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**TALKS**

# Reflection or action: And never the twain shall meet

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**Abstract**
This talk, one in a series of seminars in the "Political Mind", was given at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, June 2015.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

I shall talk about the major problem I see in getting psychoanalysis and politics to communicate together fruitfully. That problem is that the unconscious individual influences and the external social ones are essentially different categories of influences, and can be bridged conceptually only with some difficulty.

## 2 | GROUP DYNAMICS AND THE LABOUR PARTY

Back in the 1990s, I was part of a group that worked out some ideas which we might take to the Labour Party. You may remember that the dying regime of the Conservatives, Mrs Thatcher, and John Major was hanging on, and with the election in 1997 coming up the Labour Party was desperate to convince the electorate of its better policies. The idea was whether we could give an account of group dynamics which might be helpful to Labour to understand the way to create a more democratic society. At the time Labour were talking about "the third way"; somewhat vague, but it appeared that it might promote more measured attitudes in society suggestive of depressive-position thinking – ambivalence, considerateness towards everyone, and generally a reluctance towards the unrealistic perfectionism of ideologies. It seemed there could be a match between the political rhetoric and the study of unconscious group processes. In the event, when we met a couple of people at Millbank, it was clear they were politely indifferent to what we were trying to present. Their interest was whether we had the secret of how to influence the electorate to vote for Labour. They wanted advice on their marketing. There seemed a radical disconnection between our earnest views about a more mature society, and their wish for effective marketing.

I have thought, over the years, about our naivety. Obviously there is a potential for psychology to be used as an instrument for the manipulation of the public and, after our unfruitful approach, I came across the writing of one of the founders of marketing and public relations in the USA, Edward Bernays, back in the 1920s: "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it?" (Bernays, 1928, p. 71) . He continued:

*The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. (ibid., p. 10)*

I find this unpalatable. Shamefully, this author, a founder of this "invisible government" as he called it, was Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew. He, like Freud, was interested in the "unseen mechanisms" at work in individuals – but for different purposes.

## 3 | POLITICAL CHANGE AND PSYCHOANALYTIC CHANGE

The aim of psychoanalysis is to change things. That is what patients want help with. The aim of politics is *also* to change things. But the changes, and how they are brought about, are completely different. Is that difference bridgeable? Influencing a patient towards some healthy state, and doing the same for society, should not be impossibly different. After all, a society is made up of people. So what really is the difference, and how can one inform the other?

Practising psychoanalysts address the determining factors of the *unconscious* – and how the individual is captured and controlled by them. On the other hand, political attitudes and actions are *socially* generated, and many would say arise from the economic system of production. The individual is located at the junction of these two sets of influences, one from inside and one from outside. If someone has a phobia for spiders, he is driven by internal factors (his unconscious imagining, say, the web-like embrace of a controlling mother). If someone drives his car on the left-hand side of the road, it is as a result of social forces – the highway code, police patrol cars, etc.

These are inherently different kinds of influences. How do social and unconscious determinism fit together? Edward Bernays decided it was simple; the external social category could be used to manipulate the individual's interior unconscious choices. Well, for me that is not good enough, and I am interested in whether there are other ways by which these two categories of influences can be combined in our understanding (Hinshelwood, 1996). There are also strong ethical requirements involving paternalism and autonomy (Hinshelwood, 1997).

## 4 | LABOUR PROCESS

Something which troubles people when they think about it, although they don't think about it much because it is not so easy to grasp, is what is called "labour process". I'll try to explain my understanding.

Let's consider a worker in a factory. The worker has necessary costs that go into sustaining his life. This can be quantified in terms of money – he is paid what he needs to survive and live. Each day he is paid that wage and, in exchange, he provides a day's work. The factory has other expenses; the raw materials, tools, and machines, the cost of the factory itself, some administration, banking charges, and so on. Together these are the manufacturing costs.

If the man is making, shall we say, nails in the factory, then a certain number of nails at the market price will roughly equate with the manufacturing costs, i.e., the worker's wage plus the correct proportion of the other costs.

Then, if the factory is a successful one, the worker will be making his quantity of nails in *less* than a full day. And so, for the rest of his working day, he will be making more nails than he costs. Now, under this system of hired labour, the extra nails will belong, not to him, the worker, but to the factory – and its owner, who is a person or an enterprise that has bought the whole day's work from him. Much of labour relations turns on the ownership of the extra number of nails which the worker has made over and above the manufacturing costs.

This is a system which does not apply just to factory work, but also to a slave society or any society where the owner of the product is not the worker who supplied the hours of work. It contrasts with a society based on self-employed land-workers, craftsmen, or professionals. They own what they produce. This system of overproducing as it seems, with the accumulation of products, is especially characteristic of the capitalist mode of production.

