Book Review

From Tribal Division to Welcoming Inclusion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives by Maxine K. Anderson, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2019, 97 pp.

Once upon a time, psychoanalysts not only presumed that they had their finger on the pulse of humanity's deepest thoughts and subliminal impulses but that they, indeed, had little to learn from sociologists, anthropologists and other psychological thinkers who had yet not metabolized the Master's theories. Other thinkers similarly trying to understand how it is that aware human creatures become enmeshed in internal and external conflict were most often ignored. If these others failed to accept the Freudian metatheory of the sexual etiology of neuroses, they were labeled neurotic, resistant or ignorant of the new discoveries. A few, including Ferenczi (1924, p. 69), recommended a humble skepticism in our formulations. Speaking of the clinical situation, Ferenczi (1924) opined:

The difference between this [interpreting] and ordinary suggestion simply consists in this, that we do not deem the interpretations we offer to be irrefutable utterances, but regard their validity to be dependent on whether they can be verified by material brought forward from memory or by means of repetition of earlier situations (p. 69).

However, Ferenczi and much of his work were often discounted. There were, as a result of mainstream parochialism, unintended consequences. This exclusionary system, in seeing itself as the one and only truth and one that would permit new information to arise only *from the couch*, yielded ongoing internecine conflict within the resulting community of competing orthodoxies. I won't review all the many schisms that have arisen in this Century of Psychoanalysis and that continue to this day. Suffice it to say that such a unitary theory — homologous to the ritualistic religions that Freud depreciated in his writings — canonically yielded generations of such schisms with each faction considering itself the only true descendant of the Prophet. Even today, with the newest contributions to Psychoanalysis, it would be more accurate to point to *competing relational turns*, even if we allow for the growing handful of psychoanalytic institutes where multiple models live together in pluralistic harmony.

Maxine Anderson has a broadly different approach. Working from Timothy Snyder's 2017 models for authoritarianism, Anderson (pp. 75–76) elucidates the methods by which “an individual capitalizing on the fear within a populace can take on the role of an increasingly authoritarian figure, who convinces himself and others

that he alone can make things better.” She marries this thinking to Cash’s 1941 and Hochschild’s 2016 analyses of how even poor White Southerners could maintain the illusion (both before and after the U.S. Civil War) that they were benefitting from White Supremacy (pp. 13–27). Speaking, for instance, about what might appear paradoxical to an outsider, namely that Southern poor Whites might welcome big industry pollution, Anderson (p. 19) demonstrates how this was maintained through a notion of “trickle-down benevolence ... [an] enduring romantic notion of the Southern aristocracy with its generosity and its benevolence to all Whites.”

I write these thoughts about Anderson’s pamphlet-sized book as the COVID-19 pandemic is gripping much of the USA and about 240,000 deaths have been confirmed with still two months to go before the end of 2020. One fear — and to my way of thinking not an unreasonable one — was that we might well need to make decisions about “who shall live and who shall die” in the Country’s Intensive Care Departments. A heady thought. And, curiously, while evidence accrues that the elected President dragged his feet for political gain before taking action to prevent an overwhelming of our Hospitals, nearly half of the Country feels that he is doing a very good job as President. How can this be?

Anderson wonders about the grip such a President maintains over a sizable minority. She (p. 74 ff.) uses “white supremacy in the United States as a model for a persistent polarizing myth ... that is [in such circumstances] we revert to earlier modes of functioning going from ... wide-ranging thought and secure inner authority to a sense of having no agency and possibly no sense of interiority. ... black and white ... us and them ... good and evil.” Using works by contemporary historians and political thinkers she concludes that Trump’s minions have reverted “to ancient tribal modes [and] re-engage the polarized myth of idealized goodness about oneself and one’s kin and a feared and dangerous other” (p. 74).

I was and am moved by her central argument: A single trickle-down myth can be utilized by would-be autocrats to inject a polarizing/schismatizing force that potentially induces a split in a given Nation State. If I may get in Dr. Anderson’s boat, though, and row a bit with her, I would add two additional thoughts, both implied by her work, if not plainly articulated in its pages.

