

RACISM AND PSYCHOSIS: WHOSE MADNESS IS IT ANYWAY?

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PSYCHOHISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS.

There are many racisms, historically and at present, and it is not the purpose of this paper to attempt to provide an overview. Instead, I want to focus on one aspect of present-day racism, which I see as an integral part of the functioning of white western capitalism: the projection of disowned aspects of the white psyche onto black people. This racism, as do most others, works psychodynamically to enable white people constantly to lose sight both of whose problem it is (our own), and how we benefit from racist social organisation and dynamics on a material and economic level, and from their socially regulative functions. I see the notion of race itself as a white creation. Joel Kovel puts it crisply: ".....racism is a specific historical situation in which some elemental aspects of human experience are turned towards the classification (and oppression) of people with different ethnic traits. Race fantasies are applied only at second hand to races; they are actually generated in the universal human setting of childhood, and used by culture to handle its historical problems." (Kovel, 1970, p.47) I am focussing on particular abuses suffered primarily by some British people of Afro-Caribbean origin or descent, which have been forced on my attention in the clinical situation, although aspects of these processes may apply at times to people from other so-called races. There is a major problem with

language, which is part of the very dynamics I am describing. I have chosen to use the word "black" as a political category and form of identification, rather than trying to be ethnically specific, but the word "black" also applies to historically specific imagos generated in white unconscious fantasy which have no bearing whatsoever on the nature of black people or the reality of their experience. I hope that you will be able to bear this linguistic dilemma in mind throughout this paper.

In "Black Skin, White Masks", Fanon demonstrates how the historically specific imago of black fits the particular form of exploitation that black people were being subjected to at the time: how, for example, bestial images predominated when brute bestial labour was forced out of the black person, or how what he calls "the native" was painted as the "quintessence of evil", and completely amoral, at times when the white coloniser was engaged in armed repression, torture and other atrocities. (Fanon, 1952, 1961) An example of this kind of reversal and its purpose - the "euphemisation, the effacement of power" (Brown, 1985, p.64) - is Shakespeare's "The Tempest", which is among other things a tale of a colonial settler. The enslavement of Caliban, the native, is portrayed as his liberation and the forcing of an alien language onto him as a gift. Rapacious colonial greed is neatly reversed: the very name, Caliban, is scrambled "cannibal". Caliban is constructed as a monster, and with its monstrous aspects safely projected out, colonial power can package and perceive itself as civilization, education, beauty and morality.

In "White Racism", Joel Kovel details three predominant forms of racism in North American history: the "dominative", during

enforced colonization and slavery; the "aversive", in bourgeois society in which black people are marginalised, ghettoised and treated as second class citizens; and what he describes as the "metaracist", in which racist discrimination is such an integral part of the functioning of advanced technological society that it appears to Kovel to require little overt human mediation. (Kovel, 1970) He demonstrates the white psychological mechanisms that go hand-in-hand with the first two stages. With the dominative stage comes an image of the black person as fantastically sexually potent: a projection from a genital/phallic and oedipal stage of development, representing a projected phantasied enactment of repressed incestuous wishes in which the white man can safely take on the role of the punitive and (often literally) castrating father. Kovel claims that the aversive stage carries with it a more powerful, because more regressed, form of projection at the anal-sadistic stage: black shit. He demonstrates how this is related to Protestantism and the rise of capitalism: in white unconscious phantasy, the black person becomes embodied filth or shit, the split-off aspect of the fetishisation of "clean shit" or money. Common to both these stages is what Fanon describes as phobogenesis. (Fanon, 1952) Because the black person carries the disowned aspects of the white psyche, he or she becomes an extremely powerful phobogenic object, whose presence threatens the return of the repressed. Taking back these projections would ultimately entail a becoming conscious of white responsibility in all the historical and present forms of exploitation of black people, and therefore of massive guilt and shame.

