Circulating emotions, beliefs and fantasies: The Middle East and the West

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Abstract

Much ink has been spilt analysing racism, ethnicity and ‘otherness’. These analyses are frequently sophisticated, nuanced and committed to delivering improved ethical, emotional and political relationships. As we have witnessed recently, however, emotions, beliefs and fantasies remain stubborn. We are all diminished (no matter our history) by these troublesome psychic processes, entrenched beliefs and unthinking assumptions that pulse away unchecked. Feelings of fear and hatred sit alongside complex identifications and disavowal of self and other. This contemporary political and social context is loaded with discourses of a ‘clash of civilization’, the otherness of Muslims and Islam and a dominant view which asserts that Western societies have to be protected from potential explosions of terrorism and the corrosion of Western values. These discourses impact on citizens and erode the possibilities of inter-connectedness and a sense of shared communality. This paper is an exploration of a specific example of intransigence.

Keywords: Emotions, fantasies, identification, intransigence, Middle East, ‘West’.

All cultures spin out a dialectic of self and other, the subject ‘I’ who is native, authentic, at home, and the object ‘it’ or ‘you’, who is foreign, perhaps threatening, different out there (Said, 1999, p. 40).

Even when we dream, we are not alone. Our most intimate psychic secrets are always embedded in the others – groups, masses, institutions and peoples – from which they take their cue, playing their part in the rise and fall of nations. Not to recognize this is, finally, the greatest, most dangerous, illusion of them all (Rose, 2004, p. xxxix).
The more we don’t know what or who it is we fear the more the world becomes fearsome... it is the possibility that the object of fear may pass us by which makes everything possibly fearsome (Ahmed, 2004, p. 69).

**Intransigence, identification and relatedness**

It is banal and obvious to state that we live in politically troublesome times. The conflict between the Middle East and the ‘West’ persists and there is no sign of the combat abating. To echo a heartfelt question by Frosh, ‘Under such circumstances and in the midst of such clouds of darkness, one wonders if any lessons ever get learned’ (Frosh, 2002b, p. 389). It is perhaps worth stating at the outset that I am driven by a hopelessly naïve bewilderment that centres on: why do these conflicts persist? What are our investment/s? What are the political and social conditions that bring about and perpetuate these antagonisms?

As a way of focusing this paper I wanted to focus on ordinary citizens – people like you and me – but inevitably this bled into public discourses. Predictably, the public, private and political could not be separated out; for the personal is political, and the political is personal. There is though a difficulty in allowing the categories citizen, government and the state to leach into one another, the responsibility of the individual is not equal to the responsibilities of governments or the State. Matters of history, power relations, material realities and armies operate differently in terms of the State and the individual. I attempt though to hold together the public and the personal in order to explore how public discourses and actions intervene profoundly on individual lives and family histories.

This essay may be jagged as I make an effort to hold what is perhaps irreconcilable together and I have decided not to smooth it out; although I am also concerned that it is not raw enough – that I have ironed out too many contradictions, confusions and dilemmas. I have an Egyptian/Muslim father (who died 4 years ago) and an English/Christian mother. I lived in Cairo until I was 11 years old and Egypt and my Muslim heritage is important – no crucial – to me, as well as both my families, my ‘Londonness’ and my adult life here in England. My husband is Egyptian and Muslim and I spend much of my time, professional and personal, attempting to straddle and inhabit both cultures and societies. My parents met in the late 1940s in London, they were young, naïve, and full of need and hope, they fell in love and married in Cairo. My father was highly intelligent, kind, tenacious, ambitious, cold, and could be careless (in both senses of the word); my mother is generous, socially skilled, lively, opinionated, thoughtless and intelligent. This personal family story is shot through with a history of colonization that was and is still active. The Egyptian revolution took place in 1952 and the revolution overthrew the Egyptian monarchy and severely undermined British rule. This colonial history cut cruelly across my parent’s
relationship and this mixed-race/mixed-class/mixed-religion relationship did not cohere and could not be sustained.

