

A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Politics of Terror: In the Aftermath of 9/11

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the group unconscious responses to the traumatic events of September 11/ 2002. It argues that prevailing economic, political and cultural patterns provide the context for understanding the psychopolitical significance of the terrorist attacks on this country, as well as the unconscious group dynamics, among leaders and citizens alike, that characterize the U.S. response to 9/11. It argues that primitive defenses, such as splitting, projective identification and idealization have operated to drive prevailing discourse and practice. It explores the possibilities that oppositional movements may be able to mobilize citizens to oppose current U.S. policy.

Key terms: paranoid schizoid position, death anxiety, corporate globalization, identification with the aggressor, trauma

I would like to explore the complex psychological meanings of living in the United States with the sequelae of September 11, 2001. My view focuses on the significance of this terrifying event and its aftermath within the context of already-existing profound problems in this country's social, cultural and economic life. It is my contention that 9/11 and the "war against terrorism" have had a paradoxical effect: on the one hand, they have constituted a profoundly traumatic experience, and on the other they have provided a kind of temporary relief from deep anxieties provoked by devastating trends emanating from within this society.

The shocking assault on American soil and on innocent civilians on September 11, 2001 tore into long-established cultural assumptions of American “exceptionalism,” that is, the shared unquestioned notion that the U.S. is inviolable--that “it can’t happen here”. Even while the U.S. is the most violent society among the developed capitalist countries, few citizens ever doubted our immunity to the violence of terrorism that has plagued almost every other society in the world. With the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, people across the country and from every ethnic and class background experienced profound grief and loss, helplessness and rage, terror at an unknown future. Suddenly trauma was part of the cultural surround, concretely visible, undeniable. Politicians, media pundits, and mental health professionals alike spoke in ways that recognized the social production of psychic pain. In the immediate aftermath, the central concern focused on a need to act, to avenge our innocent victim-hood. While the U.S. had a right to respond to this crime against humanity, critical reflection was foreclosed and there was little debate about how to define the tragic events, how to punish the perpetrators. Little consideration was given to long-range concerns; we were simply “at war”. From 9/11 on, a “manufacturing of consent,” as Noam Chomsky has called it, was orchestrated in support of retaliatory vengeance. The invasions of Afghanistan and then of Iraq have marginalized the voices that protested “not in our name,” the sentiment articulated by hundreds of thousands of citizens in this country (and millions more throughout the world) who marched in demonstrations opposing this government’s war policies rationalized as a crusade of civilization against evil. With all the contours of a repetition compulsion, this country is once again at war--a war launched by the President, embraced by the Congress, bolstered by the corporate media, yet never formally declared. The enemy? “Everyone who is against us.”

I think that 9/11 might have evoked a different response that might have led to an enlightened strategy with longer-range goals in mind: the urgent need to understand the nature of this country’s relationship with the rest of the world that stimulates such fanatic hatred toward us. But a more reflective response to 9/11 was impossible precisely because it would have required an

examination of ourselves in too many domains, including this country's prevailing nationalist ideology that for well over a century has been built on intellectual rationalization, denial of the often destructive effects of U.S. policies, and the use of primitive psychological defenses such as splitting and projection. Indeed, the government's discourse and policies have supported archaic and binary ways of thinking: us **vs.** them, good **vs.** evil. Leadership and followers alike have demonstrated an inability to bear the knowledge that we, **like** them (the terrorist enemies), are both good and evil; we, **like** them, have perpetrated aggressive assaults around the world that have caused immense suffering and pain; we, **like** them, must take responsibility for our contribution to the escalating cycles of global violence. We, **like** them, must find a way to move toward policies based on reparation and justice rather than hatred and exploitation if we want to preserve human life and the earth.

Such a realistically complex stance, however, would represent the political equivalent of moving, in psychoanalytic terms, from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position. As Melanie Klein pointed out, in the paranoid-schizoid position, anxieties of a primordial nature threaten the immature ego and lead to a mobilization of primitive defenses, including splitting, idealization and projective identification, which operate to create rudimentary structures composed of idealized good objects that must be separated from persecuting bad ones in order for the latter to be preserved. The leading anxiety in this earliest of mental states is called paranoid and is resolved by projecting it onto others. The subject is thus rescued from an internal threat and must now be protected from an external one. Rejection of the idea that the anxiety-mobilizing impulse is mine is thus characteristic of this infantile state. In the developmentally advanced depressive position, ambivalent impulses toward the object can be tolerated: the object is not destroyed but the subject suffers by realizing that the destructive impulse is his or hers. This change represents an increased capacity to integrate experience in which destructive impulses lead to feelings of loss and guilt, which enable mourning and the emergence of reparative capacities. Klein postulated that even after the attainment of depressive position capacities, persecutory internal

or external stimuli could provoke regression to paranoid schizoid states. Wilfred Bion believed that the frequent alteration between the two positions is a feature of ordinary mental life.

