Manic Society: Toward the Depressive Position

Neil Altman Ph.D.

Manic Society

Toward the Depressive Position

Neil Altman, Ph.D.

I argue that on both the small-scale level of the interpersonal relationship, and the large-scale level of society, the manic defense makes it difficult to care about others, and so militates against a sense of social responsibility. I address four basic questions: what is the nature of social responsibility? What is the nature of the manic defense? How does the manic defense interfere with the potential for social responsibility? And, on a more general level, what are the issues with respect to methodology for efforts such as this one to link psychoanalysis and social theory?

THIS PAPER, ALONG WITH THE COMPANION PIECE BY RACHAEL PELTZ, was written for the inauguration of the Section on Social Responsibility of the Division of Psychoanalysis of the American Psychological Association in April 1999. Since then, much has changed in the world. The "roaring 90s" that formed the backdrop of these papers have gone the way of all roaring decades. The Clinton administration was replaced with the Bush administration; the stock market fell; a recession took hold; there were the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the Iraq war and its aftermath, a deepening of hopelessness in the Middle East. In many ways it might seem that the manic society has been replaced by the depressed (not depressive) society. Yet, we feel that the manic defensive structure that we outlined in these papers remains in place, though it now takes different forms. For example, we view the U.S. government's response to the terrorist

Neil Altman, Ph.D. is coeditor of *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* and Associate Clinical Professor in the Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis at New York University. He is author of *The Analyst in the Inner City: Race, Class, and Culture Through a Psychoanalytic Lens* (TAP, 1995) and coauthor of *Relational Child Psychotherapy* (2002).

attacks of 2001 as <mark>a fundamentally manic response. That is, the response has been to attempt to restore a damaged sense of omnipotence and guiltlessness by constructing and attacking an enemy, Saddam Hussein, who could be easily defeated in the name of spreading North American virtues such as democracy and freedom.</mark> The fact that there was no evidence that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the United States, or that he had anything to do with the September 11 attacks, was ignored in the face of the defensive need to restore a sense of the country's omnipotence and virtue. Complications—such as the collateral damage to civil liberties in the United States, to the country's standing in the international community, and to the effort to counter real terrorist threats—were ignored in favor of the need to have a simple, black-and-white view of the world we live in, with good guys and bad guys and never the twain shall meet. In psychoanalytic terms, there was a retreat from depressive position complexity, doubt, and sorrow.

Many of the manic phenomena we reported on in our papers remain. People multitask and pursue the "in" universities for their children more frantically than ever. The deep structure of manic defense in the society of the United States transcends any particular manifestation in any particular decade. We hope that our papers, and the discussion that follows, will advance the project of developing a psychoanalytically informed body of social criticism.

Social Responsibility

Psychoanalysis and social responsibility might seem like implausible bedfellows at first blush. Psychoanalysis takes place in sequestered offices, in private practices, removed from the hurly-burly world of politicians and social activists. Psychoanalysis focuses on individuals; it has a reputation for sponsoring a value system organized around self-actualization and self-assertion as opposed to social responsibility. We psychoanalysts and psychotherapists devote ourselves to taking care of our patients and helping our patients take care of themselves. But many of us, while feeling that our work is highly meaningful, are troubled by a feeling of having turned away from engagement with larger social problems. We have had periods in our lives of strong engagement with political action, and we feel a sense of loss at having

chosen a career focused on personal, rather than social, change. Larger social problems periodically attain an urgency, at times of war or other upheaval, that leads us to question our office-based work. We might suspect, additionally, that psychoanalysis provides an illuminating framework for addressing social problems—that, in fact, we think analytically when we talk about social and political issues, though we have not articulated exactly how. This paper represents my own beginning efforts to address a social problem psychoanalytically, specifically the problem of abandonment of social responsibility in American society. Insofar as psychoanalysis as a field, and we as individual analysts, have also turned away from our societal context, this paper might also be taken as an effort at self-examination and self-cure.

Let us begin with a look at the history of psychoanalytic engagement, or the lack of same, with the social world. The social context of the individual is secondary in more classical approaches, Freudian and Kleinian alike; in relational and interpersonal psychoanalysis, the social context is salient in limited form, that is, in the form of the patient–analyst dyad. Botticelli (2004) has called attention to the way in which the social concern and activism of the 1960s has been funneled into the dyadic utopianism of relational psychoanalysis. Bader (1998) has noted how the postmodern turn in psychoanalysis is associated with the abandonment of both therapeutic and social activism, as analysts turn inward to deconstruct the nature of the interaction and their own participation.

