

The Open Letter on World Dynamics

Some Reflections on an Intervention

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Introduction

Raising awareness of the ubiquitous power of unconscious forces that drive our social and collective behaviour is a critically important task. It is a necessary but not sufficient step in the process of social transformation. To be unaware of the unconscious is to be ruled by it, to act it out in fractal patterns of dysfunctional behaviour and to divert an escalating proportion of energy and resources into the preservation and reinforcement of the social defences against anxiety. To become aware of its existence is to begin the journey of its deconstruction. Beyond that essential initial step lies the work of analysing its causal roots, delineating and understanding its dynamic outworking in every level of human behaviour, annealing and integrating the effects of the precipitating traumata, deconstructing the associated defences, releasing the human potential previously bound up in the process of repression and, finally, the creative evolution of a form of civilisation underpinned by a culture committed to making the as yet unconscious conscious.

Publication of the “Open Letter on World Dynamics” in mid December 2002, was timed to coincide with an historic window of opportunity. Although addressed to leading figures in the world political scene, its relevance was to a far wider group of responsible leaders, behavioural scientists, consultants, analysts, communicators and opinion-formers across the world. Its task was to focus attention on the unconscious and non-rational dynamics currently driving international process and in so doing to

introduce the emerging paradigm of macro-systems analysis based on the application of pre and peri-natal psychology.

This paper reflects on the socio-political context and the analytic background of the document before turning to issues of delivering a consultative intervention to a massive system using concepts and procedures drawn from the field of complexity. Before the section reviewing, expanding and commenting on the text itself, there are some personal remarks on my experience of the process of authoring and initiating the intervention. Massive circulation was achieved by using an e-mail meta-net cascade, supported by web-site and more traditional mail-based means of distribution. Feedback on the initiative and its content, intertwined with emotionally loaded transference, is reviewed before a final section exploring some of the lessons to be learned from the experience, their application to future work and the outstanding issues now facing us in the ongoing task of making the unconscious conscious.

Background

The spectacle of the last American Presidential elections revealed a nation equitably polarised between two diverse directions. The inner core of heartland states with a more uniform, white-dominated, business controlled, conservative caucus supported policies of comparative isolationism, high defence, more intense social control, favouring the interests of big business, suppressing the needs of socially dependent groups and ignoring the environmental agenda. The outer ring of boundary states with a more diverse ethnic mix, greater international contact and environmental awareness, tended more towards policies of integrationism, environmentally responsible constraints on pollution and energy consumption, curbing the power of capitalist multi-national corporations, and balancing the needs and resources of the different social groups. The decision to resolve the dead-heat by awarding the presidency to the first group was taken by a judiciary dominated by conservative interests against a background of comparative disenfranchisement of populations from inner-city, poor and ethnically diverse areas.

The twin towers of American leadership were subject to splitting and denial. All power aggregated to one side of the polarity. The outer agenda was depotentiated and George Bush took up office at the head of a nation fraught with ambivalence.

The dynamics changed at a stroke as the martyr-driven aircraft plunged into the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. America had an identifiable enemy. Moreover, it was an enemy whose own dynamics were dominated by extreme splitting and denial with the projection of all repressed internal negativities into the external environment. The powerful paranoid-schizoid syndrome at the heart of Al Quaida masks the intensity of unconscious terror behind a façade of religious fundamentalism. The events of 9.11 transferred that terror into the heart of America.

In a state of post-traumatic-shock, the US began to mirror the primitive defences against anxiety. The whole nation and its representative leadership on Capitol Hill, suppressed internal division and united to elevate its new president to the role of champion with draconian powers. His political problems were solved, the internal ambivalence of the electorate dissolved and the dynamics of the right-wing Christian

fundamentalist movement unleashed. The Patriot Act institutionalised repression of dissent. Subsequent legislation and internal defensive measures evolved American society in the direction of the rule of the Taliban. Externally, the demonisation of Osama Bin Laden and his fundamentalist network led to the first staging of trauma re-enactment in Afghanistan. As the energy of that psychodrama receded, a new enemy figure-head, with equivalent intra-personal and social defences, was elevated in the guise of Saddam Hussein, and the current second round of compulsion-repetition was staged in Iraq. Further future re-enactment scenarios are already in the pipe-line.

