

The Dynamics of Counselling and Peace

[Some comments on 'A Report from the CAP Working Party 1985-1988 in the British Association for Counselling', British Association for Counselling, 1988]

'Probably the crucial move for those under hostile pressures is to fall back on projection and take up some kind of paranoid-schizoid position. The unbearable confusion of divided loyalties and uncertain support is masked by a simple picture of Us and Them, the Good and the Bad. This happens not only on the grand scale with hot and cold wars (and with a safe boundary provided by a metaphorical Iron Curtain or a very literal Berlin Wall), but also on a smaller scale of groups as they distinguish themselves from other groups. Thus for us as counsellors our familiarity with psychodynamics will provide us with some conceptual tools for the understanding of aspects of social and public reality, although we would be wise not to apply our categories without careful thought about differing contexts. In *LIVING WITH THE BOMB*, Dorothy Rowe writes illuminatingly of our need to construct enemies in order to survive threats to our individual or group existence: 'The more the Stranger is feared, the more cohesive is the group' (p 133). However, some members of the working party felt that Dorothy Rowe seems to assume that fear of war is always irrational and based on projection, so that we were inclined to prefer Joanna Macy's position that such fear is often eminently rational: There really is a threat of nuclear war!' [p.30]

Comment by David Wasdell

This section seems to reflect a coping response to symptoms rather than a resolving response to causes. The individual dynamics of projection and paranoid-schizoid defence are taken as datum of human behaviour, acted out at individual, group, institutional, national and global levels. Within inadequate analysis of the reason for and dynamics lying behind such processes, there is no real capacity for intervention to change the processes and therefore a coping mechanism is required.

Secondly, there is a polarisation and misunderstanding between the role of projection of unconscious fears into social processes and the reality of the threats so engendered, which then becomes disconnected from the ground which has given it power, reified into an object or reality of its own, which then generates and perseverates the dynamics in question. Part of this seems to stem from the low levels of understanding of feedback loops in social systems, the tendency to stay with the here-and-now in any understanding of psychodynamic process, and the confusion between projection and re-introjection and re-projection. If the historical and time element is also taken into account then the fundamental levels of paranoid projection from the individual out to the group boundaries, can be seen over centuries, indeed millennia to be generating norms of social behaviour which far surpass, in terms of their time base, the temporary structures of individual consciousness. These constructs of a historic social unconscious are then perceived as reified objects of social space, given a reality of their own and then designated as causal of the fears which are felt by the present generation in the here-and-now of their own dynamic consciousness. We therefore conveniently have a way of externalising the objects and causes of our current fears and in so doing reinforcing the displaced, disconnected, psychotic processes of armouring of the body politic. It is essential therefore to understand the feedback processes over time between the intrapersonal world of feared bad objects and idealised bad environments which lie at the root of the paranoid schizoid position, and the matching externalised social construct which is the

historic deposit and reification of such projected fears. Where advance is made in solving the problems of the social armouring, the projection of paranoid behaviour from individuals tends to put up the walls once more. However, and conversely, where individuals make process and progress in understanding and working through and integrating their own paranoid positions, they find that they have to live in a world in which there is very real reason for being paranoid, the defences are therefore reinstated from external reality and the collusion processes act to maintain and reinforce the paranoid schizoid defences against primitive anxiety, in a kind of stasis-preserving process.

Any approach at resolution therefore requires interventions at many levels. Certainly there has to be in-depth understanding of the origins of the paranoid schizoid defences as learned systems, stemming from extremely primitive and terrifying encounters with persecutory environments, shared in common by very high proportions of the human species. Certainly there has also to be a very widespread process of education and integration, minimising the precipitating trauma in the first instance, working through the effects of whatever traumata are there, integrating the material, withdrawing the projections that generate the reified social responses. In addition there must also be interventions that delineate and explicate the generation of social armouring out of the individual projection mechanisms developed over history. With growing understanding can then come also the withdrawal of the collusion feedback loops - the result of which is the renewed possibility of the deconstruction of the social defences themselves. Any such process would therefore require a matrix approach of multi-level, multi-input, multi-dimensional networking of ideas across every level of the global dynamic.

Any such programme could not in its very nature simply limit itself to dealing with the projection mechanisms associated with aggressive tendencies. It would also expose a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of regression, projection, displacement, idealisation, scapegoating and so forth in many, many other systems, indeed in the totality of human consciousness. It would therefore inevitably lead to a profound and radical transformation of our understandings of religion, of political processes, of family life, of the roles of institutions, of organisational structure and dynamics, of the relationship to the environment, to the management of differences between persons of race, belief, gender etc. Resistance to change which was reified in any one of these fields (and the most profoundly resistant is that of world religion) would itself mobilise to block and reverse any level of insight into the dynamics of armouring and disarmouring. It is a paradox that the world religions which see themselves as engaged in enabling peace should in fact be the maintainers of the very mechanisms that lead to war itself. The structures of what one author has described as the 'benign psychosis' will also have to be unpicked if the species-threatening insanity of the malign psychosis is itself to yield.

David Wasdell

26th January 1990

Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE

Hosted by: Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN)

(Charity Registration No: 284542)

Web-site: www.meridian.org.uk