Nonetheless, there have been analysts all along who did turn the psychoanalytic lens on society. The Frankfurt school (Horkeimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Brown, Fromm) is the most prominent example of analysts who engaged in psychoanalytic/Marxist social criticism. Recent generations of feminist analysts (Dimen, Harris, Goldner, Benjamin, Chodorow, Layton) and queer theorists (Magee and Miller, David Schwartz) have illuminated and exposed the psychic functions served by particular ways of constructing gender and sexual orientation and the defensive roots of sexism and homophobia using psychoanalytic concepts and perspectives as tools. I have made a similar effort with respect to racism (Altman, 2000a). Lacanian-inspired analysts, with the idea that the unconscious is structured by language, have always seen the footprints left by society at the very heart of the individual, as have the feminist authors just mentioned, who see individual development as profoundly structured by gender as it is organized in a

particular culture. In my own work, I attempt to show how race, class, and culture are similarly constitutive of individual identity. We are just beginning to experiment with ways of linking the psychic and the social with ways of thinking that can encompass both levels at once, without reductionism.

The Nature of Social Responsibility

The previously mentioned efforts, at a conceptual level, to link the psychic and the social, do not address the question of social responsibility. By social responsibility, I mean a sense of concern for the welfare of others in the larger society that leads one to take action on their behalf when their welfare is threatened. From a psychoanalytic point of view, what would lead the individual to feel a similar sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, or for the welfare of the social group, as one feels for oneself? Is there a place in psychoanalytic theory for social responsibility? If so, how is a sense of responsibility for others, and for the social group, to be understood?

The line that divides those for whom we feel responsible from those for whom we don't can be said to define the boundaries of the "communal self" (Roland, 1988). In the United States and Europe, the individual self is most prominent. A communal sense of self characterizes many third-world cultures in which there is a strong identification with extended family, tribe, caste, and so on. Emphasis on the individual self tends to be associated with a relatively narrow communal self—that is, a sense of identification limited to one's nuclear family.[1]

Consider how concern for intimate others, and for the larger social group, may be unrelated or may even be experienced as in opposition to one another. There are people who are very caring about their families or the small groups to which they belong while being quite antisocial, or uncaring about the welfare of society as a whole or people beyond their small groups. Sometimes this discrepancy occurs when groups are defined as enemies to one another, or when one's own small group is disaffected. In other cases, people feel conflicted about how

---

[1] These distinctions are hardly cut-and-dried. A sense of identification with the nation is quite common in the modern West, while rigid distinctions between one's tribe and other closely related tribes are common in the third world.

to allocate finite personal and financial resources. For example, upper-middle-class professionals in the United States (like me and most, if not all, of my readers) might feel they have to choose between a more lucrative private practice to finance private education for one's children and a lower paying public sector job that would rule out private education. One might argue that this sort of conflict is a product of an individualistic, capitalistic social system in which socially responsible work is devalued and marginalized. At the same time, how such conflicts are resolved in any individual case depends on many other factors, such as the personalities, psychodynamics, and interpersonal patterns of the people involved. As Muriel Dimen (personal communication) has pointed out, the forms taken by, and even the existence of, love and concern are constructed on multiple social and psychological levels. In a sense, it is misleading to conceive of love and concern as having a singular essence aside from the various forms in which they are manifest and separable from the contexts in which they arise.

Generally speaking, in modern American society, the impulse to care for intimate others draws on a more immediate and sustained human responsiveness than caring for those in a larger social group. Caring for intimate others is embedded in immediate and ongoing interactions, giving and taking, struggling through life problems together, that can produce deep love and caring. Caring about others in society may be based on immediate contact, such as seeing the suffering of the homeless in the street or the alienated, overworked bureaucrats and executives downtown, or it may be based on political or ideological positions that are relatively abstract. These positions seem to have a family resemblance to, but are certainly distinguishable from, caring impulses as they manifest in the context of intimacy. In our individualistic society, some additional factor must be at work in large-scale social responsibility, some broader sense of identification with others or with society as an entity that itself draws on personal and social factors, such as identification or disidentification with the values of parents or a social group.

Let us now return to the question of the place of social responsibility in psychoanalytic theory: Consider what is taken for granted and what is taken to require explanation in this question. The very fact that social responsibility, as opposed to its absence, needs to be accounted for speaks to the individualism embedded in psychoanalytic theory.

Social Responsibility in Freudian Psychoanalysis

Placing sexual satisfaction (as opposed to sexual forms of relating) at the foundation of human motivation, Freudian classical approaches begin by foregrounding the interest of the individual.[2] Especially in his economic theory, the individual's motivation was seen by Freud as basically derivative of the need to manage sexual tension. Concern with the satisfaction or welfare of others was accounted for by recourse to two concepts: sublimation and identification.