Kovel argues that there is little or no psychological

mediation at the metaracist stage. I would argue that not only is this impossible, but that following his argument, a further regression takes place to an oral stage of development. Ivan Ward suggests that this may be possible in his introduction to the British edition of "White Racism" but he does not develop the notion further (Ward,1988,p.61). Several social theorists, including Christopher Lasch (1979,1984),Joel Kovel (1970, 1988),and Barry Richards (1984,1989) have shown how in post-industrial technocratic capitalism, as society fragments into ever-smaller social units and commodity fetishism comes increasingly to replace stable networks of relationships, the individual white psyche reverts to increasingly primitive psychological processes. Paranoid-schizoid processes predominate as less cultural space is given over to depressive position activities. In plain language,this is a state of affairs described by Melanie Klein as belonging to the first four months of life (Klein,1975,p.49) but to which we are all capable of reverting under stress, in which love and hate are kept separate and aspects of the self's own feelings and processes are projected out on a massive scale. The result is a lack of capacity for reflective thought, reasonable guilt and responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions, and genuine and mature concern for others' well-being, all of which Klein ascribes to what she calls the "depressive position". The white self also becomes increasingly impoverished as the ego-ideal becomes located in powerful centralised government and a massive form of projective identification takes place onto those black "Others", who now carry the aggressively violent and

persecutory ideation which threatens the return of psychotic anxieties.

IN BRITAIN

Before taking a more detailed look at how some of these processes are in operation in present-day Britain, I would like to take a brief look at the recent historical context. Since the first wave of Afro-Caribbean immigration was solicited in the mid-to-late 1950's, we have witnessed a rapid recapitulation of Kovel's three stages of racism. Dominative processes held sway as these settlers were employed in menial and subservient jobs, well below their previous work experience and capabilities, and were subjected to a violent backlash from the white working class. Aversive processes set in as racism became institutionalised and enshrined in law. Black immigrants and their offspring were officially designated as "the problem" by being made into second-class citizens in the 1962 Immigration Act and beyond, thereby legitimating ghettoisation, harassment and political pronouncements like that of Roy Hattersley in 1965, that..."Without limitation, integration is impossible." (Quoted in Fryer, 1984, p.381) Structural metaracism was introduced with the sorts of theoretically anti-racist statutory bodies, like the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants and the Race Relations Board, which some people felt often seemed to effect little concrete change in the lives of ordinary black people, and even sometimes serve to obscure the actual effects of racist institutions and social processes. To quote A.Sivanandan: "To ordinary blacks these structures were irrelevant: liaison and

conciliation seemed to define them as a people apart who somehow needed to be fitted into the mainstream of British society - when all they were seeking was the same rights as other citizens." (Quoted in Fryer, 1984, p.383) M.Fakhry Davids ascribes the white "liberal" position, which is a concomitant of this kind of institutionalised "double-take", as a reaction formation rather than a genuine working through of the racist impulse, which then finds unconscious or less conscious expression in apparently intransigent institutional practices. (Davids, 1988, p.49)

Because of the relative rapidity of these transitions in recent British history, the stages of racism are often conflated (as I suspect they actually are in the USA as well). The corresponding projective imagery, always multiply determined, seems still to draw on anal sadism with furious abandon. For example, at the end of April this year, when the LSE Students Union elected Winston Silcott as its honorary president, the Sun, that epitome of the light of white reason, referred to the "revolting" students as "sewer rats" in a front page article. The sensationalist appeal of the notion of violent black rape also still seems to be alive and well in the tabloid press. The Sun, the Daily Star, the Daily Express, the Daily Mail and Today, which between them account for about 65% of the readership of daily newspapers in Britain (Gordon and Rosenberg, 1989, p.71), have consistently portrayed black people in this country as a massive problem, have fallaciously identified violent crime with the black population and recounted all forms of black struggle and resistance as criminal and delinquent "rioting". This is not to say that the Daily Mirror and the so-called quality press are

not racist, but their racism tends to be predominantly of the inferential rather than the overt variety (Hall,1981, quoted in Gordon and Rosenberg,1989,p.64),with sporadic overt outbursts. I want to pay particular attention to the forms of imagery of the overt racism in Britain's daily press.