What identification/s are at work for me much of the time? Perhaps whatever our histories we all inhabit contradictory wishes and impulses. I have wished to be in Cairo and I have wished never to return there. Similarly, I have wished to have no home other than London and also wished wholeheartedly to live anywhere but there. Alongside these contradictory yearnings the picture would not be complete if I did not talk about refusal. For it is true that I have at times lived a life full of fantasy and refused the present and simultaneously I have also refused all that is Egyptian, my past life there and any wish to visit. Alongside all this loss and absence is my stubbornness – a stubbornness which has refused to be anywhere at all. It is not that this is a truer state or that longing and yearning are more real emotions. I am edging towards drawing out ambivalences. All of this refusal and relief lies alongside the wish to be there, to return and above all a profound desire that we had never left.\(^2\) After all as Jacqueline Rose points out there are always cruel ambivalences lurking in our most cherished form of allegiances (Rose, 2004, p. xv).

I frequently have difficulty in translating across these two cultures. It is more profound because I often do not understand the questions I am being asked, or perhaps more accurately, I have difficulty gleaning the motivations pulsing away beneath the questions. I end up feeling suspicious, insecure and frequently I do not know what to think. I am unsure of my ground. I feel fear of mis-representing Egypt and the UK. I am frightened of betraying my father and being disloyal. I can hear his scorn and his arrogance and his despair. I am paralysed by concerns that I am colluding with the ‘West’ in my theoretical framework, and/or so intent on resisting Western ideologies and agendas that I end up missing truths/dilemmas/absences about the Middle East. I am, however, exhausted with American and Western imperialism and equally done in by the liberal left’s endless explanations of Western imperialism as causing all political ills in the Middle East and elsewhere.

I am concerned with issues of recognition, identification and with how we can reach across to one another in ethical relatedness, understanding and enjoyment. This is not to wipe out the difficulties of a persistent problem, which focuses on how we relate to the ‘fact of the other’s independent consciousness, a mind that is fundamentally like our own but unfathomably different and outside our control’ (Benjamin, 1998, p. xii). Our capacity, however, for identification with others can ‘further or impede our recognition of others, to bridge or obfuscate differences between us’ (p. xiii). At this current political conjuncture there seems to be little recognition, understanding or identification. There is much talk of the enemy, of threats from within and outside (mainly Muslim), and of the continual danger of terrorism. The discourse of a ‘clash of civilisation’ is endlessly spoken and reiterated. Apparently, no talk can take place, only the
gun will do. I want to adhere to Erlich’s plea that ‘it is probably as creative an act as we may ever be able to perform, to be able to regard an enemy as part of us and yet as existing separately and in his or her own right’ (Erlich, 1997, p. 125). Here, we are in an intricate area for our feelings and fantasies of the enemy can be marked by complexity, as feelings of hatred and rivalry exist alongside positive feelings of love, admiration, and the wish to identify and emulate (Erlich, 1997).

There are different talks and a colony of difference between talk that reaches across and talk that distances. Similarly different motivations are at work – that which seeks to understand and be changed, or the motivations which searches for opportunities to dominate and subjugate. Recognition, identification, knowledge demand, they insist that we pay attention to our intransigent fantasies, stubborn feelings, heartfelt beliefs, to those thoughts that flit across the mind seemingly innocuous but problematic in their capacity to alienate and entrench the self and others in well-worn relationships. It is also incumbent on us to question what precisely our motivation is when we demand communication. For as Erlich points out, there are different kinds of talk, verbal exchange may occur but ‘in the service of direct and literal expression and satisfaction of aggressive and destructive wishes and impulses. Words become weapons and are used to attack, invade, dominate, and eviscerate the enemy’ (Erlich, 1997, p. 126).

This calls upon us to draw on a different notion of the other and lessons can be learnt from the past on how to understand the scapegoat and the person who is other. Terry Eagelton explores how the scapegoat historically was a sacred thing for ‘the scapegoat is both holy and cursed, since the more polluted it becomes by absorbing the city’s impurities, the more redemption it brings. The redemptive victim is the one who takes a general hurt into its own body, and in doing so transforms it into something rich and rare’ (Eagelton, 2005, p. 131). From a different angle, Marina Warner explores how it is a peculiarly modern phenomenon to treat the other as different and as a threat. She explores how the new and the strange did not always shock for ‘they can lure, they can delight. The Other in history has exercised a huge power of attraction, not repulsion and recognizing that there are different and enjoyable ways of living with otherness ‘can then stretch and deepen the language of pleasure’ (Warner, 2002, p. 20). In short, the discourses that surround us at present are neither the only ones available nor are they inescapable. As good a place as any to engage differently is to move away from assumption as fact and to know that many beliefs are based on fantasy and lack of knowledge.

