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The social unconscious and the herd

By Lene Auestad

WE ARE LIVING in dark times. Right-wing populist movements are spreading and gaining in power throughout Europe and beyond. These are shocking and frightening days.

One of the foremost promises in Donald Trump's electoral campaign was that he would erect a wall on the border with Mexico and have Mexico pay for it. Hungary did raise a fence with barbed wire last autumn on its border to Serbia and Croatia. While refugees were drowning in the Mediterranean last spring and the party voted to deny access to Syrian refugees, the politician of the populist right-wing Progress Party in Norway, Per Sandberg, sported a t-shirt with a picture of an anchor displaying the text 'good journey – sea adventure'.

What can psychoanalytic thinking contribute to understanding such phenomena? What constitutes its fruitfulness and what are its limitations? I would like to argue that psychoanalytic thinking is indeed invaluable when it comes to grasping what is at stake in such political movements, and that it is a tragedy that its insights have been lost from mainstream social science, indeed are avoided by it. At the same time I would like to caution against a too uncritical reliance on some of its individualist assumptions when confronted with social phenomena.

In witnessing these contemporary manifestations, of shutting out, humiliating and mocking a threatening other – an imagined other in so far as the subject who does it is concerned, but with real consequences of suffering and ultimately death for those who are targeted, what are the questions we would want to ask? Perhaps, what fears or fantasies are played on in the rhetoric of the politicians who enforce these agendas, would be a highly relevant question to ask, and one that psychoanalysis is supremely equipped to explore, and (therefore) often left out in debates today.

Or: why this individual, rather than another, could be asked of the leader or of the follower of a right-wing populist, nationalist movement; another question to which psychoanalysis could contribute. A further question, why is this particular category of people being targeted today, is one that is better answered by current social conditions, by relations of power. In other words, the fantasies involved in prejudices against 'others', in social stigmatisation and denigration, in ideas of what constitutes the qualities of the 'us' and the 'them' are remarkably constant – though the targets vary in time and in space.

Rather than understanding the current political mood of increasing nationalism and ethnocentrism, of idealisation of what the nation-state has defined as falling within the boundaries of the 'we', and the denigration of those defined as 'others' as exemplifying pathology in contrast to a perceived normality, I propose to see these tendencies as qualities of the social unconscious of these societies. The point is not that characterising certain extremists as mad or ill in some ways is entirely wrong; it may indeed often be fitting. The point is rather that focusing one's attention here may distract from a more serious issue – the spread of attitudes previously thought of as extremist in the general population. When that happens traits that used to be seen as 'abnormal' become normal in the sense of being common, and their general social acceptance makes them recede from view. To paraphrase Adorno et. al., personality patterns that have been dismissed as pathological because they diverge from the manifest trends or dominant ideas in a society have turned out to be but exaggerations of what was almost universal below the surface. Thus what is pathological today may, with changes in social conditions, become the dominant trend of tomorrow.

Similarly, the fascist leader, as described in 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', is distinguished from the followers in expressing more freely the drives which incite the member of the crowd to follow, in being less inhibited in voicing what is latent in them, thereby allowing them the vicarious gratification of merging with this passion.

Authoritarian populist movements construe immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, black people, Roma and Muslims as enemies, threats to one's community and one's 'way of life'. The 'other' is depicted in dehumanising terms as diseases, insects or vermin that threaten to destroy the body politic. In other words, as fundamental anxieties to do with the destruction of one's self, or attacks on one's body, which are exploited for the political purposes of reinforcing a nation-state as an imagined closed unit which successfully expels 'foreign bodies', pollutants or difference.

'What is pathological today may become the dominant trend of tomorrow.'

In one sense, psychoanalysis is in a unique position when it comes to understanding and interpreting such discourses, due to the unconscious meanings they draw upon and exploit. Though this is complicated when we reflect on the fact that these meanings are socially embedded in everyday practices, in social norms and standards for what and whom counts, and who is not worthy of attention

or reflection. Since the analysts or psychoanalytically informed theorists are part of the same society in which these meanings are embedded, and in which many of the same things are taken for granted and remain unquestioned; and since they take part in the same social unconscious, they are not necessarily in a better position than anyone else to spot dehumanising practices of which they are part. I have elsewhere described how we can refer to condensation and displacement, and other characteristics of primary process logic, as unfolding in public space when people are portrayed as masses and become mere objects of discourse, and when groups are depicted as inwardly homogenous entities that are rigidly distinct. For instance, white middle-class people in this society habitually displace racism onto white working-class people and perceive it as a quality belonging over there. This is allowed for because it is a shared social structure of displacement, supported and not questioned by social practices. Thus knowledge and experience of unconscious dynamics as such, though important, is in itself insufficient without genuine and equal encounters with social positions, environments and practices.

The new nationalisms' answer to a felt need for belonging, significance and security is an imagined unit which has the features of an 'I' made 'we', replacing individual narcissism with group narcissism. Togetherness is allowed for in so far as the members of the in-group are imagined as being all the same, and

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Editorial

A precarious balance

By Gary Fereday

THIS EDITION of *New Associations* carries its usual diverse range of articles designed to provoke thought and debate. The articles are varied in their themes but there is a challenge posed as to how psychoanalysis, with its focus on the individual and the inner world, can and should relate better to the outer world and societal factors that affect individuals.