This imagery is most revealing. We are continually threatened with the possibility of a black "flooding" or "invasion" of the white boundaries of reason and law and order. ("Rampage of a mob" (Daily Express 1981), "Day the Blacks ran riot in London"(Sun 1981), "When the Black tide met the thin blue line"(Daily Mail 1981),"Rampaging blacks kill youth after wrecking pub"(Daily Telegraph 1981), "New Asian invaders" (Sun 1976),and "One topic above all others stirs reasonable men to swift anger, that of coloured immigration. Their faces and beliefs, their ways of life are not ours; they are obviously neither our kin nor our kind; but this would not matter except that they are determined to settle among us.This we resent. And their birthrate exceeds ours. This we fear. Their settlement thus poses a threat to the society we have grown up in"(George Gale in the Daily Express,1978). This is not the language of "reasonable men" ; this is paranoid language, the language of an embattled and beleaguered ego which fears being flooded by unconscious material. The language suggests that it is not merely a return of the repressed that is being threatened, but a wiping out of boundaries of sense, rationality, containment and order by a psychotic deluge. And what the white ego fears being flooded by seems to be very early oral, oral sadistic, violently aggressive and persecutory ideation. The black population are therefore

portrayed as greedy, cannibalistic, violent and sadistic. Let me give you just a few examples of these constant and recurring themes in the majority of newspapers in this country over the last fifteen years. (Many of these examples are quoted in Gordon and Rosenberg, 1989). Greed : "Four star Asians run up £4,000 bill (in a bed and breakfast "hotel") (Sun 1976) And see cartoon number (1) in the appendix. British people of Asian origin or descent seem to be being made to pay very dearly for a measure of material success by being lumbered with the majority of the stereotypes of greed. Oral sadism: the Daily Mail warns Britain's black communities that they must "forego the luxury of these orgies of arson, looting and murderous assaults" (1985). And see cartoon number (2). Purported black violence is reported on a daily basis. The relatively recently coined term of "mugging" has a multitude of racist implications and assumptions built into it. Crimes of violence against black people either go unreported, or are relayed in much tamer and less phobic language with copious qualifications and use of words like "claimed", "alleged" and "might". Not only does there seem to be no corresponding concern with editorial precision in describing black people and supposedly black events but there is frequent and inflammatory use of capital letters in phrases like: "FLAMES OF HATE" (Star 1981) and "BATTLE OF BRIXTON" (Sun 1981), and a complete absence of investigation into what might be the reality of the lives and experiences of black people in Britain. Instead the by now familiar tactic of reversal is used within this all-encompassing projective system to claim that anti-racist initiatives are greedy grasping after "special" or "privileged" treatment, and

that it is the anti-racists who are responsible for racism and conflict: "anti-racism... intimidating, censoring and punishing without regard for justice, truth or law" (Roger Scruton in The Times 1986), and who are called up as infantile bogeymen to strike terror into the hearts of so-called reasonable men: see cartoon number (3). And all this takes place within the context of a massive and never satisfied fixation on large breasts ! A mad, topsy-turvey nursery world indeed.

CLINICAL DILEMMAS.

In this context it is interesting to note that recent statistical studies suggest that you are between three and ten times as likely to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, schizo-affective or paranoid disorder if you are of Afro-Caribbean origin or descent than if you are white British. (Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1982; Harrison, Owens, Holton, Neilson and Boot, 1988). Indeed, the latter study suggests that rates among British-born people of Afro-Caribbean descent are twelve to thirteen times higher than those in the rest of the population for the age groups 16-29 and 30-44. Although these statistics are probably affected by a high rate of misdiagnosis based on cultural, linguistic and downright racist assumptions of white psychiatrists and other mental health workers (Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1982), the extraordinarily high rates of psychiatric hospital admission for British black people, and particularly for those born here, suggest that at the very least things are becoming much more difficult for black people in this country. It also seems likely that the level of racism amongst white mental

health workers runs very deep, and partakes in the projective system I have outlined. This will affect how psychotherapists read the pain and trauma suffered by black people__in this country, and the framework of reference that we use in interpreting this distress.

