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'Psyche, Ideology and the Creation of the Political Subject': A Summary

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ABSTRACT This paper shows how in an interdisciplinary context psychoanalysis can illuminate the interface between ideology and mental states that produces citizens' identification with repressive political trends. It argues for a socially conscious clinical psychoanalysis that includes an awareness of and respectful exploration of the social as well as the psychic origins of patients' deep anxieties and conflicts. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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The complex psycho/political dynamics characteristic of US society since 9/11 can be illuminated by a psychoanalysis that takes into account the relationship between psychic and social reality. How do we explain how so many citizens continue to support their government in spite of repeated exposés of its lies, misrepresentations, corruption, loyalty to class allies and assaults on the constitution, civil liberties and economic justice? I argue that the impact of trauma on the one hand and the convergence of hegemonic ideology and unconscious defenses on the other explain our post-9/11 political culture in which a bystander population has contributed to a crisis of democracy in this country.

Psychoanalysis explains how subjectivity is fashioned out of the interplay between the imaginary dimensions of the unconscious, characterized by representations, drives and affects, and the socio-symbolic order, composed of asymmetrical relations and structures of power and force. Lacan has shown the process of subject formation that shapes the psyche within particular social contexts that contextualize it, predate it and extend beyond it. For Lacan, the unconscious is constituted by the 'discourse of the Other', so that identity comes from outside, forcing the subject to experience loss and rupture through the enforced rec-

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ognition of difference and prohibition. The subject's true state of diffuseness or decentered-ness is partially transcended through the encounter with a consolingly coherent image of him or herself mediated through the dominant ideology that assigns a place in the socio-symbolic order based on attributes such as class, race and gender. Hegemonic ideology, as both Gramsci and Althusser have demonstrated, is disseminated through all the structures of society, including the family, church, educational system, cultural institutions and so forth that 'interpolate' or hail the subject to enact its values as a 'thought-practice' of everyday life that is experienced as 'natural' and 'universal' and is thus generally unconscious.

This psychoanalytic approach can help us think about contemporary subjectivity within the context of 9/11 and its aftermath. Following 9/11 the US government mobilized support for its aggressive preemptive foreign policies and assaults on democracy at home among a population traumatized by the unprecedented attacks on our homeland. When people are frightened, the denial of vulnerability alternates with overwhelming feelings of impotence, and the administration's bellicosity initially fulfilled group fantasies of being rescued by a strong leader who would enact wishes for revenge. Bush's simplistic discourse relied upon a psychologically primitive bifurcation of the world, which was depicted as all good or all bad (civilization versus barbarism, the Christian world versus Evil). Political rhetoric exacerbated splitting and projective mechanisms typical of Klein's paranoid-schizoid position.

The President championed this country's victimhood instead of exploring how US foreign policy and corporate expansionism had contributed to anti-US sentiments in many regions of the world. Christopher Bollas calls this posture 'radical or violent innocence', a self-idealizing defense that denies one's own aggression and projects it onto an other, who is then demonized and attacked. This stance impeded the development of the depressive position capacities to manage the complexity and ambiguity of internal and external reality that, according to Klein, lead human beings to take responsibility for their own aggression, to feel guilt and remorse and to be able to make creative reparation in an effort to prevent escalating cycles of violence.

In addition to the psychological defenses mobilized in response to trauma, citizens' identification with hegemonic ideology also permitted an initial consensus for an aggressive foreign policy designed by the neo-conservatives long before 9/11, whose goal was to guarantee this country's position as the uncontested Superpower with control over the world's declining strategic resources. This vision was an extension of the centuries-long ideology of Manifest Destiny with its reservoir of racism and neo-colonial sentiments shared by leaders and citizens alike.

For a time, Bush's 'war on terror' also served to obfuscate the deep divisions in this society, predating 9/11, linked to the profound erosion of opportunity and wellbeing for millions of people. Multiple symptoms of a society in conflict were linked to the bad distribution of wealth, declining standards of living and opportunities for working Americans and increasing social violence among the poor and youth. Fractured social relations were promised symbolic repair in the unity that followed 9/11, as the threat to our nation's integrity was displaced from the complex internal social and economic forces onto a simple and identifiable enemy from outside that could be the receptacle for our collective projections. These hegemonic processes produced a majority of citizens whose ideological commitments and psychic defenses provided uncritical support for the administration's policies.

However, alongside the bystander population oppositional ideological movements have emerged to demand alternatives to economic oppression, social injustice and political repression. How can we explain this capacity of people to disengage from hegemony? Gramsci stressed that the consciousness of subordinated groups in society is fissured and uneven, drawn from the 'official story' of the ruling ideology and their lived contradictory experience. The inchoate, ambiguous aspects of experience can develop into a coherent critique that coalesces into oppositional movements. A Kleinian perspective emphasizes the depressive position capacities that permit the subject to tolerate the ambiguity and complexity of psychic and external reality, to rely less on splitting, projection and omnipotent control over others, to take responsibility and feel guilt for one's own aggressive impulses and to make creative reparation. This achievement of love over hate can be realized through political engagement that stresses libininal connections in the struggles for equity and justice. The Lacanian point of view suggests that hegemonic practices can never provide the suture that completely covers over or permanently repairs the original gap or wound that forms the basis of the subject's alienation. As Slavoj Zizek declares with respect to the interpellation of hegemony, 'for psychoanalysis, the subject emerges when and in so far as interpellation … fails. [The subject's] resistance to interpellation (to the symbolic identity provided by interpellation) *is* the subject.'

We could argue that psychoanalysis permits the subject to emerge as interpellation fails, if and when the analyst and patient engage in an exploration of both intrapsychic conflict and transference dynamics as well as the patient's largely unconscious insertion into the sociosymbolic order. When the patient's political views are taken not only as symbolic representations of intrapsychic conflict but treated as significant aspects of his/her subjectivity as a citizen, neither analyst nor patient excludes this central aspect of identity from the psychoanalytic frame. The psychoanalytic process can thus provide the potential for a more critical and sturdy subject to emerge.

The psychoanalytic process I am suggesting is best appreciated within the context of the growing contradictions in our 9/11 war culture and the crisis of democracy. Fortunately, a new consciousness is emerging in this country to contest the hegemonic discourse of the 'war on terror', one that acknowledges that while terrorist violence must be punished and ultimately stopped as a political tactic, the inequitable global system that is its violent context must also be altered. Since history's lessons teach us that psychoanalysis can exist freely only within a democratic culture that guarantees freedom of thought and expression, our profession benefits from an alliance with struggles against politically repressive trends in this society. Should an increasingly critical citizenry ultimately produce a change in the US government's discourse and policies, we make an important contribution toward a world based on a negotiated sharing of resources and cooperative efforts to solve the profound problems that threaten peoples everywhere, and most importantly, the sustainability of the earth itself.