



A brief comment on the paper by Daniel Burston and Cary Nelson

Bob Hinshelwood

This long and impassioned paper by Daniel Burston and Cary Nelson expresses a significant regret that the unconscious human mind which psychoanalysis focuses on has been invaded and disrupted by the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. This news of the psychoanalytic world in the USA is alarming. It is written as if it were about psychoanalysis in general. But it may apply to the particular collapse in the US of the ego-psychology/drive theory model. It is a different situation in other places including Britain where there has always been more interest in the actual experience that brings people to psychoanalysis, than in the theoretical models psychoanalysts use. Patients' motivation is after all to find someone to listen to their own suffering. Possibly it was the close tie with psychiatry which led to the more mechanistic models of categorisation and theoretical determinism that overtook US listening, strongly promoted by the Viennese colonisers in the 1930s. It was a strand that became extraordinarily successful and then imploded under the criticisms of Erich Fromm and others of the post-Sullivanian William Alanson White Institute.

Deterministic psychoanalysis seems to have been a 'fashion' that has had its day, in the way Thomas Kuhn described how scientific theories come and go. But in this case, it was not pushed aside by alternative theories but more probably by economic pressures from other forms of therapy which had developed a behavioural or educational approach. And politicised by the powerful voices of marginalised groups in the USA. Thus ego-psychology has left a gap filled more recently by a return to interpersonal psychoanalysis, now known as intersubjective or relational. This emphasis on the interpersonal has certainly emphasised an 'experience-near' approach advocated previously by Kohut, but it has opened the way for socio-cultural critiques. Not only Lacan but also academic social scientists, have stressed the importance of cultural influences. This coincides serendipitously with the so-called 'culture wars'. Whilst the term 'culture wars' is an attempt to put a bland surface on the class war in the USA, it has not in any way diminished the bitterness of that social alienation and exploitation that class has represented for so long. With the looming prospect of round two of the US Civil War, inevitably the conflict has invaded many institutions including such professional arenas as the American Psychoanalytic Association.

The invasion of psychoanalysis by single-issue politics under the heading of diversity creates the alarming possibility that the key contribution of psychoanalysis – the interplay of the individual person's unconscious with their familial and cultural context – is about to fade away. The emphasis moves to a spat over the resettlement in Palestine by the Zionists reclaiming possession of their ancient homeland. Racist-nationalist identifications of this kind are perhaps a profoundly attractive distraction from the serious underlying stratum of the break-up of the Disunited States.

The so-called ‘woke’ positions of single-issue politics is itself a distraction not only from the core conflict of patients and analysts over getting acquainted with the painful unconscious and its distortions of realities and cultures, but they are a specific distraction from the overweening prioritising of money as a value that diminishes the human values and humanity itself.

What the paper fails to do is to grasp the fact that cultural oppositions are very tempting, and that it may be necessary to trace the reasons for such temptation. The irony might be that in tracing those reasons one is led back to the dynamic of unconscious processes – in both individuals and in cultures. What psychoanalysis can offer is that we repress our own internal conflicts and disperse them in such a way as to envision conflicts in the external context – those within society instead of within ourselves. This does not mean that there are not contextual cultural conflicts, only that they can be driven by internal factors that cannot be resolved by the politics of societies. Psychoanalysis properly used can identify and mediate the internal factor within individuals. But it has the ability also to trace why cultural conflicts can be so resistant to conscious resolution.

As a result, the paper unfortunately descends into a predictable pattern of oppositional debate within a social group (the American Psychoanalytical Association, or Division 39, in this case). In other words, the understanding that this kind of oppositional stance is possible seduces the paper into taking part itself in an oppositional political stance. Of course, psychoanalysts cannot stand outside political conflict. But we are trained and adept at standing within a conflict situation while at the same time being able to see it, describe it, and asks the questions which might understand it. And it may be quite understandable that rather than sticking to the psychoanalytic stance of asking why we can so easily be drawn into such oppositional positions, we ourselves end up joining in the politicking. However, psychoanalysis has the best chance of understanding and investigate our unconscious readiness to oppose. We should add our knowledge of displaced unconscious conflicts to an understanding of the fight over social conflict.

How to deal with entrenched oppositional positions in politics is a question provoked in the paper, but not completely exposed, commented on, or redirected. Psychoanalysis is a gift to the understanding of unconscious dynamics that are inserted into ordinary political debate. Such unconscious determinants erect the entrenched positions and lead to the failure of conscious resolution. If there is an unconscious need within a group to reinforce its views, it is unlikely to be resolved consciously. It may fade away when an alternative conflict arises; or, as in the case of the USA, a real self-decline of the whole culture is in sight.

Is it possible that this kind of conflict between intransigent groups is a feature of the US culture? Looking back historically one could say that the colonisation of the original states was to be a repository, a kind of international dustbin, for small groups of expelled and conflict-driven emigres, starting perhaps with the Plymouth Brethren, but then greatly enhanced by the persisting genocide of the indigenous populations. Opposition, extermination and guilt could be part of the building blocks of US culture to the present day. But perhaps it is important to add immediately that probably no nation on earth has not settled anyway without excluding the preceding inhabitants. It is

just that the success of the USA and Israel are historically closer to us and recorded in more detail.

Does psychoanalysis have something to offer the management of such intransigent cultural positions which have absorbed the underlying displaced conflicts of the individuals' unconscious? Of course, the actual external conflict needs to be faced consciously. But when intransigence supervenes one has to consider if the internal conflicts of a significant number of people are being externalised and resist the attempts at conscious resolution. The facility with which blame, shame and condemnation are thrown at the opposition suggest that a starting point might be unconscious guilt from various possible sources. But the oppositional hatred aroused can suggest that unconscious guilt over the exterminating hate could provoke a continuous flood of blame elsewhere. However, closer attention to the details of these hypothetical interactions of internal and external conflicts needs to be researched.

Finally, the question has arisen whether *Free Associations* should have given space to the oppositional opinions of Burston and Nelson. Perhaps not? It may be that a better policy would be to remain silent over bitterly blaming feuds. Would a silence be preferable to an open dialogue which clearly will not reach a resolution without delving into unconscious dynamics?

Bob Hinshelwood is a fellow of the British Psychoanalytic Society and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Psychiatrists. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Essex. His latest and forthcoming book is entitled *Unconscious Politics*.