness or the promotion of criminal immoralism.’ (Laskey, Jaggard & Brown v. The United Kingdom, European Court of Human Rights, 109/1995/615/ 703–705).

If we look at what is going on here, we can discern two primitive forms of argument. The first could be characterized as ‘I don’t understand this behaviour *therefore* it is intrinsically incomprehensible *therefore* no-one could rationally want to do this *therefore* anyone who does this is sick or evil *therefore* people who do this must be punished severely.’ Take out the intermediate steps, and one is left with ‘I don’t understand this behaviour, therefore anyone who does it must be punished severely.’ The second runs something like ‘the idea of this behaviour makes me uneasy *therefore* it will make everyone uneasy *therefore* it ought not to exist *therefore* it must be banned.’ Despite both arguments being plainly ludicrous, they are in fact both at work, both in the law, in society, and in De Masi and mainstream psychotherapy. It hardly needs saying that it’s ironic, in that stopping someone else doing what they want for no other reason than your not understanding it is a fairly cruel thing to do.

The psychotherapy and the politics run parallel to each other, and both are fuelled by unexamined personal disgust.

All of the negative judgements on S&M outlined above are singularly short of facts; facts that can only be discovered by talking seriously to S&M practitioners. S&M is a highly mutual activity, in which top and bottom pay keen attention to each other throughout to ensure each other’s satisfaction. It’s a safe activity, where all is contracted in advance and with the use of the ‘safe word’ providing a guarantee that nothing can go further than the bottom

wants; in the event of reaching the ‘bottomless pit’ or ‘forever place’ where the bottom is in such ecstasy that they may lose part of their ability to judge how things are going, the top rapidly assumes responsibility for bringing things to a safe conclusion. It isn’t cruel: injuries are very carefully gauged, so that they’re not lasting: the point is precisely *not* to inflict harm, but rather to explore the sensation of hurt. It is consensual and it is done by people who are totally sane. Even if one finds that difficult to empathize with, there simply is no justification for moving from incomprehension to vilification. It really is a place where the personal is the political.

As final points, it may be worth saying that a good starting point for a psychodynamic understanding of S&M could be the nature of pleasure, and how the boundary between it and pain is essentially blurred; it might also be useful to explore the possibility that libido and mortido, far from being distinct entities, are simply identical – as great swathes of literature indicate.

Alec McGuire

34 Gledhow Wood Road

Leeds

LS8 4BZ

WRESTLING WITH FOG

Cultures Under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma. Edited by Antonius C G M Robben and Marcelo M Suarez-Orozco. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 285pp. £16.95/\$23.00 pb., £45/\$60.00 hb.

This collection has two main intentions: to explore the individual and collective traumatic effects of social violence, and to use

this exploration to demonstrate creative interaction between several areas of intellectual work, in particular anthropology and psychoanalysis. The papers included are half of those delivered at a conference of the same title in 1996, so the material is not new; but its themes and issues are entirely relevant to our contemporary environment.

Rather than describing each chapter in turn, it seems more useful to focus on some of the book's overarching themes, ideas which have become the common property of several of the authors, who are clearly very familiar with each other's work. This group includes the editors – a Dutch anthropologist and a Hispanic American psychologist; the Israeli analyst Yoland Gampel, who has worked extensively with Holocaust survivors and their adult children; and Vamik Volkan, a psychiatrist well known for a range of psychopolitical work.

These authors, along with others represented here, are centrally concerned to describe and define the range of ways, some relatively creative and others quite disastrous, in which societies, cultures, families, and individuals deal with overwhelming trauma. Probably the most extreme cause of trauma is 'ethnic cleansing' or the equivalent; but chapters here also focus on the traumatic effects of such, as their authors argue, indirectly 'violent' experiences as migration, suppression of cultural formations, or change in the social status of an ethnic group.

Perhaps the most problematic response to trauma, from both a clinical and a political viewpoint, is the 'sealing-off' of unprocessable, unverbalizable experiences of horror – material that appears only in such forms as nightmares, obsessive images, phobias and other symptoms, and that can then be inherited by the children of survivors, and

their children's children. Survivors may finally identify with and act out the original dehumanizing experiences. Gampel calls this 'radioactive' trauma, which well conveys its long-lasting toxic, mutating quality (rather better than the alternative, trivial-sounding formulation of 'indigestible' trauma). It is a shame that these authors are apparently unfamiliar with the important parallel concept of the 'crypt' developed by Maria Torok and her collaborators.

This 'radioactive identification' can presumably happen to cultures as well as individuals. A lot of Gampel's work is with Holocaust survivors; she does not suggest, but we may very well think, that something of this kind may be playing out in the way the State of Israel is currently treating Palestinians. (For me, one of the most interesting features of this book is how many such thoughts it suggests about the sources of cultural violence – for example, David de Levita's chapter quotes a description of child-rearing practices in the former Yugoslavia as 'a crowded life of neglect, battering, terror, and the absence of almost all signs of affection . . . widespread and routine sexual abuse' (p. 136). This applies to the whole region *except for Slovenia* – the one state to have avoided ethnic cleansing and its correlates.)

An alternative response to trauma, which may be less damaging for the individual but is even more harmful for society as a whole, is its incorporation into cycles of revenge; the former Yugoslavia is a terrifying example, where extreme violence not only fails to damp down over time, but even escalates, as not only every violent act but also every rumoured phantasy of violence is returned with interest. The De Levita paper already referred to explores in some detail the structuring of individual and

group consciousness that supports this revenge pattern.

It is also possible for traumatic violence to be incorporated into what one might call the 'social ego', the identity of a nation or ethnic group; and this is the phenomenon explored in what is perhaps the most ambitious paper in the book: Volkan and Itzkowitz's 'Modern Greek and Turkish identities and the psychodynamics of Greek-Turkish relationships'. Volkan in particular is well known for a series of attempts at psycho-historical and psychopolitical synthesis. This paper argues that these two nations have constituted their identities out of the series of violent conflicts between them – although in distinctly different ways. Hence 'the continuation of Turkish-Greek conflict is psychologically necessary because such conflict serves to mend each large group's identity demands and difficulties' (p. 244). And, of course, such a situation enforces the keeping open of the wounds of trauma, which cannot be allowed to heal.

This paper in particular is perhaps an indication of how psychotherapy and politics could potentially come together in a practically useful form; which is, I think, the general hope of the book's editors and contributors. *Cultures Under Siege* suffers from the usual problem of conference paper collections – an exaggerated variety and range of material, as contributors try to shoehorn whatever they are working on into the required context. It might have been ultimately more useful (though of course much more difficult) to start from scratch and commission work that would fit together better. Having said that, though, pretty much everything here is of interest and the group of core authors whom I have identified are cooperating closely on an important shared project of understanding how the trauma of social violence not only damages cultures and individuals, but is also incorporated into their self-image.

Nick Totton
ntotton@tiscali.co.uk