In the first place, my own sense is that the would-be autocrat doesn’t choose an arbitrary myth. The Leader who seeks imperial power creates an outrageous persona with psychic defensive characteristics that, with certain differences, will be taken on by not only those who support him but unwittingly by those who oppose him, as well. Importantly, splitting, lack of empathy for the Other and Black-and-White thinking will infect both those who would deify him and those who would crucify him. He — and it is almost always a he — moves intentionally to create this unbridgeable cleavage between his supporters and detractors. The outrageousness, I’ve argued (Covitz, 2020), is fundamental to this split-inducing strategy and fuels both sides. The goal, not always reached, is complete domination of the nation he seeks to control. Having split the Nation, he identifies all who oppose him as treasonous giving him reason to assume inordinate governing powers. In order to accomplish this, the Leader *must* construct an opposition that is as vehement in their hatred of the Leader as his supporters are enthusiastic about his coronation.

Secondly, Tribalism — and I'm confident Dr. Anderson would agree — comes in two forms, just as our development rests in no small part on a smooth interweave of loving identification with what is one's own and a recognition of difference in Others. Erikson's Trust-Mistrust conundrum, the Ego Psychological quest for a fusion of Eros and Destrudo and Mahler's and a host of other developmentalists' notion of the need to wed love of kin with a separating and individuating notion of difference all speak to this partnership of drives. Henri Parens (2004, Ch. 14), for instance, writes of a benign fealty to one's family and tribe as an absolutely necessary developmental achievement and different than, for instance, a *toxic or malignant prejudice* which seeks destruction of the Other.

There are those who disagree; I mention one from popular culture. Woody Allen (1990) suggested that *all* such identifications with family, religion or nationality are intrinsically toxic and destructive. Indeed, in this essay in *Tikkun: a Jewish Magazine of Renewal* (1990), he recommends that the magazine remove any connection to tribalism (e.g., the word Jewish from its title), as such expressions can only cause division and, on a larger scale, war. The problem, then, that I allude to is in the overemphasizing of either Similarity over Difference or Difference over Similarity. Both are necessary for the Good Life, Self and Other.

Elsewhere (Covitz, 1998), I've suggested four levels of tribalism, of group identity. The most primitive, exemplified by Nazism, seeks the destruction of the Other and all who are aligned with that Other: "Don't convert; just die." A slightly more progressed but still primitive form was seen in the European Crusades and the Inquisition: "Convert (i.e., become like me/us) or die!" Still more developed we see those who pay lip-service to and may even support another's right to express or practice their silliness. I think of American Tolerance as a prominent example of this form of provisional acceptance of the Other. Finally — and for those of us who come to accept that others have relationships and ideas and feelings not only different from ours but that may exclude us (i.e., for those who successfully resolve oedipal tensions of childhood) — there can develop a *primus inter pares* (first among equals) sense: "What makes mine so valuable is in all ways based on the same dynamics that has you cherishing what is so valuable to you." This final level of development, which Mr. Allen effectively discounts, is precisely what Henri Parens put forth as a notion of benign or non-malignant prejudice and bias.

Anderson closes her work (p. 75) by leaning on, as she had earlier, Lear's work on Crow Indian Chief Plenty Coups who mourned the losses to his people while accepting the need for bringing his tribe to the peace-table of the White Man. It is perhaps, as the Kleinians have so frequently reminded us, that only in the Depressive Position's mourning are we fully capable of recognizing the Other as *different* but *just like us*, too. Civilization may, indeed, depend on an ability to live amicably with those differences brought to our attention by our individuated Others.

I close, then, by highly commending this pamphlet-sized book by Dr. Anderson that many will find helpful in arriving at a psychoanalytic — and historical and sociological — understanding of underlying dynamics of the new American nationalism in our newly-born 21st Century.

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