The events of 9/11 have stimulated many psychoanalysts to write about the “terrorist mind” in which paranoid schizoid dynamics are seen to prevail. But I want to argue that the U.S. reaction reveals similar features of paranoid schizoid splitting and denial. From my perspective, these regressed forms of psychological functioning are related to the increasingly polarized and dangerous conditions of the contemporary world and the position the U.S. occupies in it. The U.S. response also reveals something about the relationship between the leaders of this country and its citizens, which I will explore further on.

Psychoanalytic research has shown how the relational matrix either promotes psychic development and integration or causes the process to fail, often with disastrous results. Aggressive impulses are fated to be destructively or constructively accentuated depending on the existence and nature of container/contained relationships from the beginning of life and reinforced throughout the life cycle by the social environment. With the existence of environmental provisions that facilitate the integration and resolution of primitive aggressive emotions, such as envy, greed, and hate, individuals are able to achieve the capacity for depressive position positive emotions that form the basis of guilt and reparative love, concern, and responsibility for others.

It is my contention that U.S. society has fallen dramatically short of providing this kind of positive containing environment. On the contrary, an insidiously traumatogenic environment has developed over the past several decades in this country, in which the prevailing discourses of freedom and democracy have been contradicted by the lived reality of most citizens. Just below the surface of a culture that prides itself on being the world’s example of equal opportunity, social justice and civil liberties, deep inequities constitute the experience of the majority of people. In the wealthiest country in the world, whose privileged standard of living has in part been acquired through its historically exploitative relationship with Latin American nations, economic and

social indicators reveal increasingly inequitable patterns that negatively affect the majority of citizens. These trends are due in large part to corporate downsizing, capital flight, deindustrialization, the shift from productive to speculative investment, and the elimination of the protective functions of the state. The distribution of the wealth is continually worsening, and today the richest one percent of all households control about 38 percent of national wealth, while the bottom 80 percent of households hold only 17 percent . In the past decade, middle income families with children have added 20 hours of paid work per year to make ends meet, even while acquiring more indebtedness. The median male wage in 2000 was below its 1979 level, although productivity and thus profits have increased during that time by 44.5 percent. Today there is less mobility out of poverty and fewer families are financially prepared for retirement (Economic Policy Institute). In the U.S., a society of “have-mores” and “have-lesses” is being created. These policies have negatively affected the middle and working classes, the unemployed and the chronically poor. Downward trends in employment, wages, job security, and benefits for working people and in increased bankruptcies for small businesses have been accompanied by a shift from a manufacturing economy to a services-based economy, one noted for its low wages and non-unionized jobs. While poverty had once been associated with female-headed families, by the 1990s, over 40 percent of the poor were living in two-parent families. In the wealthiest country in the world, one in five children lives below the poverty line. Adolescents are poorer and more often being raised in chaotic families by neglectful or abusive parents, who are themselves overworked or unemployed. Young people today are more likely than previous generations to suffer alcohol or drug addiction. For the first time in the nation’s history, the next generation will have less opportunity and a lower standard of living and will be exposed to more social violence than their parents’ generation.

The assault on a sense of security, stability and hope contained in these trends with their demoralizing psychological effects are often manifested in the increasing acts of aggression and violence among the population. And the rise in real-world violence is mirrored and stimulated as well in the

ubiquitous violence typical of most forms of entertainment. Entertainment violence deepens our belief that the social world is dangerous and even predatory. Huge vertically-integrated conglomerates are producing advertising, films, television programs, and computer and video games that bombard consumers with violent depictions of innocent men, women and children being assaulted, abused and tortured. Vigilante action is modeled rather than reflection and negotiation, which results in a muting of the public's association between justice and lawful process. Indeed, psychological studies of the impact of the ubiquitous narratives of violence on consumers of television and film demonstrate their identification with aggressive and impulsive resolution of conflict. Many individuals make use unconsciously of the repetitive themes of violence (for example, through identification with the aggressor) in order to defend themselves against the threat of being overwhelmed by the experience of helplessness and vulnerability in response to the destructive aggression they experience in the larger culture, their interpersonal peer groups, their families and their own psychic reality. Ironically, to the extent that these unconscious maneuvers are successful, they wind up reinforcing an identification with violence and aggression as models for feeling and acting. Thus the media makers and the profit-driven institutions that fund them have literally all too often won the minds and hearts of this society's citizens.