**Assumption as thinking: fantasy as fact**

The categories – the ‘West’, Islam, the Arab region and the USA are terms that obfuscate more than they reveal. These terms flatten out complexity,
wipe out differences within the regions and risk obliterating issues of similarity and differences between Arab societies and the ‘West’. It has become commonplace in Western public discourses post-September 11th to position Islam and the Arab world as pre-modern and backward (Amin, 2006). This placing of Arab societies as rooted in outdated and oppressive social and political practices is an ongoing feature of the way the ‘West’ and the USA fix societies regarded as Islamic (Huntington, 2002; Lewis, 2004). In contrast the ‘West’ and the USA represent themselves as societies motivated by the laudable aims, indeed achievements, of freedom, equality, rationality and progression (an ongoing theme in the political speeches of Bush and Blair). The predominant belief system is that a shift has occurred for ‘Western’ societies to modernity and this is conceptualized as progression to rationality, enlightenment, and the provision of political, social and emotional space for the individual development of all. A strong belief in the ‘West’ and the USA is that for these societies tradition provides a safe centre from which to engage with the present and simultaneously a springboard for the future. On the other hand, or so this particular story goes, for Arab societies the past is used to oppress and lock people in hidebound traditions that do not allow progression or development. Arab societies, on the other hand, tend to perceive the ‘West’ as a monolith that oppresses the Arab peoples, does not respect Islamic traditions, and simultaneously corrupts its own citizens and seduces through the illusory promise of consumption – a false ideal that denigrates human life. There are, though, contradictions at the pivot of Arab countries, perceptions and thoughts towards the ‘West’ – the khawaga complex, or the foreigner complex, is openly spoken about at least in Egypt with some ambivalence. People speak with irony and astute knowledge that life is not all milk and honey in the ‘West’, while simultaneously, they still believe that those in the ‘West’ have it all.

Both the ‘West’ and Arab societies are entangled with one another, yet represent themselves and the other, as strictly dichotomous and absolutely different; similarly both regions represent themselves as internally united and thereby ignore internal differences and conflicts. We cannot talk of the Middle East as homogeneous for there are diverse practices (cultural, religious, language) and while Islam is the predominant religion by no means is it the only one. Identity is also constituted by class, religion, ethnicity and membership to a tribe and these cut across axes of identities. One important difference between the Middle East and the ‘West’ is that of religion. As Joseph points out, religion has been a central force in politics in the Middle East and directly marks citizenship, for in most Middle Eastern states the ‘citizen as legal subject has been constituted through membership in religious communities, institutionalizing religious identity as political identity’ (Joseph, 2000, p. 11). Moreover, as ‘religion has been seen as the domain of the sacred, the moral, the domain of truth and absolutes has
meant that religion has not been a discourse of negotiation’ (Joseph, 2000, p. 12).

The constitutions of most Western states define the basic unit of society as the individualized citizen but in the Middle East the basic unit of the society is the family. As Joseph puts it Middle Eastern cultures embed people in familial relationships; for

Personhood is understood in terms of relationships woven into one’s sense of self, identity and place in the world. One is never without family, without relationships, outside the social body (Joseph, 1999, p. 54).

We have to be careful not to polarize the Middle East and the ‘West’ and thereby reinforcing every stereotype that ever existed. For people in the ‘West’ are also formed within relationships (psychoanalysis teaches us that if nothing else); affection, obligations and bonds also tie people together in the ‘West’ as well as the Middle East. Individuality, however, is a powerful myth in the ‘West’ but we all live within the dynamics of relationality and autonomy, role and personhood, obligation and freedom, family and self, society and self.

There is an enduring issue that centres on how subjectivity is shaped by post-colonial relations and ideologies. A theoretical and emotional challenge focuses on how to produce an analysis in which people’s emotional and material investments and responsibilities are recognized and understood. In the case of the Arab region and the ‘West’ identities are intertwined – to live in the ‘West’ is to have Arab societies as a reference point; to inhabit Arab societies is to engage inexorably with the ‘West’. Arab and Western subjectivities are replete with shifting desires, split fantasies, vulnerable uncertainties that move through and across ambivalence, ambiguity, repulsion and fascination. To recognize these matters is to re-think contemporary discourses and to be attentive to diverse histories. Perhaps it is more radical than that and we should redraft a history that has been made in common and to move away ‘from a model of clashing oppositions to one of coalescence – turbulent, disgraceful, riven within equalities, of course, but nevertheless mutual in the sense that whose who are done to, also do’ (Warner, 2002, p. 21). The Middle East and the ‘West’ due to unequal power, political and material relations are implicated differently in these vexed processes.

