

Special section: ideology and the clinic

# THINKING CRITICALLY IN THE MIDST OF THE MAELSTROM: CAN PSYCHOANALYSIS HELP US STAY SANE IN AN INSANE WORLD?

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**ABSTRACT** *This special section of Psychotherapy and Politics International contains an online discussion from October 2006 titled ‘Thinking critically in the midst of the maelstrom: can psychoanalysis help us stay sane in an insane world?’ This discussion, which took place on PsyBC (<http://www.psybc.com/>) revolved around two target articles by Neil Altman and Nancy Hollander on psychoanalytic understandings of the contemporary crisis in the US. This introduction discusses a few of the issues that emerged during the wide-ranging discussions. Among these issues are: whether war is inevitable; the interaction of psychodynamics and social processes in maintaining the dominant ideology and social structures; the psychodynamics of bystanders in maintaining social problems; and the complicity of many, even most, citizens in the advanced countries in various ongoing forms of oppression. A theme running through the discussion concerns the role of the citizen in a democracy and the need to increase the individual and social ability to remain aware of unpleasant social realities. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In its early years, psychoanalysis was a radical profession, both in the sense that it fundamentally challenged the usual ways of viewing human experience and in the sense that most early psychoanalysts were political radicals concerned about the relationship

between individuals and society and involved in changing both individuals and society. The best known of these political radicals is Wilhelm Reich, the Austrian analyst who diagnosed the psychological basis of fascism (Reich, 1970), explored the nature of class consciousness (Reich, 1971) and united political activism and his psychoanalytic

ideas about sexuality in the 1930s German Sex-Pol movement (Reich, 1972; Sharaf, 1994). But less well known is that many other early psychoanalysts were also aligned with the political left. Thus, that paragon of psychoanalytic orthodoxy, Otto Fenichel, author of the encyclopedic *Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (Fenichel and Rangell, 1996), was a member of a group of left-wing analysts (Jacoby, 1983), a fact that discerning readers of his magnum opus could detect but that most missed. But Reich and Fenichel were hardly alone. In his study of the early psychoanalytic left, Jacoby lists the a number of early analysts of socialist or Marxist inclination: 'They included Paul Federn, Helene Deutsch, Siegfried Bernfeld, Herman Nunberg, Annie and Wilhelm Reich, Edith Jacobson, Willi Hoffer, Martin Grotjahn, Karl Landauer, Bruno Bettelheim, Ernst Simmel, and Fenichel' (Jacoby, 1983, 12).

As psychoanalysis became a settled force, especially in the US, it lost much of this radical impact. As Jacoby (1983), pointed out, the very memory of these radical ties of early psychoanalysis was repressed. Adaptation became a central concept and failure of adaptation the defining characteristic of psychopathology, as was embodied in ego psychologists placing adaptation at the center of their theory; it was this adaptationist view of psychoanalysis that was taken up by mainstream American social science, as in the theory of sociologist Talcott Parsons (1949), before psychoanalysis fell out of favor. At the same time, within psychoanalysis, the political and social aspects of psychoanalysis were replaced by the preoccupation with the theory and practice of clinical therapy.

In the 1950s through much of the 1980s, among psychoanalysts in the US at least, there was little attention to social issues beyond the immediate family. There were a

few exceptions, of course, including the iconoclastic psychoanalyst and social critic Robert Lindner in the 1950s (Lindner, 1952, 1956) and Joel Kovel in the 1970s and early 1980s (Kovel, 1981, 1984, 1988).

In other countries the divorce of politics and psychoanalysis was never so complete. In Germany psychoanalysis exerted a strong influence on the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s (Reiche, 1970; Schneider, 1975). And Hollander (1989, 1997), one of the authors in the current special section, provides a fascinating account of Latin American attempts to bridge the political and the psychoanalytic domains in the creation of a liberation psychology.

In recent years, an increasing number of psychoanalysts and psychotherapists have returned to exploring the tenuous and difficult relations between the individual and the greater society. Especially prominent in thinking among colleagues in both the UK and the US is a concern for the expression of politics within the clinical encounter (Totton, 2000). Several participants in this special section have been at the forefront of these efforts. In Britain, Samuels has argued eloquently that politics and political attitudes, as vital aspects of the full life and of that citizenship desperately needed today, need to be brought into the therapy session with equal status with the more usual material of therapeutic discourse (Samuels, 2001). In a somewhat parallel move, several US psychoanalysts, including several of our discussants, recently published a collection exploring the expression of issues of class and politics as expressed in psychoanalytically-informed therapy (Layton, Hollander and Gutwill, 2006).