I have summarized some of the critical trends that I believe constitute an insidiously traumatogenic environment in this country, which I believe provides the context for understanding the unconscious group meanings of 9/11.

From my perspective, 9/11 and the political, economic, and foreign policies that have emerged in its aftermath can be comprehended in terms of a paradox: On the one hand, the terrorist attacks on U.S. lives were experienced as cataclysmic. In the subsequent weeks, threats of potential future suicide bombings and the intermittent warnings of the threat of biochemical or nuclear attacks, as well as the severe economic dislocation affecting millions of working people all constituted an acute traumatic group experience. On the other hand, there was an additional and paradoxical significance of 9/11, given the social, political and economic conditions of this

society at the historical moment of the attack: it simultaneously represented a kind of relief from unconscious anxieties. My view of this phenomenon is related to Robert J. Lifton's concept of death anxiety. Lifton has dedicated much of his work to an examination of human destructiveness, which he believes is manifested in the dynamics of trauma and survival. Lifton has revised the concept of the death instinct, which Freud developed partly to account for the omnipresence of violence in the world and which he came to believe was an innate destructive impulse that struggled with the life instinct for hegemonic expression in the human psyche. In Lifton's thinking, the idea of an instinctually-based explanation of the ubiquity of human destructiveness and aggression is replaced by one that is based on a "psychology of meaning" (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 133). According to Lifton, from early on in life we struggle for vitality and, ultimately for symbolic immortality. Early experiences with separation, loss, and fears of disintegration represent death equivalents. In this sense they are precursors of imagery, symbolization, and meaning connected to "a life-death model or paradigm" (p. 134). Lifton's concept of psychic numbing, which he developed from his clinical work with Hiroshima and Auschwitz survivors, refers to people's reaction to extreme trauma in which they distance themselves from a traumatic experience that is incomprehensible and that they have little capacity to deal with symbolically. The challenge is to gradually put together the shattered psyche, balancing the need to reconstitute one's former self with the need to metabolize the traumategenic experience. If this working through is not accomplished, there is a perverse quest for meaning that includes the exploitation of other people psychologically. As Lifton puts it, in response to traumatic situations that are not integrated, "we reassert our own vitality and symbolic immortality by denying [others] their right to live and by identifying them with the death taint, by designating them as victims." In other words, destructiveness entails the projection of death anxiety onto others, who become its container. Lifton adds that human beings cannot kill large numbers of people except by claiming a virtuous motive, "so that killing on a large scale is always an attempt at affirming the life power of one's own group" (140).

In this regard, then, 9-11 has symbolically constituted a relief in the sense of a decrease in the persecutory anxiety provoked by living in a culture undergoing a deterioration from **within**. The implosion reflects the economic and social trends I described briefly above and has been manifest in many related symptoms, including the erosion of family and community, the corruption of government in league with the wealthy and powerful, the abandonment of working people by profit-driven corporations going international, urban plight, a drug-addicted youth, a violence-addicted media reflecting and motivating an escalating real-world violence, the corrosion of civic participation by a decadent democracy, a spiritually bereft culture held prisoner to the almighty consumer ethic, racial discrimination, misogyny, gay-bashing, growing numbers of families joining the homeless, and environmental devastation. Was this not lived as a kind of societal suicide--an ongoing assault, an aggressive attack—against life and emotional well-being waged from within against the societal self? 9/11 permitted a respite from the sense of internal decay by inadvertently stimulating a renewed vitality via a reconfiguration of political and psychological forces: tensions within this country—between the “haves-mores” and “have-lesses,” as well as between the defenders and critics of the status quo, yielded to a wave of nationalism in which a united people--*Americans* all--stood as one against external aggression. At the same time, the generosity, solidarity and self-sacrifice expressed by Americans toward one another reaffirmed our sense of ourselves as capable of achieving the “positive” depressive position sentiments of love and empathy. Fractured social relations were symbolically repaired. The enemy--the threat to our integrity as a nation and, in D. W. Winnicott’s terms, to our sense of “going on being”—was no longer the web of complex internal forces so difficult to understand and change, but a simple and identifiable enemy from outside of us, clearly marked by their difference, their foreignness and their uncanny and unfathomable “uncivilized” pre-modern character. The societal relief came with the projection of aggressive impulses onto an easily dehumanized external enemy, where they could be justifiably attacked and destroyed.