Incidentally, the concentrated effort on systems to maximize the accumulation of products that *appear to be independent* of their makers may have made an impact on other cultures. The anthropologist C. A. Gregory attributed the phenomenon known as the potlach to the arrival of Western explorers and merchants in New Guinea. The potlatch is a ritual requiring a seemingly bizarre accumulation of goods that are circulated apparently aimlessly around the tribal community. Of course there are other explanations, but it is possible that these tribes mirror for us the bizarre nature of our system of production which drastically divides production and ownership, and which has been foisted onto other cultures as a model of mature civilization.

## 5 | ALIENATION

The unease we feel about the labour system needs some understanding. In our society there appears to have been an historical development of a particular bond between the producer and the products which emerge from his work. For instance, since the humanistic age of the Renaissance, painters have signed their own pictures. That tells a story of how the bond between the individual producer and his opus has become an especially significant feature of Western cultures.

So it is of interest that the division of the worker from the product of his work is also paradoxically so characteristic of our modern age. This culturally enforced division is especially significant in manual work. The factory worker's labour is physical so he therefore has a particular bodily closeness to his product; there is an intimate connection between the worker and his product. The sale of his working hours removes the ownership of what is felt to be connected to him, and is in his experience a part of him. It is not too fanciful to accept that what we physically create – indeed what we intellectually create, like this paper – is closely identified with me, and vice versa. I know that I am seen, to a considerable extent, to be the person who has written certain things. Or, an artist, say Francis Bacon, is identified with the paintings he produces. In fact a painting of his may be referred to as "a Francis Bacon", meaning one of his pictures.

Marx seemed especially angry about this labour process which rips the product from the worker, like a new-born baby from its mother. Long before his classic book, *Das Kapital* (1867/1975b), we can read his humane ranting about this. In 1844 he was writing his notebooks which were published as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. There he dealt with the unfairness of this separation of the producer from his product:

> The object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object … this realisation of labour appears as loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation. (Marx, 1844/1975a, p. 324)

If the work product is disconnected then the producer is disconnected to some degree from what is felt – by him, and by others – to be him. He becomes a lesser person as these aspects of himself are removed from, or, as Marx said, "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces" (p. 323). He becomes poorer in a psychological sense. This is a psychological understanding, not something that we would normally go to Karl Marx for.

Many years ago (Hinshelwood, 1983) I was struck by a parallel kind of description to be found in the psychoanalytic literature. For example, "In such fantasies products of the body and parts of the self are felt to be split off, projected into mother, and to be continuing their existence there" (Klein, 1955, p. 142).

No surprise that this comes from Melanie Klein describing the mechanism of splitting of the ego, or self, and subsequent projective identification of a part of that divided self into some other. She "referred to the weakening and impoverishment of the ego resulting from excessive splitting and projective identification" (Klein, 1946, p. 104). For the idea of alienation, it would seem that splitting is central because the object – that is the product of the worker "stands opposed" to him, and it is projected, *"alien"* and *"independent"*, yet it retains an identity with the worker, it *is labour embodied.* In other words, products of the person's (worker's) body are felt to have become separated off, alienated as a characteristic of someone else.

In that paper of mine now 30 years ago, I looked carefully at the way Marx described what he called "alienation" and I made a comparison with the psychoanalytic phenomena of splitting and projection. I found striking similarities between the way alienation is experienced and the way splitting and projective identification are experienced.

Implicit in this comparison is a particular view of the relations between social influences from the wider culture and the individual level of personal experience and unconscious mechanisms. We know that alienation is conceptualized as having its origins in the mode of production, whilst its counterpart, splitting and projective identification, has its origins in the unconscious need to deal with an anxiety – the fear of annihilation, or a fear for survival. The alienation from the ownership of the product and the mechanisms of splitting and projective identification converge in this case – the outside social influences and the inner mechanisms coincide.

## 6 | SELF-PERPETUATING SYSTEMS

Where policies and politics play on already existing psychological mechanisms they may succeed handsomely. We know that psychological mechanisms are defences aimed at managing anxiety by avoiding it and, like all defence mechanisms, as Freud showed, they are usually imperfect and cause further effects known as symptoms. This is the case, no less, with the mechanisms of splitting and projective identification: they are aimed at avoiding fears regarding annihilation and personal survival. However, splitting will enhance the feeling of going to pieces, and projective identification will impoverish the ego. The conscious anxiety may be avoided but it is unconsciously enhanced. As a result, the defence mechanisms are driven even harder – i.e., splitting and projective identification are sustained, a vicious circle is created. In effect the mechanisms of splitting and projective identification *allow* the social process of alienation. And the redistribution of ownership of the products of labour becomes stabilized as a self-perpetuating system resting on the vicious circle of anxiety and defence.