**Personal identification: Political allegiances**

Psychoanalytic theory is based on the view that the past is inescapable, and as Baldwin points out – people are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them (quoted in Hall, 2002, p. 1). One reason why history endures and has to be endured is that our ‘inner landscapes are peopled with the
burdens of history...a history not of [our own] choosing unfolds in the deepest recesses of the mind’ (Rose, 1998, p. 6). The past is problematic, for while in one sense, it is past, there is always the continual threat of the repressed, or indeed the oppressed. History haunts, for as Elliott argues, societies and present lived experience always risk becoming haunted by what is excluded. The more rigid the position, the greater the ghost and the more threatening is in some way (Elliott, 2002, p. 153); or as Freud argues ‘shards of the forgotten past resurface in neurotic symptoms like fragments of necrotic bone’ (Ellman, 2005, p. xiii).

The mind is a palimpsest as traces of the past remain, persist in the present, persist despite our best efforts to disavow these traces, they make themselves felt, pulsing away in the present. The palimpsest mind contains the social and political past and our earliest relationships. From the very earliest moment of our lives ‘without the rudiments of contact, the infant will not survive – we are “peopled” by others. Our “psyche is a social space”’ (Rose, 2004, p. vii). As Stephen Frosh puts it, the mind is in constant dialogue with the world as it takes in that which is external, makes something of it, ‘finding ways of producing internal representations of what it finds (out)there’ (Frosh, 2002a, p. 55). What happens out there, critically, becomes ‘internalized’, develops into part of the mind itself, part of the unconscious itself. Encounters with objects, relationships, ideas, and other people become part of the person. Self and other are always entwined and no mind can be considered in isolation (Frosh, 2002a, p. 56).

The lines of affiliation and descent are always complex, and we need to ask more precisely how exactly and ‘along what lines of conscious and unconscious inheritance – histories, individual and collective, are moulded and passed down’ (Rose, 1998, p. 42); while bearing in mind that our ‘key, decisive points of connection are the ones [we] cannot see, do not want – or cannot bear – to know’ (Rose, 1998, p. 43). Abraham and Torok have most usefully elaborated transgenerational haunting (1994), for them haunting is the secret carried within families and across generations. These secrets have life; they pulse with energy and are always at risk of return. The consequences can be devastating and I am arguing here that these transgenerational hauntings persist in social life. We both know about them and deny their existence, we capitulate to them as we struggle to get through everyday living. For Freud ‘realities that matter always strike too early: sex before the infant understands the language of desire, death before the ego is ready to let go of the beloved. Survivals of these premature events lodge themselves in the unconscious, demanding re-enactment in the form of symptoms and phantasmagoria; because of these precocious shocks, the psyche is condemned to be forever out of synch with daily life, absorbed in the unfinished business of the past’ (Ellmann, 2005, p. xiii).

Colonization and its effects are elusive and can be understood as what Toni Morrison ‘sometimes just calls the thing, the sediment conditions that...
constitute what is in place in the first place’. Colonization endures (as in persists and has to be suffered) because as Avery Gordon puts it, it makes its ‘mark by being there and not there at the same time, when without a doubt that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence’ (1997, p. 4). So we can call upon remembrance at this moment and make a heartfelt plea that we remember as if that will deliver us into a transformed future, but as Passerini argues there are profound difficulties in remembering (Passerini, 2003). Remembering always has absence, silence and forgetting. For Passerini the profound impediment to remember is predicated on a forgetting, for to remember something you, others, we, have to know that something is absent, forgotten even. In a further twist – to forget – you have to forget that you have even forgotten. In another twist of the emotional screw, remembering and forgetting are inextricably linked for we remember and forget simultaneously.