This country's response to 9/11, then, in part demonstrates how persecutory anxiety is more easily dealt with in individuals and in groups when it is experienced as being provoked from the outside rather than from internal sources. As Hanna Segal has argued (IJP, 1987), groups often tend to be narcissistic, self-idealizing, and paranoid in relation to other groups and to shield themselves from knowledge about the reality of their own aggression, which of necessity is projected into an enemy--real or imagined--so that it can be demeaned, held in contempt and then attacked. Thus 9/11 permitted a new discourse to arise about what is fundamentally wrong in the world: indeed, the anti-terrorism rhetoric and policies of the U.S. government functioned for a period to overshadow the anti-globalization movement that has identified the fundamental global conflict to be between on the one hand the U.S. and other governments in the First World, transnational corporations, and powerful international financial institutions, and on the other, workers' struggles, human rights organizations and environmental movements throughout the world. The new discourse presents the fundamental conflict in the world as one between civilization and fundamentalist terrorism. But this "civilization" is a wolf in sheep's clothing, and those who claim to represent it reveal the kind of splitting Segal describes: a hyperbolic idealization of themselves and their culture and a projection of all that is bad, including the consequences of the terrorist underbelly of decades-long U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and Asia, onto the denigrated other, who must be annihilated. The U.S. government, tainted for years by its ties to powerful transnational corporate interests, has recreated itself as the nationalistic defender of the American people. In the process, patriotism has kidnapped citizens' grief and mourning and militarism has high jacked people's fears and anxieties, converting them into a passive consensus for an increasingly authoritarian government's domestic and foreign policies. The defensive significance of this new discourse has to do with another theme related to death anxiety as well: the threat of species annihilation that people have lived with since the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Segal argues that the leaders of the U.S. as well as other countries with nuclear capabilities, have disavowed their own aggressive motivations as

they developed weapons of mass destruction. The distortion of language throughout the Cold War, such as “deterrence,” “flexible response,” “Mutual Assured Destruction”, “rational nuclear war,” “Strategic Defense Initiative” has served to deny the aggressive nature of the arms race (p. 8) and “to disguise from ourselves and others the horror of a nuclear war and our own part in making it possible or more likely” (pp. 8-9). Although the policy makers’ destructiveness can be hidden from their respective populations and justified for “national security” reasons, Segal argues that such denial only increases reliance on projective mechanisms and stimulates paranoia.

In this regard, 9-11 has facilitated the U.S. political leadership’s ability to project responsibility for the ongoing threat to humanity posed by the arms race onto the immediate threat represented by terrorists, who may very well have managed to buy or steal the components of germ warfare or radiation bombs from sources financed or supplied by the U.S. itself. The Bush administration has reconstructed the image of this country from being a major player in the threat represented by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to that of a victim, whose current dangerous military escalation is defined exclusively as justifiable self-defense. These dynamics of denial and projection are reflected in the discourse of the administrations’ war against terrorism that justifies not only as self-defense its preemptive wars of aggression, but also as well in its self-declared right to constrain other countries’ acquisition of nuclear capacities as it simultaneously advocates the research and manufacture of a new generation of nuclear weapons to add to its already exorbitant nuclear arsenal.

However, in the several years that have passed since the acute trauma represented by 9/11 facilitated a relatively united support for the government’s retaliatory responses, the cumulative costs of its aggressive foreign policy are being felt and recognized by increasing numbers of citizens. As some critics have argued, whenever empires expand their global reach, it is not only the conquered peoples abroad that pay the price, but the citizens in the heart of the empire as well. Thus, the persecutory anxieties produced by the deterioration in the quality of life in this country that predated 9/11, which were temporarily

relieved by the mechanisms of group denial and projection following the terrorist attacks, have once again been heightened by current domestically-driven political and economic crises. We now live in a society in which the chronic traumategenic environment I described earlier is exacerbated by those in power whose omnipotent strivings are being realized at the cost of the well being of the majority.