One place where the discussion of the interface of psychoanalysis and clinical practice has flourished is in Section 9 of the Division of Psychoanalysis (Division 39) of

the American Psychological Association. Section 9, also known as Psychoanalysts for Social Responsibility, has brought together a community of psychologists and others concerned with the role of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapists in the social arena.

Section 9 has been in the forefront of struggles to make psychological and psychoanalytic practices consistent with social justice concerns. Thus, the Section has played a key role in attempts to change American Psychoanalytic Association policies allowing psychologists to participate in interrogations of so-called 'enemy combatants'.

Other concerns of Section 9 have been to explore the interface between psychoanalytic theory and practice and political activity, broadly defined. In order to further this exploration, Section 9 initiated an annual online discussion forum, *Ideology and the Clinic* hosted on the *PsyBC* online forum (<http://psybc.com/>), where selected articles can be explored in depth. The format is that two authors are asked to provide articles, which are taken as the focus of discussion. These authors select a group of individuals who they ask to participate. Others are able to sign up and participate through *PsyBC*. The authors are interviewed online, followed by a month-long discussion.

This set of two special sections represents the second of these 'ideology and the clinic' discussions, titled 'Thinking critically in the midst of the maelstrom: can psychoanalysis help us stay sane in an insane world?' and conducted in October 2006. The target articles for discussion were Neil Altman's 'Psychoanalysis and war' and Nancy Hollander's 'Psyche, trauma and the creation of the political subject'. Both of these articles have been published elsewhere (Altman, 2006; Hollander, 2006); as a result we elected to ask these authors to produce a new work of about 1,000 words summarizing their argument

for inclusion here. Both graciously agreed to do so.

Annie Stopford conducted the pre-discussion interview with our authors. Then the discussion began. Invited discussants were Neil Altman, Philip Cushman, Stephen Hartman, Nancy Hollander, Lynne Layton, Jennifer McCarroll, Andrew Samuels, Stephen Soldz and Annie Stopford. Of course, other participants contributed as well.

Here is the announcement that described this program:

This year we feature groundbreaking papers by Neil Altman ('Psychoanalysis and War') and Nancy Hollander ('Psyche, Trauma and the Creation of the Political Subject').

The current global political crisis is making it more and more difficult to think clearly about the emotional storms breaking around us. Join us as Neil Altman and Nancy Hollander explore how the psychic-social split is no longer tenable as we try to cope with the destabilizing impact of dread and insecurity fostered by an increasingly violent, polarized, and nihilistic world. Exploring the assumptions about human nature that organize our attitudes toward ourselves and our adversaries, Dr Altman focuses on dissociative defenses against knowing and feeling in the context of war. Dr Hollander's paper uses aspects of psychoanalytic theory to explain how the convergence of unconscious mechanisms and ideology in the post-9/11 political culture accounts for uncritical consensual support for domestic and foreign policies that attack democracy. The paper also explores the psychic and social factors that permit the emergence of critical social conscience.

The papers and the discussion dealt with profound issues of the intersection of psychodynamics and political dynamics, the relation of psychic terror to war and peace, the nature of citizenship and political participation, personal victimization and social victimization, the role of bystanders in social oppression and the collusion with privilege that taints each of us. Because of the

importance of these issues and the depth of the discussion of them, we decided that these discussions should be made available to a wider public through publication in *Psychotherapy and Politics International*. This issue contains the interviews with our two authors, the summary paper by Altman as well as the discussion of that paper. The following issue will contain the summary paper by Hollander and the ensuing discussion. In editing these discussions we strove to maintain their fresh, informal nature. Thus, contributors were allowed to edit their contributions but these edits were primarily restricted to fixing typographical errors and clarifying unclear passages.

In this introduction I want to call attention to a few of the issues raised during the discussion. The selection of issues, of course, is idiosyncratic and by no means exhausts the discussion.

### **WHY WAR? OR IS WAR INEVITABLE?**

Altman's initial paper raises a question that has dominated much of social thought over the last hundred years: is war and its associated destructiveness, as Freud tended to think, largely inevitable, a result of human nature? Or might there be some alternative way of taming the passions that war unleashes, of preventing them from eventuating in the type of all-out destruction that the Iraq war brings home on a daily basis?