Nine months on from Ground Zero I had the opportunity to make a presentation on “The Psychodynamics of War and Religion” to the 25th Annual Convention of the International Psychohistory Association at the University of New York on Manhattan Island. July saw a similar engagement with the European arm of the same organisation meeting in Vichy (of all places!). In September I presented “Prenatal Experience as the Ground of Group and Social Process” to the fifteenth World Congress of the International Society for Pre and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine which gathered contributions from the edge of psychoanalytic research in Budapest, while two months later I was to offer “Roots of the Common Unconscious: Towards a new Paradigm of Psycho-Social Analysis” to the London conference of the Organisation for Promotion of Understanding of Society. The series of events enabled me to listen to and work with some of the most outstanding psycho-social and systems analysts in the world. There was an awesome sense of convergence in the understanding of the unfolding international psychodrama which cried out for synthesis and exposure to a wider public. We faced the practical dilemma of how best to achieve that in the comparatively short time-span during which such an intervention could make a significant contribution.

Consultation and Complexity

When offering an interpretation to a small group or organisation, the relationship is ongoing and face to face, the membership is limited and contained, feedback is virtually instantaneous and transference issues can be worked with in real time. Conditions are very different when attempting to make a consultative intervention in a massive international system. There is no chance to engage with a sequence of single issue communications, so the content must deliver the full range of material in one package. The medium is cool (i.e. written text) and low band-width with no personal relationship. It is impossible to reach all members of the target population, so a strategy needs to be developed to reach a significant percentage of the opinion leaders and formers. It cannot be assumed that readers will be uniformly familiar with technical terms and language of the analytic profession, concepts must therefore be couched in non-technical terms and be supported by explicatory statements to ensure minimal loss of core meaning. Reception is by comparatively isolated individuals, rather than a dynamic matrix of interactively relating group members. Timing of reception is not instantaneous, but stretches out over days, weeks or even months. Under these conditions, feedback is minimal, one-to-one, fragmentary in content and incoherent in timing. Evoked transference suffers from the same set of constraints and cannot be effectively engaged in an ongoing process.

Systems of complexity consisting of massive populations of communicating and interconnected elements, behave in increasingly well-know ways. Outcomes of

interventions or actions are inherently unpredictable, though limited within the boundaries of statistical probability. Initial conditions or incremental changes at one point in the system may have profound effects at a distance and over long periods of time (the so-called “butterfly effect”). The originating source has no control over the specific communication paths or responses, once launched, the intervention has a life of its own. The system exhibits phenomena of autocatalysis and autopoiesis, which may be positive or negative in effect. In other words, subsets of the system may cohere spontaneously to take self-organising initiatives with respect to the intervention, like translating it into new languages, placing the text for publication in journals, news-letters and on web-sites, using it as a basic document in academic courses, circulating it to personal contacts in strategic positions, editing the text to clarify, simplify or cut out parts that give offence, circulating counter messages condemning the intervention as anti-American, as not sufficiently practical or writing off the whole premise of unconscious dynamics as nonsense.

In systems of this complexity it is impossible to know for certain what effect if any the intervention has had, nor is it possible to attribute changes in the system behaviour directly to the intervention, since linear and simple chains of cause and effect do not apply. The initiative takes its place within a soup of competing and complementary signals, playing its part in increasing the level of awareness in the system as a whole and modifying the matrix of dynamic information which drives transformation in the presenting topology of system behaviour.

Process

At a personal level I felt particularly vulnerable. In fantasy there were a number of scenarios that had to be faced and tolerated before I could risk taking such an initiative. At one level I feared making a fool of myself in public, having my precious insights ridiculed professionally, being seen through as a sham, an intellectual con-man. What if no one was interested and the whole thing was simply ignored? Was I indulging in some kind of ego-trip, falling into the temptation to indulge in megalomania or exhibiting a messiah complex? Would the act be viewed and attacked as an exercise in academic one-up-manship, trying to put my nose out in front of the field and score points off other professionals? At the other end of the scale I had to be able to cope with responses of adulation and praise or of having the material taken seriously at the highest levels with consequent elevation into a high-profile public role. They were difficult emotions and I wrestled with them for some days. Eventually I felt clear that this was an important work initiative that needed to be taken at this time and that I happened to be almost uniquely in a position to take it and had to risk whatever the response might be. The important stance would be to minimise my personal identification with the output, but to remain open to feedback while discerning and sensitive to differentiate between transference and genuine critique or affirmation.