It is not just histories that are sedimented, embodied, bedded down but also values, beliefs, attitudes and fantasies. They are elusive – they haunt – as in they trouble, they hang about, appear when you least expect them to – and they overwhelm in that indefinable, vague, discomforting way that ghosts have. They are both ephemeral and too real. Subjectivity, fantasy, the State, emotion, politics, history are inextricably linked – these terms work back and through one another. As Jacqueline Rose points out ‘fantasy reaches out to the unspoken components of social belonging, “state” also has a set of meanings which move back from public being into the heart. Fantasy, even on its own psychic terms, is never only inward-turning; it always contains a historical reference in so far as it involves, alongside the attempt to arrest the present, a journey through the past’ (Rose, 1998, p. 5).

The stuff of psychic life is frequently expelled from discussions of politics seen as irrational and that which interferes, as opposed to that which is shot through political life and responses. Rose in her discussion of politics and fantasy points out that fantasy is excluded from politics because it is ‘not serious, not material, too flighty and hence not worth bothering with. [My] starting premise works the other way round. Like blood, fantasy is thicker than water, all too solid – contra another of fantasy’s more familiar glosses as ungrounded supposition, lacking in foundation not solid enough’ (Rose, 1998, p. 5).

Indeed, how can we ‘find a language which allows us to recognize our part in intolerable structures but in a way which renders us neither the pure victims nor the sole agents of our distress’ (Rose, 1986, p. 14)? In short, how responsible are we for the sins of our fathers? It is too easy to dismiss that question as if there can be a simple separation between past and present for after all the sins of our fathers do descend on the present – the weight of the past lays heavy on the present. I have been haunted while working on this paper – I have spent time not being able to think, staring into space in wordless and helpless fashion, I have been daunted, overwhelmed and little
has cohered. The presence of this paper has dominated much of my time as a necessary and loaded object as I have not been able to work on it. I remain profoundly bewildered as to why it has been trying, loaded, thorny. Haunting is not just about loss but about uncanny persistence and it is of course a question basic to psychoanalysis ‘whether you can leave anything or anywhere behind’? (Rose, 1998, p. 48).

In 1956, when I was 2-years-old, the Suez crisis occurred. Anthony Eden (the British Prime Minister at the time) furious and confounded by Nasser, whom he perceived to be a colonized upstart went to war for the canal, trade and to assert British authority in the Middle East. My mother was and remains supportive of this British aggression, and needless to say, was against the grain in Egypt. My paternal grandfather froze her out and refused to speak to her. A political war became personal, if it ever could have been otherwise. I do not know how this impacted on my parent’s relationship – but it must have done for they were on opposite sides. My father throughout his life was proud, fiercely nationalistic, and at the time pro-Nasser while my mother was and remains conservative, nationalistic and cannot bear not to adhere to the British nation and its values. Her allegiance would have been unquestioning and she is adhesively identified to the white/Westerner. My father’s identifications and affiliation would have been unquestioning and on the side of the colonized and the move to assert Egyptian authority and Egypt’s right to control the Suez Canal. My father was a complex man and he held contradictory positions for he had a deep and fierce pride and loyalty to Egypt and to being Egyptian while simultaneously he positioned himself as being more like a Westerner. Longing and pride which is a lethal mix as it produces longing to be the other and pride to be who one is. I do not know why I expect this complex to be straightforward for I am after all in the area ‘of belief and values – whether religious or secular and this calls up – is inevitably caught up in – psychic investment’, and as Rose poignantly expresses it, embroiled in ‘our most heartfelt and obdurate attachment both to others and parts of ourselves’. Attachments, rational and irrational, complex and contradictory, how can we reason with these obstinate parts of ourselves. For as Rose puts it, Freud, of all people, should know better than to think that you can walk into this part of the mind and try to reason with it. No one enters here without being burnt’ (Rose, 2004, p. xix); and I would add my family could not enter here without being torn asunder. Perhaps, the point is no longer to dissipate deeply-held beliefs with blasts of reason, ‘but to understand, even respect, the unconscious transmission of mass or group. To understand why people, from generation to generation – with no solid ground and in the teeth of the most historically unsympathetic conditions – hold on’ (Rose, 2004, p. xxxii).

To hold on fast requires energy, requires us to be ruthless. There is no limit to what we are capable of, no limit to our hostility and aggression.
Ruthless so that we can hold on to what we know, to who we are, to our imagined place of superiority, we ruthlessly forget what we know – the hurts, injuries, previous aggressions – that we have inflicted on others or have been passive witness to. What has been inherited and perpetuated is denied for the ego can only come to ‘believe in its own supremacy by blocking out shades and layers of former identifications’ (Rose, 1998, p. 40). It is a state of political and emotional imperialism that colonizes the imagination, thinking, and action that thwart different relationships from being made and experienced.