Sublimation, in the Freudian account, sees concern for others as defensive, though adaptive, and derivative of sexuality (and its frustration), thus leaving undisturbed a primarily self-focused account of human motivation. Loewald's (1988) later revisionist account of sublimation leaves more room to conceive of the transformation of motives to a higher developmental level, so that an originally self-centered sexuality might become linked with a more truly caring and other-focused form of motivation associated with a higher developmental stage. Such a transformation, in which self-interest and concern for others coincide, provides a basis for feelings of love and responsibility.

The second concept that accounts for concern for others in Freudian theory is identification, including that form of identification with the father that, in classical Freudian theory, is thought to constitute superego formation. Superego-driven feelings and actions are seen as inherently at odds with sexual and aggressive motives. Thus, in "Civilization and Its Discontents," Freud (1929) portrays the individual in conflict with society, so that superego (the intrapsychic representative of society) and id (the truest, deepest level of the individual) are destined to be pulling in opposite directions. From a Lowaldian perspective, one might conceive of ego-sponsored resolutions, or transformations, of this conflict. That is, one might imagine that id and superego could transform each other at a higher developmental level so that self-interest and concern for others would cease to be polarized opposites. In the classical form of the structural model, the polarization of superego and id builds into Freudian theory an antagonism between the interests of self and other, in which self-interested motives are primary. Thus, self-interest is set aside in acts of social

---

[2] Of course, such simple assertions fail to do justice to the richness of Freud's theorizing in its totality. For example, sexuality conceived of as manifesting the life instinct can be said to transcend individual boundaries.

responsibility. Loewald's version of Freudian psychoanalysis suggests a path toward transcendence of this polarization between self and other.

Aside from the theoretical considerations that tend to foreground individualism in Freudian psychoanalysis, there are factors related to the sociology of American psychoanalysis. European immigrant analysts, many of whom had leftist political commitments, were afraid to give voice to their social commitments during the McCarthy era of virulent anticommunism in the United States (Jacoby, 1983). Additionally, psychoanalysis in the United States was absorbed into the medical model. Ego psychology, the version of psychoanalysis that fit best with the medical model of diagnosis and treatment, privileged qualities of the ego ("strengths") and criteria for analyzability that tended to rule out culturally nonmainstream or impoverished Americans. Analysts, intent on succeeding in financial terms, raised their fees as high as the market would bear, so that analysis for the most part was available only to the economically privileged (except as it was available in training clinics). For all these reasons, traditional Freudian analysts in the United States tended to turn away from concern with the broader society.

Social Responsibility in Kleinian and Winnicottian Psychoanalysis

In the classical Freudian model, guilt is the expression of superego-linked opposition to basically ruthless sexual and aggressive strivings linked to the id. Insofar as the id is core to the individual, there is something intrinsically self-defeating about guilt in this context. The Kleinian version of psychoanalytic theory finds a more constructive role for guilt—one more of a piece, less at odds with, the individual's fundamental motivations. Caring feelings and actions in the Kleinian model arise, in the depressive position, from reparative impulses, the wish and need to make restitution for fantasied destruction in relation to a loved object. In this context, "love" refers to concern for the welfare of the other, as well as the more ruthless love associated with sexuality as conceived of by Freud. In fact, in the Kleinian model, ruthless love by definition belongs to the paranoid-schizoid position rather than the depressive position relationship to ambivalently loved objects. Concern for the welfare of the other partially accounts for the persistent efforts to repair a damaged object, internal or external, that are frequently noted in Kleinian accounts of human relationships

(e.g., Segal, 1964). Guilt, in this context, would seem to encompass feelings of caring for the other and concern for the damage done to another that are basic to the individual in the depressive position; guilt, therefore, is not at odds with the individual's fundamental motivation or core. In Winnicott's (1958) revision of Kleinian theory, this transformed understanding of love and guilt is made even more explicit. In Winnicott's theory, ruthless love becomes the greedy baby's attack on the breast, while "guilt" becomes concern for the damage done to the other by these ruthless attacks.

Turning again to the sociology of psychoanalysis, Kleinian analysts in England have been more available to impoverished people than analysts (Freudian or otherwise) in the United States. Analysts in the United Kingdom (and throughout Europe and Latin America) are less identified with the private-practice medical model. Lay analysts were always more accepted in the United Kingdom than in the United States, while many analysts practiced analysis within the National Health Service. Even in private practice, fees are much lower in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Latin America than in the United States. Kleinian analysis, then, has been engaged with a wider range of socioeconomic groups than has North American analysis.