As the fears and confusion subsided, I experienced increasing clarity in writing out the set of propositions and supporting illustrative notes that brought together the cumulative and convergent insights of the previous six months of study and consultation. With main text complete, I shared what I was doing with a small peer-group. It generated intense interest and excitement, but I came away with a disturbing sense of being caught up in a process of avoidance. It felt as though the content were

vortexing round a black hole, literally held in “a void-dance” around a core that was still unconscious and too terrifying to name. Slowly it dawned that the set of insights, although drawn from the classical paradigms of psychoanalysis and systems psychodynamics, were not taking into account the fundamental source of the paranoid-schizoid defences in the pre and peri-natal experience of our species which lies at the heart of the last three decades of consultancy-research. Nor were they taking into account the intense anxiety stemming from the restimulation of this inner core by our current experience of reaching critical mass within the limited holding environment of “island earth”. As one colleague recently put it, the task is “to turn the spotlight on the darkest place”. So the final section, the “Core Analysis of Global Dynamics” was crafted and welded into the text.

The whole period of authoring and circulation was one of intense over-work, little sleep and physical and emotional exhaustion. With compromised immune system, I went down with an acute attack of influenza with a long and slow period of recovery. It felt like a warning to take greater care of my body when engaging in such emotionally challenging areas.

Circulation

With the text complete, we clarified the distribution strategy. Hard copy was mailed in advance to the principal addressees, followed by postal delivery to several hundreds of colleagues on our mailing list. An accompanying letter was generated to carry the content into an e-mail meta-net cascade, distributing the text much in the same way that a virus spreads through the internet, except that each recipient had the power to make a conscious choice to take part in furthering or blocking the circulation. Copies were sent to every bishop in the Church of England and to every member of the British Parliament. A comprehensive Press Release targeted every appropriate UK news publication and key international news distribution networks. Personalised copies reached the political analysts of the main UK television stations and information centres in the United Nations.

The text was translated into Spanish and Russian and was made available in a variety of electronic formats. Recipients spontaneously transmitted the text through networks of networks of networks. Copies were placed in a variety of journals and newsletters. Three months after the launch new initiatives were still being taken. Some intense e-mail correspondence, chat-room and notice-board dialogues were generated. People in nodal positions of responsibility received multiple copies from a variety of sources. Circulation ran into many, many thousands of copies, reaching round the world and penetrating to some of the highest positions of political and professional leadership in the international community.

Content Selection

The content of the letter is intentionally limited to those processes which are essentially unconscious in the psychodynamics of social systems. It is these which distort the capacity for rational decision-making and, unless brought out into conscious awareness, can drive extremely dysfunctional and destructive behaviour. No attempt has been made, therefore, to deal with the more conscious and overt

dynamics like power-struggles, political and economic factors, historical and geographical context, vested interests, etc. all of which are more readily accessible for consideration.

Language and Format

All disciplines tend to generate a distinctive vocabulary of technical terms. While acting as a kind of shorthand that speeds communication within the professional group, the jargon has the unfortunate effect of rendering the subject matter opaque to those unfamiliar with the subject. Psychology is no exception! While every effort has been made to avoid the most abstruse terminology, use of some fairly technical language in the description of particular processes has been retained. Where this is particularly difficult, the relevant proposition is structured in two stages. There is an opening sentence boldly asserting the process concerned. This is then followed by an illustrative gloss which helps to unpack or decompress the density of the technical language. It was hoped that this literary device would make the material accessible to a wide readership who were not necessarily familiar with the in-house jargon of psycho-social analysis. In retrospect it is clear that the attempt was not completely successful. Some of the statements still require further elucidation. The “Core Analysis” section is particularly condensed. It reflects some of the most recent advances in the field of systems psychodynamics research and is as yet unfamiliar even to many professionals in the field.

One further point, the linguistic style of English-as-mother-tongue, may require further revision if clear communication is to be sustained with those for whom English is a second language. Technically competent translation into languages other than English probably represents the best solution and it has been encouraging to see various recipients taking initiatives in this direction.

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