My experience of working with some very seriously disturbed black people has led me to reflect on how white projection of psychotic anxieties into black, and the overdetermined symbolisation of black and white, can affect both countertransference and intrapsychic dynamics. To protect confidentiality, all historical detail has been fictionalised. My first example is an extreme one, perhaps because the extent of X's fragmentation and his capacity to use therapy marked the strength with which he defended himself against an identification with white projections into black. He was referred to me by a far-sighted GP during an attachment to a Health Centre in South London. X believed that an enemy alien planet had shot a black egg into his insides from which emanated all his troubles. In the transference, at times I was an inter-galactic enemy, who therefore had to be managed with military tactics of interrogation and disorientation and various kinds of threats. He thereby gave me an experience of how unpredictable and attacking his whole environment felt, in a way that was reminiscent of Bion's "bizarre objects", but perhaps also signified the reality of how vulnerable he was to the projections of others at that time. He was terrified of losing touch with reality completely, and at the time he felt himself to be several different people and to have virtually no control over his transitions between one

and another, which I took to be his personification of his splits (Bion 1967). There was a correspondingly powerful positive transference, which I have less need to document at this point, and which happened on different days. He would also enact his splits through his use of black and white in the way that he dressed, and through the way that he perceived me as dying my hair between sessions so that it was sometimes black, sometimes blonde and sometimes brown. The part of him that he initially identified as black, as the black egg that had been shot into him, was his overwhelmingly murderous rage. Much later, he said that he felt that if he had not "broken into pieces", he might have been in danger of acting out his rage, with much worse consequences. But blackness had also come to stand for the disintegration, the chaos and the fear of madness itself: when he had first come to see me he had dressed entirely in white and cream. When he first let me see the extent of his distress and disturbance, he wore a black "disguise" for a while. He let go his black disguise on the occasion on which he first expressed concern for my well-being, apologised for his "attacks" on me and spoke in an extremely sober and coherent fashion about what he felt was going on - in other words, his first step with me towards depressive position processes. Blackness first of all, therefore, symbolised rage and madness - a rage and madness which had indeed threatened to take him over completely. But he was black, and the central core of himself was thereby identified as disintegrative: this, in my view, poses the white psychotherapist with a severe therapeutic dilemma if he or she is not to reinforce the black patient's self-alienation. As it happened

with this patient, X's imaginative capacities came to the rescue.

He introduced the notion of "Peru", which I came to understand as a transitional space or culture where he and I could have an unambivalent and playful union outside and beyond black and white and all that they symbolised for both of us and signified in reality in terms of our power relationship. He started to send me love messages on cards "from Peru". I still got the hate ones, of course, but these came on ordinary British writing paper. He gave me a beautifully decorated Peruvian hat, and for three sessions after that carried a large erect penis under his T-shirt in the form of a Peruvian musical pipe. In this way his image of his sexuality came to be modified as this area of his development had also been contaminated by white projection, being associated in his mind with ugliness and with aggression. We had, by a variety of means within the transference relationship, to decathect the meaning of black in many different areas of his mind before he could begin to accept himself as black and valuable and to internalise our relationship as an integrative capacity.

Patients Y and Z would also have been classified as borderline, although neither of them were in as overtly disintegrated a state as X when they began therapy. In the light of this, it is interesting that their internal splits also fell along lines of over-determined symbolization of black and white, although they both managed to keep functioning by maintaining a defence of a more externalised form of projective identification

into black people. Y, a young woman, hated black people and saw them as over-sexual, aggressive and invasive, and went to astonishing lengths to avoid their company, to keep at bay the rage and sexuality she associated with her own blackness. Z, an older man, who had previously been hospitalised with a diagnosis of "thought disorder", also saw black people as greedy and violent, and as having low moral standards. Now, in terms of their projective systems, none of these people were employing anything other than what I am arguing is a normal contemporary, although usually deeply unconscious, collective dissociation. For example, a white patient, Q, had a series of dreams about black men bursting into his house and chasing him on the underground, before he came to recognise and own the return of his previously dissociated infantile rage. I am sure you will be able to recognise similar themes from your own dreams and associations. I certainly can. But because Y and Z are black themselves, not only is the split off "Other" someone whom they themselves are forced to identify with at some level, to deeply disintegrative effect, but, in this divided state they are also deeply vulnerable to the mass of white projections that they are receiving on a daily basis.

