Section Introduction

SHINING A PSYCHOANALYTIC LIGHT ON ALIENATION, OTHERNESS, AND XENOPHOBIA

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Psychoanalytic insights about the human mind, the internal world, and object relations, gleaned through our psychoanalytic work on the couch, have enriched our understanding of individual dynamics and the relationship with the outside world. Psychoanalytic concepts and mode of thinking may also be usefully applied to deriving models of understanding current events, phenomena, and crises in the social, political, and cultural media. Just as psychoanalytic theory has brought light to the dark reaches of the unconscious mind, it might help to enlighten us about the dynamics of alienation, otherness, and xenophobia that we are witnessing in the current crisis of mass emigration, and its xenophobic reaction in the “welcoming” countries.

Psychoanalysts are reaching out to the world community in offering a forum for discourse concerning the dynamic undercurrents of the world crises we are witnessing. Fortunately, there appears to be a trend in psychoanalytic and academic circles with an increasing number of efforts to introduce psychoanalytic ideas to socio-political and cultural debates on current world events. The European Psychoanalytic Federation 2017 Conference titled *The Familiar, and the Unfamiliar*, is an example of this discourse. Lene Auestad’s annual conferences on Psychoanalysis and Politics, Samir Gandesha’s Psychoanalytic Lecture Series in the Simon Fraser University Humanities Department, Vamik Volkan’s Special Issue of the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Volkan, 2015), are all recent evidences of the intersection of psychoanalysis and the social world. These are only a few expressions of the increasing interest by psychoanalysts and academicians, in the application of psychoanalytic ways of thinking in framing the socio-political dynamics of current world crises. In their papers, Franco De Masi (2017), Sverre Varvin (2017) and Ilany Kogan (2017) have

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approached the topic of the familiar and the unfamiliar from different perspectives, as described briefly below.

De Masi (2017) limits his discussion to the individual experience of alienation, although one can interpret this experience, generally, as applicable to states of being when individuals or groups feel threatened, vulnerable, or fragile. The high anxiety engendered results in a feeling of foreignness experienced as uncanny. When this state is ongoing, alienation becomes a psychotic process resulting in altered reality testing, and fantasies are projected onto the real world, taking on the quality of a real perception. External reality is taken to coincide with internal reality, disavowing external reality and constructing a new reality at a sensory level. The ability to symbolize is damaged and introspective thought is hampered. In neuroscience, this is observed as inhibition of higher cortical functions in the pre-frontal cortex, whose task it is to monitor reality testing. Lower, more primitive brain centers, which are normally inhibited, become active. Rational, symbolic thinking ceases. The individual regresses to a more primitive, ruthless and concrete thinking state that dehumanizes the other. This type of process can readily be applied to a group which perceives itself to be vulnerable to economic instability, penetration by terrorists, threats to employment, fundamentalist threats to their belief systems, or any number of other threats to their society which large scale immigration by strange and unfamiliar masses represent.

Varvin (2017) explores both individual and group dynamics in a comprehensive study of the socio-political and cultural discourse that animate public debate on current mass migrations, which continue to put stress on European communities, already facing socio-economic insecurities. Varvin examines the perspectives of both the displaced and the settled. Invading 'hordes' from unfamiliar cultures pose a threat to the known and familiar ways of Western culture. Émigrés have had to run the gauntlet of war, flight, internment camps, acculturation, downward social mobility, and at times an inhospitable new environment. The trauma they experienced in their native countries, in transit, and on arrival can contribute to mental health issues further contributing to their ability to adapt to a new reality. Strange and uncanny newcomers, who might upset familiar and comfortable ways of being, challenge the peoples of the destination countries. Refugees are held in suspicion of holding fundamentalist beliefs and threaten terrorist acts of violence. They might compete for already scarce work in the marketplace. They might introduce their Islamic beliefs into Christian communities. Such rhetoric has been used by certain factions in a political debate that fuels a malignant type of xenophobia that dehumanizes and traumatizes the already traumatized, outsiders marginalized as aliens who threaten the very fabric of their society. Varvin attempts

to analyze the dynamics underlying these attitudes. Collective memories of past traumatization and humiliation may fuel various fantasies: of revenge or rectification of wrong-doing; the demand for sameness and purity being threatened by elements that endanger cohesiveness and unity; the other being cast in the role of unwanted, projected parts of the self; or, competition for scarce jobs by desperate refugees. As a defense against the perceived threat, political factions may use paranoid rhetoric stimulating fantasies against a defined enemy: the refugees.

From a broader, historical perspective, the conflict between Islam and the West may be viewed as tension between Western modernism and Islamic traditionalism casting refugees into the camp of anti-modernist, extreme fundamentalists who threaten more enlightened Western modern values.

Varvin argues that xenophobic, dehumanizing views will traumatize and marginalize refugees and contribute to their PTSD pathology. Resolution of such pathology depends on how the individual is responded to, after the trauma. Providing a mirroring, holding environment helps to mitigate the development of pathology. Political and societal acknowledgement of the trauma experienced by refugees can be an important step towards healing the wounds experienced in refugees' difficult journeys of survival. In analysis of the situation facing both refugees and their "welcoming" countries, Varvin interweaves internal and external dynamic perspectives of the refugee experience. On a societal level, traumatized refugees may be seen as frightening aliens cast in the role of threatening fundamentalists, thus being marginalized on the fringes of society. On an individual level, refugees may feel abandoned by all good and helping objects, facing impending catastrophe with no one to help or care, evoking primordial anxieties, and fear of breakdown and doom.