The public's fear of terrorism is being challenged by a growing awareness that the experience of danger is due as much to internal sources as to potential external threat. People in this country are witness to the undeniably corrupt collusion between political leaders and multi-billion dollar corporations, such as Halliburton, that enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship that expands their political, military and economic interests throughout the world. U.S. citizens are witness to the accumulating evidence of the lies and misrepresentations of a government that misdirects billions of their tax dollars to the occupation of faraway lands, while their own communities and access to jobs, health care, education, and housing deteriorate before their very eyes. Such a process represents the expansion of U.S. corporate interests abroad while it simultaneously represents the massive transfer of wealth from the middle and working classes of this country to the ruling political and economic elites. Citizens are witness to the unparalleled assault on civil liberties contained in the Patriot Act, which legalizes government harassment, entrapment, imprisonment and even the removal of citizenship from individuals who exercise their traditional constitutional rights to think and speak critically about the dominant political discourse and policies of this country.

Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to tell the difference between real terrorist threats and the threats represented by a terrorist state whose policies and discourse are meant to mask their assault on "us" (citizens) as well as "them" (foreign enemies). The U.S. population now lives with the policies of an under-funded Homeland Security Agency that is incapable of defending our public buildings, ports, nuclear power plants, waste sites and weaponry storage sites and chemical and biological research facilities. Instead, this federal agency has developed a color-coded scale denoting the relative danger

of immanent terrorist attacks with weapons of mass destruction. Its periodic declaration of the frightening “Code Orange” sends panic throughout the population. The danger, a “clear and present” one that for years was denied, is no longer deniable. And what are the effects of the awareness that we are in fact not protected by our government all the while we are simultaneously exposed to these periodic code alerts? A terrified people who are ideologically and psychologically more likely to identify with the primitive splitting and projective practices of its leaders who wage war against other nations in the name of self-defense, creating more terrorists by the thousands.

As I suggested earlier, the relational (social) matrix either promotes psychic development and integration or causes the process to fail, often with disastrous results. I believe the current political situation in this country constitutes a critical juncture in which either paranoid schizoid or depressive dynamics might prevail. It is possible that the conditions I have described may continue to produce a traumatized citizenry who wish to deny vulnerability and whose fantasies of being rescued (by a strong leadership) make them abandon their capacity for independent thought; a traumatized citizenry whose experience of extreme terror produces wishes for revenge that provide a manic omnipotent defense against helpless feelings of vulnerability. In this case, a bystander population, whose unconscious defenses of identification with the aggressor, splitting and projection, will provide continued uncritical support for governmental policies. Or, as increasingly appears to be the case, the illegal and unethical practices of this government will result in a growing capacity for reflective critical thought among citizens that could provide the potential support for an oppositional movement seeking to shift the discourse and practice of the U.S. in terms of domestic as well as foreign policy.

In the end, it would be folly to let our understanding of the conditions that have helped to produce Islamic fundamentalism blind us to the threat it poses. On the contrary, understanding the conditions that breed hatred, envy and vengeance has the potential for widening the options of what needs to be done, not only militarily, but politically and economically, to repair the conditions that continue to foster such malignant states of mind.

The U.S. government's decision to widen the arch of violence to combat terrorism is producing another generation of terrorists whose sense of outrage leaves them from their perspective no apparent alternative to nihilism. I believe that this policy endangers our survival. Luckily, growing numbers of U.S. citizens are responsive to an alternative discourse whose roots lie in the multifaceted movement of activists from the labor and human rights organizations and from a variety of groups concerned with the despoliation of the environment and the crippling indebtedness of third world countries. For several decades, this anti-corporateglobalizationmovement, whose adherents are found in many countries, has challenged the existing paradigm of power in the world. The movement's alternative discourse has advocated for equity among the world's peoples and for the sustainability of the earth, and it has been the foundation out of which the widespread peace movement emerged to oppose U.S. foreign policy since 9/11.

This movement's oppositionaldiscourse has, I believe, created a space for the reflective process that more citizens are willing to engage in as they become disenchanted or even outraged with the current administration's policies. "Not in our name" is the theme articulated by more and more citizens who oppose this government's destructive policies. Their perspective reflects the willingness to deal with the trauma of 9/11 in ways that strive to achieve the depressive position capacity to bear the knowledge that we, **like** them, are both good and evil; we, **like** them, have perpetrated aggressive assaults around the world that have caused immense suffering and pain; we, **like** them, must take responsibility for our contribution to the escalating cycles of global violence. We, **like** them, must find a way to move toward policies based on reparation and justice rather than hatred and exploitation if we want to preserve human life and the earth.

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