In reflecting on my countertransference with all these patients, I came to recognise my own use of this same projective system. X, Y and Z stirred up considerable quantities of anxiety in me, in a way that went beyond and felt more personal than the massive anxiety that always needs to be contained in work with a patient with a disturbance in the psychotic area. In fact, patient Z had been referred on by another white therapist who had

felt that she could not cope with him because he was too "deeply disturbed and disturbing." Gradually I had to own that my sometime fear, especially of X, was not merely to do with the intensity of his threats against me but with the primitive level of projection of my own rage and violence into black, which was previously so regressed and so disowned that it assumed a primitive, unmodified and therefore unutterably terrifying quality. This was a potentially serious impediment to our work together and required considerable psychological work on my part. I had less difficulty when it came to acknowledging my real power in the therapy relationship or in terms of my whiteness and all that carries with it historically in dominative and aversive forms. What I was even more horrified to discover in myself was the way in which I allowed these people to carry, in an extremely subtle but nonetheless real way, areas of my own unresolved contradictions. I am referring to the partial splits and areas of self-alienation which arise from my own dislocations in terms of class, history and culture as a "second-generation" Irish immigrant. Working with these patients made me enormously more aware of the social and political fault lines in my own psyche, and to take back some of my own confusion and pain. To some extent I think this kind of projection operates all the way along the line in a hierarchical society divided along lines of class, race and sex, as for example it is often the lot of the secretaries in hierarchical organisations to carry the contradictions of their "superiors" and contain stress in that way. But I think that this is also a function of the black "Other" and one of the least observed but most effective dynamics

in terms of social regulation.

I have deliberately said nothing about the individual or family histories of the black patients I have mentioned. Of course individually specific material and processes constitute the predominant focus of therapy. There will be many occasions when the individual overlaps with and recapitulates the social and that both of these become alive in transference and countertransference issues. For example, X's use of black and white in the transference also seemed to represent his ambivalence towards his parents. His family operated an extremely rigid, prescriptive defence structure within which he became the scapegoat, the carrier of problems and cultural contradictions, leaving the others, as he said, "psychologically squeaky clean." This dynamic was to some extent being revived in the countertransference dilemmas I have just described. But I am trying to focus on underlying social dynamics which we all carry in with us to the consulting room, and an understanding of which, I think, should inform our understanding of individual and family processes. Not only have I no desire to pathologise individual black families, but I think that to do so would endanger our perspective on the social issues currently being addressed. To quote Fanon: "A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world." (Fanon, 1952, p.143). A family faced with and only too well aware of this dilemma, and perhaps with less access to black-identified cultures of survival, may, as a survival adaptation and in an attempt to give their children the best possible chances in the white world, try to take the white world

into themselves and internalise some of its values, and perhaps even some of the symbolic and projective social order. Stephan Feuchtwang demonstrates how the black family is in an "endemic colonial situation" and therefore often "a constellation of potential contradictions." (Feuchtwang,?, p.130, and 1985, p.461) The society is pathogenic and encourages strategies of survival which maintain the status quo at the cost of our divided selves. Sometimes individual families may deal with their ambivalence towards colonial power and the promises it fails to deliver by lodging it in one of the children who seems to personify conflict, contradiction and those projected qualities of "blackness" which the family is forced into the position of having to ceaselessly struggle to disown.

THE AETIOLOGY OF PSYCHOTIC DISTURBANCE.

Biochemical genetic theories of the causation of psychoses are enjoying a fashionable resurgence in this country at the moment, and can have extremely dangerous consequences. Whilst I am not disputing that very disturbed states of mind are part of a process that involves biochemical changes in the brain as a physical correlate, as do to a lesser extent even the smallest psychological or emotional changes, biological reductionism distorts the picture by omitting social, psychological and political dimensions, and is open to repressive and reactionary usage. "In the wake of the US inner city riots of the late 1960's, self-styled "psychosurgeons" began to argue that there must be faults in the brains of the ghetto ringleaders, correctable not by social intervention but by recourse to knife,

electrode or drug. By 1984 the leading US journal "Science" carried a paper claiming that the tendency to commit crime was itself carried in the genes."(Rose & Rose 1986).

