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BOOK REVIEW:

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND POLITICS: EXCLUSION AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Edited by Lene Auestad. Pp. 288. London: Karnac, 2012, £24.99.

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Emerging from the 'Psychoanalysis and Politics' research group, Lene Auestad's edited collection, *Psychoanalysis and Politics: Exclusion and the Politics Of Representation*, brings together a broad range of psychoanalytic approaches to questions of alterity and prejudice in contemporary social formations. Mostly established academics with a grounding in psychology and philosophy and/or practising psychologists and psychoanalysts, the assembled writers draw largely upon various object relations theories (Klein, Winnicott, Bion), but also Lacan, Kristeva, Ferenczi, Fromm and others. Predictably, however, for a collection on psychoanalysis – but perhaps more interestingly for one on politics – the preponderance of references are to Freud, thus insisting (for the most part) on both the continued and renewed relevance of the nineteenth-century Moravian neurologist to twenty-first century global concerns. Together, they make a forceful argument for the progressive potential of psychoanalysis – particularly in the domain of the psychosocial – to lay bare the structures and mechanisms of repression, and the ideological foundations of exclusion in Western society.

Particularly impressive are three chapters at the heart of this book, that are perhaps most grounded in the contemporary, global, political and social realities that we face. First is Jane Frances' contribution, reporting on her research into attitudes towards people with facial disfigurements, shedding light on the (often unconsciously) different or prejudicial behaviour people can demonstrate when encountering a person with a disfigurement. She charts a history of

cultural bias against people with disfigurements, from Pliny the Elder to the Elephant Man and contemporary computer game *BioShock*, and points to the continuing association between disfigurement and moral corruption (e.g. an ad campaign that declaims, “Litter louts have snouts!” [118]). Frances’ account of Sussanah Biernoff’s research into the art design for *BioShock* is particularly disturbing, as Biernoff demonstrates that the game’s creators drew upon medical photographs of soldiers injured in WWI as models for their “Splicer” antagonists. Interestingly, Frances notes that *Star Trek* functions differently: presenting a wide array of alien forms, who are judged on their character rather than appearance (and, I’d suggest, the pivotal sequence in Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2014) could serve as another, fertile ground for consideration here). From this empirical research, Frances then proceeds into a speculative consideration of the disinhibition often demonstrated in these instances (inappropriate questions, defensive or aggressive behaviour), arguing that it suggests a certain infantile regression such as when confronted with the “bad object”. The piece ends with an analysis of a short video, ‘Face Equality’, that gives the viewer an impression of what it is like to be stared at in this way, with the goal of encouraging a more sympathetic attitude. Frances’ research thus demonstrates the impact a psychosocial approach can aim to have at the level of policy-making and inter-personal encounters.

Secondly, Rene Rasmussen’s chapter lays a claim for the fundamental difference between psychoanalysis and contemporary psychological therapies (from NLP to CBT). Rasmussen argues that the latter are normative practices seeking to regulate the individual so that she or he conform to pre-existing social structures (i.e. capitalism): an industry in itself, creating happy and productive workers – in theory, at least. However, as the spate of deaths at France Télécom demonstrates, this commercial order is pathogenic: placing impossible and obscure demands on the individual, resulting in anxiety, depression, even suicide. Such normative therapies, Rasmussen insists, work at the level of the ego and superego: telling the subject that certain dispositions are “good” or “bad”, such as “negative thinking”. The way in which this is pathologised as “unhelpful” thus leads to a vicious, superegoic circle where desperate attempts to avoid such “negative thoughts” can only result in further negative feeling, anxiety and depression. Instead, psychoanalysis works at the level of the symptom, approached from the perspective of the individual subject and understood in terms of their unique structure (which is to say the unconscious). And while Rasmussen’s Lacanian characterisation of depression as

“moral cowardice” for having given up on desire is really not helpful (145), his general point regarding the way in which psychoanalysis can allow us to see how the pathologies of capitalism are self-propagating and his psychoanalytic argument against an “uncritical adaptation to given social bonds” (142) is demonstrated forcefully.

Thirdly, Elisabeth Rohr’s chapter is a standout contribution, giving a powerful first hand account of entering an environment of mass trauma. She convincingly argues for the necessity of recognising the experience of trauma in its socio-political context, and against what she sees as a too-rigid adherence to an individualistic model of PTSD, which she demonstrates through her work in a Guatemalan society scarred by decades of mass murder. Grounded in her attempt to offer a therapeutic intervention in the country, this chapter paints a devastating picture of the instability and violence endemic to such a social situation. Most striking is Rohr’s account of her growing realisation that her attempt to intervene in a therapeutic way – through a state-sponsored workshop for people suffering stress in the workplace – actually functioned as a part of the “problem”: the participants did not understand why they were taking part, the workshops were subject to sudden disruptions and change, and so on, thus mirroring the upheavals and loss of agency that accompany post-traumatic subjectivity. To this, Rohr adds her own empathic feeling of having been similarly traumatised by this institutional violence, and one gets the sense that this personal report is in some way therapeutic for Rohr, in that it allows her to give an account of her self, her professionalism and the generally (and genuinely) beneficial impact of her intervention, in the face of conflicting and defamatory reports and state interference. Rohr suggests that the workshop was designed as a space of catharsis for the group, and I wonder whether this writing doesn’t perform something similar (and similarly necessary) for its author. Rohr concludes that there can be no space for anything approaching healing in a state where the violence and trauma visited upon the people has not been recognised: that, for example, survivors of genocide cannot mourn their losses while its perpetrators are treated with impunity, as is the case in Guatemala. This direct experience and Rohr’s honest account of both her (unwitting and initial) complicity in and struggle against such oppressive conditions make this chapter certainly one of the most important to have been presented in the collection.