Lene Auestad argues that not only has psychoanalytic thinking been lost from mainstream social science, but is even avoided by it. This should be of huge concern to all of us who believe our profession has something important

to say to policy makers, academics and professionals from other disciplines.

We face huge challenges as a global society: on the political right we have a US presidential candidate appearing to stoke up fear of 'others', with talk of building walls to keep the 'other' out; on the left we have North Korea aggressively parading its missile technology, presumably to mask the dire economic reality of day-to-day life of its citizens; and (surely dwarfing other concerns) we have climate change scientists gathering data that suggests our world is warming up at an even faster rate than we thought; so fast we may no longer be able to do anything about it.

Social unconscious

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the emergence of a dissimilar other evokes all the rage which reveals the limits of these bonds. These ideologies transform the liberal individual, an isolated competitor seen as driven only by egoistic motives, into a herd-animal sticking close to its kin though equally ruthless towards a perceived outsider. 'Our contempt for weakness' is common to both of them – this is to point to how features which now appear on the political scene in their extreme cruelty have already been fostered in the society we share – of competitiveness, egocentrism, coldness towards self and others, and with contempt for many of the qualities that make us human.

To refer again to Adorno's essay on fascist propaganda, he describes how fascism plays on unconscious forces in such a way as to perpetuate the follower's dependence. It expropriates the unconscious for social control rather than aiming to make the subjects conscious of their unconscious. As a contrast, it is inherent of the practice of psychoanalysis that it takes a stand against instrumentalisation. In these times where effectiveness and usefulness are worshipped, with few people pausing

to ask: usefulness for what ends, the psychoanalytic stance of promoting reflection, wherever that may lead, is a much needed alternative position, when even the education system is moving in the direction of more efficiency and less thought. This stance is worth defending, and it is worth questioning how it can be extended so as to provide more safe spaces for thought ■

Lene Auestad holds a PhD in Philosophy from The University of Oslo. She is editor of Psychoanalysis and Politics: Exclusion and the Politics of Representation (Karnac, 2012), Nationalism and the Body Politic: Psychoanalysis and the Growth of Ethnocentrism and Xenophobia (Karnac 2013) and a book on Hannah Arendt in Norwegian (Akademika, 2011). Her monograph Respect, Plurality, and Prejudice: A Psychoanalytical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Dynamics of Social Exclusion and Discrimination was published by Karnac in 2015. She founded and runs the international and interdisciplinary conference series Psychoanalysis and Politics, www.psa-pol.org

Richard Sherry, in a challenging article, asks us to think how we address the profession's often indifference to these societal issues; 'to transform the very privileged training we have received to better apply these to the real world problems.' A theme of course that *New Associations* returns to regularly – how do we articulate a voice for the profession in the wider political debate and policy making arena? How do we get to Lene Auestad's position where our psychoanalytic stance, with its focus on reflection, is seen as a much needed insight when Britain's education system is moving in the opposite direction, focusing on efficiency and less thought?

'How well do we understand the intersection between the individual, the group, a system and society?'

With relatively limited resources (we are a profession that is small in numbers) the BPC is working hard to respond to the challenges of articulating a voice for the profession. To do this we have to work closely with our member institutions and our registrants. The willingness of individuals to give so much time and expertise freely is quite humbling particularly when, as Elizabeth Cotton's article highlights, so many are facing challenges in day-to-day clinical practice with increasingly precarious working conditions and the steady decline of effective teamwork.

As well as taking the profession's messages to policy makers and politicians, a key role for the BPC is to support registrants in their day-to-day clinical work. One area we are increasingly recognising is the issue of our ageing profession and retirement. This provokes very real anxieties for many of our registrants, and Gill Barratt, Georgina Hardie, Judith Philo and Ruth Pitman thoughtfully explore this sensitive issue in their joint article.

We are currently developing a range of 'good practice' guides that are likely to cover a range of issues that includes dealing with retirement as well as other concerns such as: clinical records and data protection; implications of the Equalities Act; and child protection.

In many ways the BPC's diverse work mirrors the complexity and diversity of articles in this edition, many of which reflect on the theme of precarity. The precarious balance we have to strike to ensure that we simultaneously support and critically review the potential that psychoanalytic thinking can add to wider societal issues, as well as support individual registrants in the complex job of working with their clients, results in a rich and dynamic mix of possibilities and objectives. In the realm of pathology and psychological understanding, our profession charts its course considerably, but how well do we understand that external intersection between the individual, the group, a system and society? ■

Gary Fereday is Chief Executive of the BPC.



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We welcome your ideas for articles, reviews, and letters to the editor. In particular we are looking for reviews of cultural events, books and films with psychoanalytic interest. If you would like to propose a topic for a longer article (up to 1200 words) please contact Leanne Stelmaszczyk: leanne@bpc.org.uk

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