Movement towards: Movement against

Kaja Silverman argues that identification involves two capacities – the capacity to identify with the people who are different to oneself and to be able to identify with those who are similar to oneself (Silverman, 1996, p. 26). For Silverman, heteropathic identification implies identification with an alien body or experience as it is the empathetic pull towards the person who is other, the experience that is outside of what we know and have experienced. Idiopathic identification, on the other hand, is based on identification with similarity, the person who is similar to us – it is self-referential and based on shared identity. Identification in this account is based on a relationship to self and other in which psychic movement can and does occur. At the risk of impertinence, perhaps the personal difficulties caused during the Suez War by my mother, father and grandfather is that none of them could move across identifying with self and other. Rigid positions were taken up leading to all being lessened and diminishing the other person involved. As Benjamin argues if multiple identifications can be integrated and enjoyed, then this altered, albeit challenging, relatedness can lead to complementarity and not the triumph of one position over the other. This involves bringing together elements of identification, so they become less threatening, less diametrically opposite, no longer cancelling out one’s identity (Benjamin, 1998, p. 60). This though is an emotional and ethical challenge as our fragile hold on self and other can be upset by those who are too close and too distant. As Erlich argues there are two types of enemy – the one who is close to the self and is too familiar to a superficially balanced mental state and the enemy who is the unfamiliar and unknown other (Erlich, 1997, p. 133). Moreover, as Das explores those who are different and strange can be ‘the best reservoir for our bad externalised parts . . . [so that they] would be located in things and people who resemble us or at least familiar to us – such as neighbours’ at the same time, however since ‘we do not wish to acknowledge on a conscious level that the enemy is like us’ there sets in the “narcissism of minor difference” – a focus on and enlargement of minor signs and distinctions in order to help differentiate between oneself and the other’ (Das, 1998, p. 114).
The four young men who attacked London on 7th July were people like ‘us’; born into families who had migrated from South Asia, they grew up and were educated in England. It is too simplistic and inaccurate to disavow links between these young men and ‘us’. There are crucial questions – what is it about the political and social conditions that enabled these young men to carry out such vicious acts of aggression. It has become commonplace and too easy to state that the ‘suicide bombers’ of the 7th of July in London did not identify – they were or so some Western commentators assert devoid of humanity, identification and human empathy. There is I think two fundamental problems with this argument – first, it bypasses what histories haunted these young men, and second, it only allows one identificatory process and that is with the London commuter. There are of course a number of different processes at work with these young men but I want to focus on two. I owe my first point to Menis Yousry (a systemic family therapist) who in conversation with me explored his hunch that these young men were seeking revenge for their grandparents and possibly their parents. These young men witnessed their grandparents and parents struggling with status, poverty, marginalization, feeling lost and at a loss, and straining to gain a place in this society. They witnessed how they ‘barricaded their souls against the thousand indignities they suffered’ (Soueif, 1999, p. 263). According to British society (loosely defined) they identified in the wrong place and with the wrong people. We ignore at our peril the damage done by humiliation – and humiliation is one of the powerful feelings at work at this moment in time, if ever it was otherwise. These young men, like so many others, witness the horrors of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and the bombings in Iraq. These young men did identify – they played videos over and over of Iraqi women and children – identifying with their suffering, their losses and despair.

We need to imagine in more complex ways what their identifications may have been partly to move towards a deeper understanding of what led them to their actions and as importantly to raise questions about our own identifications for ours are not necessarily as mature and as thinking as we would wish them to be. How do we identify with the other, do we just identify and want to be with people who belong to our world, our values, and our attitudes? Incidentally or not, I would ask these questions of Arabs as well. Psychoanalysis is crucial here, for as Rose points out it is at its best on how we can begin to give shape and voice to what we would rather forget, what we would prefer not to have been a part of and experienced. I am struck by how frequently identifications work towards the victim and not the perpetrator. It is socially acceptable to express sympathy and identification with the commuters in London on 7/7. What of, however, identifications with the perpetrators (this is not to turn them into victims) but am I the only person who has a wish to go out ‘with a bang, not a whimper’? (as the poet T. S. Eliot famously wrote). Am I perverse to long
for an ideal (misguided, grandiose, aggressive it may be) but a faith/belief to
which I can give myself up, to which I can pass myself over, to something
that will enable me to hold on. I will not give myself over (but note the
defensive tone), the questions, however, persist – when and why do men
and women obey? Further, ‘upon what inner justifications and upon what
external means does this domination rest? (Rose, 1998, p. 8). On which
obscure emotional forces does adherence rely? (Rose, 2004, p. xxiv).