Another vicious circle also occurs as projective identification has another aim; it is a means of denying separation projective identification establishes a merging with the person into whom some part of the self is projected. So projecting some part of the self into the factory or its owner inevitably promotes a sense of solidarity in the worker *towards the owners* into whom the worker has projected his products. Moreover, the reality situation in which the product is actually removed in a concrete way, separated and sold from the factory, must enhance the painful feelings of separation which the projective identification was intended to deny. Thus the anxiety of separation is enhanced, which then drives the projective identification to deny the separation.

Both these are enduring social-psychological dynamics which underpin the alienation, allow it to endure, significantly impoverishing the egos of the workers. The alienation and solidarity are stabilised by resting on these enduring psychodynamic cycles.

One aspect of the success of the neo-liberal emphasis on monetary value is that survival of the individual is increasingly felt as financial survival. The aim is in part to motivate people through a fear for their survival. This motivating strategy raises the survival anxiety for the individual and for working organizations, playing on the fears of the worker who already feels impoverished in himself and has sought solidarity through merging with the organization.

Indeed, today such a large proportion of personal identity is constructed through consumer activity – that is, what you buy is what you are, and therefore if you can't buy you can't exist! Again it provides, and stabilizes, the inner psychodynamic cycles just described. Financial survival plays into the anxieties about ego-survival to harmonize with them and add to the drive for the characteristic defences. The elevation of monetary value and financial survival to trump ordinary human values in work and other commercial aspects of social life is a spin-off from the conjunction of external and internal influences that are realised in these two vicious circles. Human values are left to exist only within the much restricted field of the family. We are allowed to be generous, grateful, honest, concerned, etc., within the family. But outside that, only monetary value counts as financial survival is almost equated with personal survival.

One contribution we as psychoanalysts can make to the political sphere is by increasing understanding of how a social process embodied in a political policy must inevitably have an important unconscious dimension – that is, the policy needs to access the personality dynamics of individuals. As psychoanalysts, we could give to political debates an awareness of the anxieties that might be available for playing upon and the defences that could establish vicious circles within individuals.

It is not enough to take a high-minded position about this; we need to help increase understanding of why people go along thoughtlessly with quite disastrous policies. In the example described above – the occurrence of alienation at work – social influence and psychological mechanisms converge and work together in vicious circles.

But policies do not always find a suitable internal dynamic. Social policies are not all-powerful and they can be successful *only* insofar as they can play upon unconscious mechanisms which they are able to activate. Psychology then meets political economy as a limiting condition. *Only* when there is a clear interaction between the social forces and the unconscious cycling of anxiety and defence can a stable political economy arise.

## 7 | INTERPRETING SOCIETY!

We need to find such models of interaction between social relations and psychodynamics. Otherwise it is so easy for us psychoanalysts to approach society or social institutions *as if they were individuals*. To equate a social organization with the individual mind risks leaving out the very valid social, historical, political forces that act on organizations and create cultures.

I am thinking of the campaign started by psychoanalysts in the 1980s, Psychoanalytic Psychotherapists Against Nuclear War (PPANW). It was led by Hanna Segal's especial interest, expressed in her paper "Silence is the real crime" (Segal, 1987). She suggested that individual defence mechanisms seemed to be aggregated and she talked of regression during wartime from depressive position to paranoid-schizoid functioning. As this campaign was largely ineffectual, it seems that there were serious limitations to this kind of individualistic political approach; the problem only disappeared with a political solution, the collapse of the cold war in 1990. I would suggest that attributing individual dynamics to social and political issues risks psychoanalysis becoming irrelevant to social scientists and politicians.

Incidentally, Segal (1987) claimed the bomb collectively mobilized individual phantasies of destruction and then the omnipotent defences against total annihilation, which lead to a vicious circle similar to the kind I am also describing.

Freud did something similar in *Totem and Taboo* (1913/1955), interpreting whole societies in terms of the psychodynamics of the Oedipus complex. He had relied on outdated texts such as Frazer's *Golden Bough* (Frazer, 1890) so that anthropologists contemporary with him such as W. H. R. Rivers, Elliott Smith, and Bronislaw Malinovski easily dismissed Freud as a positive danger! Malinovski described psychoanalysis as "an infection … of the neighbouring fields of science – notably that of anthropology, folklore and sociology" (Malinowski, 1923, p. 650).