Melanie Klein (1975), Herbert Rosenfeld (1965), Wilfred Bion (1967) and Harold Searles (1965), among many others, have discussed the importance of the role of introjection in the aetiology of psychosis, but like most psychoanalytic theorists, they focus on the family or on individual mother/child relationships within what, by omission, is implied to be a benign or neutral social and political environment. The family mediates the social environment, and passes it on to children who introject society's values as superego(Symington,1983). The black family lives in a society which negates its potentially integrative identifications and projects instead its own psychological debris. To quote Fanon again: "What is true is that under normal conditions, an interaction must exist between the family and society at large. The home is the basis of the truth of society, but society authenticates and legitimizes the family. The colonial structure is the very negative of this reciprocal justification."(Fanon,1970, p.61, quoted in Feuchtwang,1985, p.461) I am therefore arguing that an awareness of the pathogenic forms of the social order needs to inform our understanding of transference/countertransference issues, and our interpretation of areas of disturbance, especially when they relate to the symbolisation of black and white and also sometimes when they appear to relate to family dynamics.

But perhaps there is something even more to be drawn from this, especially in view of the astonishingly high rates of

psychiatric hospital admission for young British blacks. Patients X and Z both displayed powerful defences against introjection. X's earliest memories involved spitting out food and milk; they both had severe skin disorders. In "The Schizophrenic's Vulnerability to the Therapist's Unconscious Processes", Searles demonstrates the child's "...unconscious endeavour to relieve the parent's own anxiety - by, namely, introjecting the parent's intrapsychic conflicts" (Searles, 1965, p.199), conflicts which could very understandably centre around those healthily infantile qualities of greed and aggression labelled as black in the pathogenic white social projective system. Following a Kleinian analysis, if the splits caused by the projection of early rage, aggression, greed and envy are not modified by being met with an unambivalent response, they are then re-introjected as persecutory objects in the child's mind. In a racist environment daily messages of hostility and rejection would reinforce splitting and internal persecution. In this divided state, how vulnerable then would someone be to the sorts of powerful primitive projections I have discussed earlier which are exemplified and whose widespread use is encouraged by the media, whose unconscious motivation may precisely be a desperate attempt to expel psychotic anxieties from the minds of the white populace. I quote Searles from "The Effort to Drive the Other Person Crazy - an Element in the Aetiology and Psychotherapy of Schizophrenia":....."The effort to drive the other person crazy can be motivated predominantly by a desire to externalise, and thus get rid of, the threatening craziness in oneself. It is well-known that the families of schizophrenic patients have a

proclivity for dealing with the patient as being "the crazy one" in the family, the repository of all the craziness amongst the various other members." (Searles, 1965, p.265)

So, if we project psychotic anxieties involving early rage, greed and aggression into some black people to carry and contain for us, the effects upon the black population of this country are manifestly extremely destructive, perhaps especially in an environment in which early child care takes place. But what are the effects and implications for the white population? The hunger for a more genuinely and deeply enriching and fulfilling life, which can never be assuaged by increasing levels of material consumption, is lost to us as a motive force. Potentially empowering embodied rage and aggression, when projected out, create instead only increasing levels of fearfulness and paranoid ideation, then requiring further and more intense projection to keep the level of anxiety manageable. In so losing some of our elemental drives, we also lose the means to work them through, the capacity to think, form creative and cooperative alliances and effective strategies for change. We defend ourselves not only from guilt and shame about past and present forms of exploitation of black people, but also from a recognition of our impotence, our loss of colonial power and our inability to develop the means to work and struggle towards more just and humane forms of social organisation and provision.

I am not suggesting that the massive projective use and abuse of the black population of this country is the only way in which we whites retrench our political powerlessness and regression, but I posit that it is one major form of social

regulation. As is well known from the families of so-called schizophrenics, the breakdown of one member ensures the continuation of the unit unchanged. So we fill our mental hospitals with black people as we carry on our headlong flight into the lived madness and disintegration of unregulated market forces. Let us not forget whose problem and whose solution this is. And whose responsibility to take informed action to begin to change it.

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