There are two points to be made here. The first is a question – why does
the suffering of one group evoke empathy and identification? Second, I
think that being able to identify with those who are similar to oneself and
those who are other, alien, strange are the marks of being human. In short, I
think we are lost if we can only function with one mode of identification.
Identification is about relatedness and is crucial for sustaining relationships.
Frosh, taking Jessica Benjamin as his reference point, explores how what is
precious about identification

is that it allows the other to survive as a living and appreciated aspect of
the self. Identification is consequently built out of an already-existing
awareness of the other’s existence as a subject, that is, it is a loving
‘intersubjectivity’ relationship in which aspects of otherness are accepted
and used by the self without destroying the other in the process (Frosh,

To place another human being and self in a ‘mosaic of non-identitical
kinship’ (Brah, 2000, p. 273), is to recognize that the ‘other’s difference
must exist outside, not to be felt as a coercive command to ‘become the
other’ (Benjamin, 1998, p. 95). The self is not there for exploitation by the
other, and the other is not there for abuse by the self. This should not be read
as an injunction to have only positive thoughts or feelings, for as Benjamin
argues ‘tolerating ambivalence, being able to feel love and hate toward the
same object, does not mean that love and hate are synthesised so that love
triumphs over hate. Rather, it means that hate can be borne’ (Benjamin,
1998, p. 105). I want to stay with hate and not move us into thinking about
love because I think that the injunctions to overcome splitting drain
complexity and difficulty. Moreover, I think overcoming splitting becomes
an imperative to have positive feelings and this allows the distasteful, the
disgusting, the worst bits of being human to pulse away – unchecked and
unknown.

It has become commonplace to describe 9/11 and 7/7 as a trauma, and
whatever kind of event it was, it did provoke and evoke a complex of
feelings, fantasies and responses. Anxious and fearful feelings were not
reflected upon or thought about, they were endless repeated and in the
reiterations they gained more reality. It is banal but true to state that in
these emotional conditions the wish to dominate gains hold. Domination
works both ways – a wish to subjugate one’s internal feelings and complex thinking, and the wish to oppress and conquer the other. Anxiety itself becomes dominating as it dictates thinking, feeling, beliefs, and identifications. It takes over and nothing else is allowed to exist. Above all, anxiety and fear paralyse as these feelings thwart identification with the other, knowledge of the self in its complexity, and hinder the capacity to move across different thoughts, different feelings, different fantasies. These states of mind allow hatred and fear to have their way. It is fear for ourselves that dominates, as Bourke points out, it is ‘fear of something that may befall us, rather than fear for others, those people on whom we inflict suffering’. Bourke carries on sharply telling us that ‘fear has become the emotion through which public life is administered. It is a time we returned to a politics which feared for the lives of others, near and far. Although fear is humanity's inheritance, trembling is our testament’ (Bourke, 2005, p. x). The question ‘why do they hate us’ turns a political question into a feeling question in which politics, history and social conditions are by-passed. It becomes emotional and further reinforces the seemingly irrational. Above all, it de-politicizes and turns politics into feelings as opposed to understanding the political conditions that give rise to these feelings.

Recognition and intransigence: Moving towards the other

In Freud’s account of mental development

sex and death are the anachronisms that disrupt the psyche’s linear progression to maturity, necessitating the compulsive repetition of the past. For humankind cannot bear very much reality, especially when reality takes us (them) by storm (Ellmann, 2005, p. xiii).

We have been taken by storm and it seems to me that the clash of civilization’s discourse perpetuates these eruptions, as they exaggerate the difficulties and make political problems intractable. This is not to eradicate differences but rather we have to find a way through to more mutual understandings.