All of our discussants take an optimistic position, that war is not inevitable. War is seen, from a psychodynamic perspective, as a projection onto the outside, the hated other (whether 'terrorists', 'heathen Americans', communists, Israelis or Palestinians) of the disowned destructiveness that resides within each of us and within our societies. Several discussants argue that contemporary psychoanalysis shows us an alternative in which the destructive and constructive forces in each of

us, love and hate, can be simultaneously experienced and accepted, reducing the need to create an other as the epitome of evil. A paradigm for this process is the Kleinian concept of the depressive position overcoming the good-bad split characteristic of the more primitive paranoid-schizoid position.

However, Altman goes beyond psychoanalysis to draw upon Buddhist and other thought. He points to a need for people to perceive meaning and connection to others in a world that is ultimately indifferent to our existence. War, with its 'glorious' setting aside of the ordinary limitations on human action, acts as a defense against realizing and accepting the inevitability of death causing us to succumb to this indifferent world. Altman bases his thinking upon Buddhism here but many existentialists and others have expressed similar ideas. Recently, terror management theory, among other perspectives, has built an elaborate theoretical and empirical structure upon the terror aroused by our incipient awareness of our mortality.

### **IDEOLOGY, PSYCHODYNAMICS, AND SOCIETY**

Hollander, in her article and her contributions to the discussion, goes perhaps the furthest among our discussants in attempting to integrate the personal psychodynamic and the political. Continuing in a long line of Freudo-Marxism, she explores the way in which the societal ideology, representing the ruling interests in our society, become coordinated with individual dynamics to create the subjectivity of a given person. She asks why US citizens, at least until recently, supported their government, despite a long record of 'lies, misrepresentations, corruption, loyalty to class allies' and assaults on long-held rights. For Hollander, in order to understand a US citizen today, one must consider the ideology of American uniqueness challenged by the national trauma of

vulnerability experienced after 9-11. Another factor contributing to a sense of vulnerability is the decline in living standards experienced by many citizens over the last several decades. This factor is exacerbated by a dramatic increase in instability of family income from month to month, as Jacob Hacker has documented (Hacker, 2004).

Similar to Altman's analysis, Hollander emphasizes the splitting and projection that united Americans around a fantasized strong leader as they feared the omnipresent threat of 'terrorists'. The social tensions of the last decades were temporarily magically erased as we 'united' to face this faceless, infinitely evil and hardly human foe.

Hollander stresses that ideology has its limits. As well as the ideological apparatuses that embed themselves in the individual psyche there is, inevitably, resistance to the dominant ideology and to the social forces that ideology serves. Psychoanalytically, one aspect of this resistance is a striving for a fundamental unity of self, a unity lost in early childhood and never again to be attained. Thus this perspective suggests that society will always include struggle between that which is and that which is desired. Raised, but not resolved in the discussion of the paper, is the question of the function of utopias, as a vision of that for which people strive but never attain. One characteristic of the last 30 years or so has been evaporation of all sense of utopia. The world that is can never change in any fundamental way, we are constantly told, and most people believe. This belief constrains social thinking and action in unknown ways that deserve greater exploration.

## **POLITICS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING**

An important set of issues discussed in this forum concern the role of the political in psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy.

Traditionally, politics has been viewed as alien to the consulting room. Discussion of political issues, attitudes, and concerns was traditionally largely viewed as resistances to understanding the self, the 'real work' of therapy. Further, discussion of politics allegedly threatens the much-vaunted 'therapeutic neutrality'.

This traditional view does not acknowledge that individuals are situated within a social context and that politics cannot be separated from the 'real self'. Rather, the real self is, among other things, a political creature, having opinions about and sometimes trying to affect the larger and smaller social decisions that affect daily life. Politics is not a separate domain apart from our daily lives. It is, rather, a component of those lives. We are all, among other things, political creatures, whether we welcome or distance ourselves from the overtly political.

As examples, our daily lives are profoundly affected by the sense of danger associated with crime and the media's and politicians' portrayal of crime. Youth and families are affected directly by the quality of schools and by the policies of those schools toward such things as substance use or dress. And, for many, family gatherings would be dull events without the inevitable political debates, while for other families, entry of such a contentious topic would be bad form at best.

The participants in the forum all dispute the traditional view, although they differ widely in their conceptualization and approach to the political in the clinic. Some tend toward emphasizing the ubiquity of the political, almost emphasizing the 1960s saying that 'everything is political'. Thus, Phil Cushman asks us to interpret the small moments of life and of therapy in a political light and bring these understandings into our explicit political discourse.