Much of the book is comprised of fascinating accounts of psychoanalytic approaches to questions of otherness, difference and exclusion from a variety of theoretical orientations. Unusually, each chapter is prefaced with a 2-page introduction by the editor (rather than just the

brief précis typically offered in a collection's introduction), and whether this demonstrates a clear sense of curatorial vision and a concession to the non-specialist on Auestad's part, or perhaps a lack of confidence or unwillingness to allow the works to flow and develop in their own terms would be down to the individual reader.

Auestad's own piece examines the way in which prejudice is often treated as an aberration against which "normal" society functions and reverses this assumption to address the structural prejudices at work in given social situations and structures: focusing, for example, on studies which show that anonymous marking consistently awards higher grades to black pupils than the marks assigned by their teachers. These assessors will almost certainly avow no explicitly racist attitudes nor identify themselves as racist, but a psychoanalytic perspective here insists upon an unconscious prejudice at work. This, Auestad relates to Michael Balint's model of trauma, which involves a stage at which the traumatised subject's experience (here, of the reality of prejudice) is denied by a third party, and thus points to the difficulties in "objectively" identifying such instances of discrimination.

Following from this is Jonathan Davidoff's presentation of another (lesser known, to this reader, at least) psychoanalytic model, in the work of Lacanian dissident, Piera Aulagnier. The latter's complex metapsychological model conceives of mental representation in line with a biological metaphor of metabolisation: the transformation of something foreign into something available to the organism. It comes across as a more complicated version of the basic Freudian schemas, adding – for example – a "primal" process to the more familiar primary and secondary processes, combined with some Lacanian ideas such as the Imaginary order and the "desire of the Mother"; although, at least in Davidoff's account, it is not wholly clear quite where the *unconscious* as such figures in Aulagnier's conceptualisation. Via Aulagnier, Davidoff argues that prejudices are often transmitted through the sedimentation of generations of a social structure, before turning to Cornelius Castoriadis to highlight the ways in which such institutions determine meaning through closed systems thereby discursively regulating that which is excluded as "foreign".

Elsewhere, Calum Neill presents a broad-ranging study on the problem of the neighbour, encompassing *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Follman, 2008), Levinas, Lacan, Kierkegaard and Žižek on the question of (non-)preferential love. However, for all the discussion of Symbolic, Imaginary and that which is excluded from identification, it seems odd that Neill does not engage in much

depth with the order of the Real, which would seem to be at the centre of his Lacanian analysis and, moreover, might constitute the shared kernel of irreducible alterity that could provide a common ground between Lacan and Levinas. Furthermore, Sverre Varvin's piece on xenophobia and Islamism is somewhat compromised by its own timeliness: as the author recognises, the terrorist attacks by a right-wing vigilante in Norway that took place as the book was being composed will necessitate further reflection on this topic, even while Varvin's general thesis on the interdependence of racism and fundamentalism makes an important and insightful claim. And Karl Figlio's chapter on the "narcissism of minor differences" (7) starts with the very promising – and counterintuitive – proposal that it is not *difference* but *similarity* that breeds hostility, pointing to the antipathy between neighbouring tribes and peoples. However, Figlio's insistence on reducing this theory to an overly literal conception of castration fantasy undermines the thesis with the sexist assumptions that such phallomania entails.

The collection concludes first with a history, recounted by Ferenc Erős, of psychoanalysis in Central Europe that focuses on the role of Sándor Ferenczi in Hungary: the first person to be appointed to a professorship in psychoanalysis in the history of the discipline. It charts the struggles of psychoanalysts in the first half of the Twentieth Century with prejudices as against the infamous "Jewish science" and socialist scepticism (e.g. Lukcas), to provide a "trauma history" (204) of exclusion and rejection. The final word goes to Julia Borossa, who raises the important question of what is excluded from psychoanalysis itself by taking up Edward Said's challenge to be hospitable to the (ethnic, cultural) "other". This she pursues through an examination of the life of South Asian émigré psychoanalyst, Mesud Khan. Borossa does rather sweep aside the sexual misconduct that marred the end of Khan's career, but her general point regarding an opening up of psychoanalytic practice to a certain "polymorphousness" (cf. 240) – recognised by Didier Anzieu and perhaps exemplified by Khan's *less unethical* social interactions with analysands and trainees – sounds an important note of renewal for the discipline.

On the whole, this collection bears the marks of its inception: a diverse group of thinkers and schools of thought brought together by an international conference resulting in a diverse group of works, sometimes only loosely connected to the central theme or thesis (Martyn Housdon's piece being an example of this: an undeniably interesting case study of a Nazi ideologue, related to psychoanalytic concerns by only a few brief references to Erich Fromm).

The overall effect of the works, however, is to make an important contribution to the on-going refutation of the idea that psychoanalysis is ahistorical, apolitical (even conservative) or divorced from the realities of the world. *Psychoanalysis and Politics* demonstrates that such critical assumptions can be countered from a variety of different positions and traditions: both within the discipline, in the case of practicing analysts, and without, through the number of academics drawing upon psychoanalytic ideas in their research. And while indeed referencing the “usual suspects” (e.g. Žižek; Lacan’s *Seminar XVII*, Freudo-Marxism), the writers collected here exemplify various, novel forms of politically- and socially-engaged psychoanalysis that will be of interest to scholars working in, as well as – *crucially* – beyond, the field of Psychosocial Studies.