A dominant view within psychoanalysis, especially British object relations, is that an ethical stance is predicated on the knowledge of the difference between self and other and that the individual can contain their feelings, thoughts and fantasies. We have to hold in mind, and internalize, a profound contradiction – to be human we have to know we are separate from the other person who is outside of us, of our control, demands, needs and wants while, simultaneously, we have to know that we are nothing without the other, for we are intensively dependent on other human beings for our identity itself. It is to know both our connectedness and
dependencies on the other while simultaneously recognizing profoundly our separateness that is the moral endeavour for psychoanalysis.

Alongside this view which focuses on knowing our separateness and our profound connectedness there is another ethical stance which focuses on the profound responsibility towards the other, there is no escape from responsibility and nor should there be (Arendt, 1998; Levinas, 1998). Responsibility in this account is different to recognition as a cognitive act; within this account the self is responsibility to the other. For Arendt, promise and obligation are what make us human. It is not just that the self is formed through the constitutive relationship with the other for it is our promises to others that are essential to our sense of self-identity. For Arendt (1998) and Levinas (1998), the other is profoundly a part of us but that phrasing remains inadequate as it still maintains a boundary between self and other.

We are made by other people while simultaneously we are undone by others. Made through our relationships and profound inter-relatedness and undone due to the way that the other unsettles and throws us into a state of otherness. By a state of otherness I mean – a different mood, emotion, thought and fantasy – sometimes welcome, frequently, uninvited and undesired. Through our interactions with other people we know who we are and the knowledge can be affirming and settling. Alongside more welcome understanding, there exists the knowledge of how aggressive, weak, vulnerable, frail, envious, full of the desire to obliterate self and others we can be. There are no easy solutions to how we live with the difficulties of who we are and the effects of ourselves on others. There is no escape or redemption from ourselves or other human beings – we are full of the effects of our failures, insecurities, precariousness and the illusions of who we are.

All of this requires mourning – not melancholia – there is enough of that around and in any case melancholia is unashamed of its depression and passivity – but rather mourning which focuses on the present. In Judith Butler’s collection of essays Precarious life she focuses on mourning not as that which is private but rather that which can show us ‘the ties we have to others and this grief can furnish a sense of political community of a complex order’ (Butler, 2004). To mourn means accepting that one is changed forever, and rather like private grief, life/oneself/others are never the same again. Through mourning you know your profound ties to the other and that these can never be replaced. To mourn, to grieve, means to engage with loss and to confront our embedded fantasies of wholeness, triumphalism and vanity. For Butler, grief would return us to a sense of our collective responsibility for the political, social, cultural and emotional lives of others.

The current political situation is a specific and worrying example of intransigence and the difficulties that arise from entrenched beliefs and an
enduring history that is shot through the present. In part this political, social and emotional period is marked by very little movement towards the other and that which is unknown, strange, exciting while simultaneously threatening. There seems to be entrenchment and a vulnerable but precarious clinging on to those who are similar and that which is known. In the attempt to open the issues up I will end with two dilemmas. Frankly, I am confused for if I plea for recognition, for society and citizens to know the web of similarity and difference am I digging in stubborn processes? For it does seem at this moment in time that any plea which asks for knowledge of similarity causes the defences to have their way and people become more entrenched. How in asking for recognition are we then pulled into cognition and worryingly end up in a place of liberal but useless smugness? So we can go for asserting difference but then what gets stubbornly ingrained? My second dilemma focuses on whether or not to break silences. I know full well about ‘fumbling clumsiness, the inadequacy, the pain of incapability’ (Kureishi, 2004, p. 93), and in a sense have attempted to write this essay out of that place. Maybe, maybe, the only radical place to be is to stay with melancholia and the knowledge that there is much to be melancholic about, which a rush into mourning can avoid. After all, as Ellman points, out Freud’s essays on war ‘ask the question why the human race inflicts loss on itself, specifically the incalculable losses of world war – a question that finally leaves Freud lost for words’ (Ellman, 2005, p. viii). Maybe being lost for words is the only ethical place to be. Sometimes what is there to say?

Notes

1 This paper is based on a talk given for Psychodynamic Practice and the Institute of Group Analysis, in January 2006. I thank Paul Terry for the invitation and also all who attended for their interest, pertinent questions and engagement.

2 For a more in-depth discussion of these issues see Treacher (2000).

3 For a careful discussion of trauma and fantasy see Susannah Radstone’s essay ‘The war of the fathers: Trauma, fantasy and September 11’ (2002).

References


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