The imperative is to understand how social attitudes and policies resonate with unconscious processes, notably anxiety and defence, deep within individuals. This is easier said than done, and there is a place for some persistent thinking about these reverberating social-psychological dynamics of the kind I have illustrated.

I would like to refer to Dave Bell's (1996) point of view as I understand it. Like me he has come to the conclusion that such action is not based so much upon fighting politically for certain parties or policies, but more on a distinction at a meta-level. The distinction he uses is the Kleinian one between paranoid-schizoid and depressive functioning. Institutions which demand depressive position functioning are likely on the whole to represent more mature functioning than paranoid-schizoid functioning institutions. Thus the NHS for instance is an establishment devoted to concern for others, the core element of the depressive position. Perhaps incidentally it could be a factor in why it is always in the front line politically as a key issue in neo-liberal policy-making. We need to support with ordinary political action those institutions which embody concern as opposed to self-survival.

This type of action is not just in order to support specific policies; we need to engage with social values: taking profits versus making a contribution, survival versus concern, collaboration versus self-serving narcissism. *As psychoanalysts*, we must touch on the unconscious substratum of those policies as they affect the individual. There is a policy, to save the NHS, but it is based on an estimation of the unconscious values of the depressive position as well as the conscious arguments that we might or might not agree with. Of course, unconscious personal survival is involved in the anxiety about the NHS, but fear needs to be tempered by concern, not defensiveness.

## 8 | ETHICAL POLITICS

So I am touching on an ethical dimension of pursuing policies as well as the merely pragmatic one of simply winning. This prompts a big question: what are the more ethical means of doing politics and what are the less ethical ones? It seems to me that the ethics of politics in a representative democracy turns on the issue of autonomy and paternalism. Much is talked of the importance of personal autonomy in our society but the fact is that there cannot always be a respect for decisions made by a common vote.

It was an extremely technical decision whether in 2008 the British Government should rescue the Northern Rock Building Society or allow it to collapse. And even experts might disagree – the American government followed different advice at the time and allowed Lehmann Brothers to go bankrupt. These are extremely difficult decisions that need expertise way beyond you or me. We need our politicians to decide things for us. This is a paternalism and it overrides autonomy of the individual. If we really want a participant democracy paternalism is not necessarily bad – most of us should not be involved in such delicate decisions as to whether to rescue a financial institution or not. Only after the event do we the general public know what should have been done. It had to be left to those with deep knowledge and long experience of economics and even they make mistakes, mistakes that could probably not have been avoided even in a proper democracy. In fact, it is the point about a representative democracy as opposed to a consensus democracy; sometimes we need experts in positions of power to make decisions for us.

If paternalism is not always bad – though sometimes it is, for instance what Edward Snowden revealed about the United States National Security Agency and the UK government's communication headquarters (GCHQ) (see The Courage Foundation, 2016) – then we need to understand when it is good and how to tell the difference. Looking from a psychoanalytic perspective here, when we face such situations we in effect put certain decisions into the hands of others. In some sense we become impoverished by losing a degree of autonomy. It is the same as agreeing to a surgeon operating on our unconscious body, we give up our autonomy and place all the decision-making in his expert hands. This is now beyond the scope of this paper, I'm afraid (though I have explored ethical action in terms of social policies in my book *Therapy or Coercion* [1996]).

The ideas are here somewhat embryonic. But the point is to strike a contrast between a necessary paternalism in politics and a paternalistic relinquishing of autonomous functions and judgements, when necessary. The labour process which impoverishes the man who makes nails has its ethical equivalent in a process which impoverishes a person's autonomy, as well as his identity and financial possessions.

## 9 | CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to describe some of my own psychoanalytic reflections on politics and where psychoanalysts might position themselves. Psychoanalysis is perhaps the only discipline which can really supply an understanding of the unconscious processes of the individual and how they may get played out in social forms. But we have to be careful to recognize that our contributions *as psychoanalysts* only stretch as far as those unconscious aspects. We will all have our favourite parties and policies, with perfectly valid *conscious* reasons for supporting them. It is not really valid for us to simply argue psychoanalytically in favour of such consciously adopted policies – this is reminiscent of the Labour Party in 1997 wanting to exploit group dynamics for their marketing. Our contribution

needs to draw attention to the underlying unconscious issues, the vicious circles, the level of understanding, etc. that affect not just policies but the political process itself – which of them are, or are not, being mobilized by conscious policies and debates.

To some extent these are seriously incomplete reflections and may be invalid. But we need, and I believe we have the conceptual resources, to deal with the complex interaction of the double influence of society and the unconscious that intersect in the political process. We do need, in my view, to contribute the possibilities of psychodynamic reflection whilst taking action.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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