However, others, most notably Andrew Samuels, note that to make everything

political is to remove the uniqueness of politics. Further, to claim that psychotherapy is always political can allow the therapist to feel good without leading to any concrete changes in therapeutic practice.

Samuels argues, rather, for the careful inclusion of an individual's political attitudes and activities in the therapeutic discourse. He suggests viewing a patient's political experience through the exploration of four aspects of that experience: 'history, intensity, centrality, and discrepancy'.

### **COMPLICITY, PRIVILEGE AND BEING A BYSTANDER**

Another theme running through much of the discussion concerns the complicity of each of us as we benefit in various ways from societal lack of fairness and equality. This complicity is endemic to our lives as citizens of the relatively wealthy industrialized countries, whose wealth is based in part upon keeping others poor and dependent. This complicity also appears in the daily interactions of middle-class Americans with those less fortunate than us. One has only to think of a businessman who comments upon the 'selfishness' of his maid for wanting both Easter Sunday and Monday off to spend with her family. In this real example the maid is, in many ways, not experienced as a person with her own needs and desires but solely through the lens of her utility to the businessman's family. And, of course, the wealth that allows this businessman to hire a maid is a consequence of the fact that his employees earn far less than he does.

Participants in these dialogs explore issues around this complicity and its complex expressions in the individual psyche. To what extent is this complicity maintained through various forms of 'not seeing', of psychological defense, that are similar to those utilized

in dealing with intrapsychic and interpersonal conflict? Or does understanding complicity and its 'no seeing' require new ways of thinking about the intersection of the individual and the social?

Closely related to complicity is being a bystander, one who witnesses social ills and fails to act. We condemn those 'good Germans' who turned their heads away from the Holocaust. And we shake our heads at those neighbors who, in 1964, failed to call the police as Kitty Genovese screamed for help as she was attacked and raped in New York City. However, most of us live our lives paying only minimal attention to the horrors around us. *Genocide in Darfur?* Where's that? *Torture at Abu Ghraib?* I just can't think about it and didn't they have it coming anyway? *Civil war in Iraq?* I wish someone would do something about it. Besides, they've been killing each other for centuries. *Global warming?* Someone ought to do something. By the way, have you seen my new SUV? It's really cool.

To psychoanalysts these responses seem familiar as the workings of those defense mechanism we routinely encounter in our clinical work. Yet, it is rare for analysts to deal with these defenses when they are applied to political material. We all know people, and have patients, who say they cannot stand to read the daily newspaper. The participants in the forum discuss whether, how, and under what circumstances, these defenses should be examined in therapy.

### **PSYCHOANALYSIS, CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY**

Running throughout the distinct threads of these discussions is the issue of the role and responsibility of citizens in a democracy. How is genuine democracy, rule by the people, possible, if 'the people' close their



eyes to major aspects of their social reality? Can the tendency of this avoidance to facilitate demagoguery and popular manipulation be countered? Jesus teaches that 'the truth shall make you free'. Psychoanalysis, social criticism and change, and genuine democracy all are built upon a radical pursuit of the truth wherever it may lead. The participants in this forum are all advocates of pushing the pursuit of truth in new directions.

Yet, history leads many to wonder, as Freud commented, how much truth people can bear. Whatever the ultimate answer, psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the myriad mechanisms of self-deception, may help humanity increase its tolerance for reality. Given the numerous crises facing the human race – nuclear proliferation and the never-vanquished threat of war, climate change and environmental, destruction and the ever-present ethnic and national rivalries and tensions periodically exploding into full-fledged wars – the future of the human race may depend upon this increased ability to face reality in all its forms.

As I hope these brief comments illustrate, the discussion that occurred last October was wide-ranging and touched upon many important ideas. One of my major criteria for a good read is that I have new thoughts while reading. I expect that you, like me, will find that this discussion meets that criteria, with a high 'new thought per page read' ratio. So embark, now, on a voyage where you can join a group of very thoughtful politically engaged clinicians in exploration of the frontiers of politics-personal interface.

**Note:** Further information about Section 9: Psychoanalysts for Social Responsibility, including a membership application, can be found at [http://www.division39.org/div39\\_sects.php?sectid=9](http://www.division39.org/div39_sects.php?sectid=9).

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