Editor's introduction to special issue on 'Us vs Them'

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Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (2009) 14, 1–3. doi:10.1057/pcs.2008.52

Two years ago the theme of the annual APCS conference was Hope for Hard Times: Anxiety, Alienation and Activism. In 2008, the theme was Ethics in an Age of Diminishing Distance: The Clash of Difference. Meanwhile, we at PCS have long hoped to create a special issue devoted to understanding what has been implicit in our hard times and explicit in the clash of difference: how do we understand the way that the *us* becomes constituted in opposition to a *them*, and is there any hope of getting beyond the kind of polarizations in which we either refuse to, or simply cannot, find ourselves in the other? Many social theorists have written about the lack of accountability and responsibility of corporate and government leaders to their workers and citizens that marks contemporary Western culture. For Zygmunt Bauman (2001), one significant consequence of the precarious state in which many of us find ourselves is the creation of 'us *vs* them' polarizations. He notes, 'The kind of uncertainty, of dark premonitions and fears of the future that haunt men and women in the fluid, perpetually changing social environment in which the rules of the game change in the middle of the game without warning or legible pattern, does not unite the sufferers: it splits them and sets them apart' (p. 48).

I began writing this introduction during the heady week in which Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. For many of us, what makes Obama attractive is his seeming ability to resist the pull to polarize, apparent both in the way he lives and in the way he thinks. He first came to prominence in 2004, when he proclaimed that there are no red (Republican majority) states, no blue (Democrat majority) states – only the United States of America. This at a time when US governmental and media discourse seemed downright giddy with the pleasures of provoking 'us *vs* them' hatred as frequently as possible: the good 'Coalition' *vs* the Axis of Evil, freedom

lovers *vs* freedom haters. There is no need to rehearse the heinous list of polarities in which Americans were posited as all good and those who criticized US policy as envious and all bad. The 2008 election was rife with this kind of language, represented perhaps most clearly in the right-wing populism of Sarah Palin, who outdid even Bush with her capacity to distinguish so clearly Americans who love their country from Americans who hate it; small-town, good America from urban, liberal, bad America; latté-sipping elites and intellectuals from Joe Six-Pack and Joe the Plumber. When the forces of polarization went after Obama for remaining (at least for a while) a congregant of a minister who ‘hates America,’ Obama gave his race speech, a shining example of a discourse that refuses to polarize and yet does not shy from truths, however painful. That is a cornerstone of the ethics of psychoanalysis: to bear painful truths, to resist the more pleasurable lie. Unfashionable as the word ‘truth’ has become, perhaps it is precisely in bearing painful truths about ourselves that we might find a key to dissolving the false dichotomies of ‘us *vs* them.’

A basic assumption of poststructuralist theory, as well as of many psychoanalytic theories, is that repudiation of otherness is inherent in the constitution of identity. Identity is felt necessarily to foreclose upon whatever we do not want to experience. To use Kleinian language, popular in cultural studies and psychosocial studies alike, what is unwanted is split off and projected onto the other. Sullivan refers to those abjected states as not-me. While some psychoanalytic theories suggest that innate and existential demands cause us to split off parts of self, others claim that social forces and the withholding of social approval motivate splitting. Regardless of what one understands to be the motivating force behind splitting, psychoanalysts know that when splitting occurs, each side of the polarity becomes a monstrous version of whatever it once was: when autonomy and dependence are split (and gendered, or raced, or classed), for example, we find that autonomy is lived as omnipotence and dependence as helplessness, clingy and hostile. We also know that whatever is split off continues to haunt the psyche; although the split polarities may seem independent of one another – and are constituted to seem so – they, in fact, live off each other alternately as host and as parasite. The form taken by the interdependence of the poles is thus as monstrous as each pole itself, monstrous because it is a form built on the repudiation of the actual interdependence of the sets of human attributes that were artificially divided in the first place.

For this issue, I asked distinguished clinicians and academics from different psychoanalytic schools – Jungian, Kleinian, relational, Lacanian, object relational, classical – to reflect on how ‘us *vs* them’ polarities form, become rigidified and potentially resolve. You will find that the perspectives of the contributors differ widely and that their conclusions derive from the assumptions they hold about human nature and subject formation. I hope that

PCS can in future issues continue the conversation about ‘us *vs* them’; we welcome comments on and further contributions to the topic, for it is central to the journal’s mission not only to understand but also to propose ways of intervening in the destruction wrought by the politics of ‘us *vs* them.’

Coda

With this issue, we inaugurate a new editorial structure for *PCS*. Simon Clarke will be our new Consulting Editor. All of us involved with *PCS* want to thank Simon for the tremendous energy and work that he brought to *PCS* as Co-Editor from 2004 to 2008; he has infused the journal with his own vision of how psychoanalysis contributes to the understanding of and intervention into social problems, and we are grateful that he will continue to work with us. We are delighted to announce that Peter Redman, of the Department of Sociology at the Open University, Milton Keynes, is joining me now as Co-Editor of *PCS*. We also welcome our new Contributing Editors: Marilyn Charles (USA), Todd McGowan (USA), Michael Rustin (UK), Yannis Stavrakakis (Greece), Annie Stopford (Australia) and Candida Yates (UK). Finally, welcome to our new Managing Editor, Eleanor Starke Kobrin. Many thanks to Glynis Morrish for her excellent work as our editorial assistant during the past several years.

Reference

Bauman, Z. (2001) *Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.