Truly welcoming political rhetoric, as in the case of Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada, as well as social programs supporting the traumatized refugees, and helping them get their bearings in a strange new land, helps to mitigate their experience of catastrophe and breakdown, and hopefully avoid pathological syndromes in their future lives. Well-integrated individuals in a multicultural society are also less likely to be pushed towards the fringes of society, where existential hopelessness may propel individuals or groups towards terrorism and lawlessness.

Unconscious factors, underlying nationalist ideologies and their appeal to the masses are explored in Kogan's (2017) paper. She argues that anti-Semitism is a form of xenophobia, and psychological explanations proposed for the former can enlighten us about current expressions of the latter. Anti-Semitism has been much discussed in historical, social, political, and

psychoanalytic contexts. Unconscious and conscious fantasies projected onto Jews fuels primitive fears and anxieties: fear of social and cultural contamination by the foreign body that Jews represent; castration anxieties that circumcision represents; sibling rivalry for scarce resources; envy at their tenacity and success. Populist politicians may voice reaction to or emphasize such fears. Political rhetoric identifying Jews as the source of social ills, which needed to be eradicated to restore an idyllic social harmony, arguably resulted in the Holocaust. Splitting mechanisms, whereby hostile and perverse drives are split off and projected onto Jews, who are perceived as dangerous, avaricious, dirty, and debauched. In such primitive states of mind, a ruthless dehumanization can occur and human beings considered as non-human objects that can be treated without moral constraint.

In Nazi ideology, the primitive ideal providing the driving force to this perverse situation is the return to the idyllic, pure, Aryan mother imago who needs to be protected by a ruthless authoritarian hero from the impure infestations of their society: Jews, Slavs, gypsies, homosexuals, and the mentally inferior. Kogan describes the ancient Teutonic Legend of the Nibelungs—revived by Richard Wagner’s Ring Cycle (1848) in the 19th century—often referred to as a chilling forebear of Nazi philosophy. In the opera, the Nibelungs, who are thinly disguised Jews, are avaricious and steal the Rhine maidens’ Rheingold, using it to forge material wealth. Siegfried, the legend’s young Teutonic hero, who became a German national idol, can recover the Rheingold and vanquish the Nibelungs, but he is betrayed and ignominiously killed. This brings about *Götterdämmerung* and the end of the world, eerily echoing what was to happen 100 years after the opera was first played.

Racist ideologies are based on the ideal of organic unity and fusion with the early mother imago (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1990). But mother’s body (society) has become infested with impure others that must be removed before a return to the idyllic initial situation is possible. This discourse is reminiscent of Ferenczi’s idea (1913), the wish to return to the womb as being a universal fantasy.

Kogan (2017) goes on to assert that anti-Semitism cannot be explained by solely invoking unconscious fantasy systems. “Anti-Semitism is tied to a multiplicity of powerful psychological motivations, including sadism, destructiveness, grandiosity, and omnipotence, as well as self/object reversal”. The German peoples suffered a collective injury to their self-esteem in their humiliation in the wake of WWI, which Hitler exploited and promised to restore. Hitler offered a way of reversing the German collective self perception from feeling helpless and victimized to perpetrator. The tool he used was anti-Semitism, the promise of the destruction of world Jewry,

and a fantastical restoration of a grandiose German self-esteem—an ideological path doomed to failure.

Xenophobic tendencies in Europe and the USA can be dynamically framed similarly to anti-Semitism. Western societies fear that they will be overrun by foreigners who represent a danger to their national identities, as well as threatening their economic wellbeing. A regression to archaic fantasies of fusion with an idyllic mother imago, as well as the rise of a hero to protect them from being overrun by hordes of foreigners who will take away their jobs, can make the populace open to political rhetoric that promises a return to a homogenous pure national identity, and provides economic security. Such were some of the populist promises of Donald Trump: to make America great again, to build a wall, keeping foreigners out, and to bring back jobs that foreigners took away. History teaches us that such populist promises, based on an imagined reality, fuelled by archaic primitive fantasies, lead to disaster as in Nazi Germany. Those who may recall George Santayana's well known caution, "Those who cannot learn from the past, are doomed to repeat it" (Santayana, 1905–1906, p. 82), should be reminded that reason does not hold sway over a person's faculties when confronted by fear. Populist politicians who recognize the fears of the majority and offer simple and simplistic solutions risk leading the populace down well-trodden and tragic nationalistic paths.

Kogan concludes with a well-tempered argument. We should not dismiss the needs and wants of the majority as xenophobia. Majorities have rights, as do minorities in maintaining their cultural identities, and distinctive way of life. "Disregarding the interests of the majority is not only morally wrong, but also politically unwise, as it may enhance majority nationalism in the future.... The paradoxical need to take care of the minority's wants while defending the majority's values is one of the biggest challenges of our times," she writes.

As these three papers illustrate, psychoanalytic insights can illuminate socio-political crises facing the modern world. Psychoanalysts have for the most part, limited their activity to helping shed light on the dark reaches of the individual's unconscious mind. Since its inception in 1941, the *AJP* has had an interest in exploring and understanding the psychodynamics and resulting impacts of external social, cultural, and political events on the individual (Galdi, 2015). These three papers confirm that insights from the couch can be applicable in the broad social-political forum as well, and psychoanalysts may present ideas to the public, which can help to view socio-political conflict from different perspectives that take unconscious fantasy into account.

NOTE

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