Other Object Relations and Relational Theories

In Klein and Winnicott, then, love becomes more clearly other-focused than it had been in the classical Freudian model. In another effort to account for attachment to internal and external others in nonlibidinal terms, Bowlby (1969) and Fairbairn (1952) developed theories emphasizing attachment and the primacy of object-seeking over satisfaction-seeking in human motivation. With this relational turn, a move was made toward transcending the individualism of psychoanalytic theory, in the sense that basic human motivation became less self-centered. In subsequent theorizing, on one level the very boundaries between self and others became harder to define, as in Winnicott's (1952) claim that "there is no such thing as a baby (without the mother)" (p. 99) or when later generations of relational authors in the tradition of Fairbairn demonstrated how inner world and outer world interpenetrate (e.g., Mitchell, 1988). On another level, the other emerged for the first time, in a sense, as Benjamin (1988), following up on Winnicott's concept of object usage (1968) developed the notion that recognition of the separate subjectivity of the other is

a developmental achievement. With boundaries between self and other less sharp (as in Winnicott), there is conceivably a less sharp boundary between self-interest and concern for others (as, perhaps, in primary maternal preoccupation). With the notion of the other person's separate subjectivity, an other to be concerned about is introduced into psychoanalytic theory, into the formerly self-contained world of the individual psyche. Between them, the concepts of the depressive position and of object usage give us a complete theoretical account of how caring and concern can be directed toward others conceived of as people with their own subjective experience.

The individual, in relational theory as opposed to classical theory, is thus both more basically intertwined with and separate from others. It now becomes possible to wonder how it is that a person fails to be concerned about others, in addition to wondering how a basically self-interested person might come to care for others as for himself or herself.

Slavin and Kriegman (1998) advocate that space be made for the recognition of the self-interest of both patient and analyst when their respective interests diverge on some level. To fail to do so is to fail to acknowledge the separateness of the analyst, creating a symbiotic rather than intersubjective interchange. Following this line of thought, there would be no true recognition of the other's interest without recognition of self-interest, even when these diverge. A superordinate convergence of interests can only emerge if this divergence of interests is not obfuscated. As Benjamin (1988), following Hegel, points out, the only recognition that matters is that of a person with an independent subjectivity. A similar notion of the value of the analyst's independent subjectivity in the effort to help the patient is implicit in Pizer's (1998) notion of negotiation. The social and political implications of this principle seem promising. White liberal guilt, a sort of hypocritical lip service to the welfare of others driven by guilt avoidance, for example, might be seen as reflecting the failure of upper-middle-class liberals to acknowledge how committed they are to pursuing their own political/economic interests when they diverge from the interests of the poor.

The Manic Defense

A specific concept in Kleinian theory, the "manic defense," provides a way of accounting for the absence, or failure, of social responsibility in psychoanalytic terms. I will argue that the manic defense militates

against a sense of social responsibility, since it defends against precisely the depressive guilt that, in the Kleinian model, leads to reparative concern for others. This defense is characterized by clinging to a sense of omnipotence, denial of psychic reality, an associated flight into action as opposed to thought, and massive projective identification. Let us first elaborate on how these aspects of the manic defense play out in contemporary American society.

Denial of Psychic Reality

Consider first Philip Cushman and Peter Gilford's (2000) discussion of the emerging shape of the early 21st-century self as manifested in managed care. In earlier writing, Cushman (1995), following in the footsteps of Fromm (1947), had delineated various forms taken by the self in particular historical and socioeconomic contexts. For example, late capitalist (or consumerist) society, according to Cushman, is characterized by an empty self that requires being filled up with goods and services. Fromm had earlier identified a "marketing self," the self as commodity, in a similar capitalistic context. Cushman and Gilford now look at the self as portrayed in the world of managed health care. This self is a functional/dysfunctional self, a self that is meant to serve the corporation. It is a flat self, lacking interior or depth. The individual mind shows up only as symptoms, which are to be removed as expeditiously as possible in order to return the person to functional status, at which time the person's thoughts and feelings become irrelevant. Cushman and Gilford's functional self is a prime example of a denial of psychic reality, with an associated flight into action characteristic of the manic defense.

Omnipotence

Omnipotence is perhaps most dramatically illustrated in Tom Wolfe's (1987) *Bonfire of the Vanities,* by the Wall Street characters who consider themselves masters of the universe. Wolfe was writing about a manic period on Wall Street in the 1980s, which was outdone by a rerun in the mid to late 1990s, at which time the "new economy" was thought to involve justifiable and sustainable stock prices historically unheard of.

Over 30 years ago, Ernest Becker (1973) highlighted the ways in which people deny death, transiency; they build sand castles during

periods of low tide, forgetting, or trying to forget, that the tide comes in sooner or later and sweeps everything away. Yet, paradoxically, it is the very transience of things that creates their value, their preciousness. Those who are unable to sustain the pain of this paradox either succumb to despair or seek to fly off into an illusory omnipotence.

Those who are embedded in consumerist society, where the value of things is measured by money, naturally come to believe that absolute freedom would come with infinite money, and in the United States, some highly visible people seem to have nearly infinite amounts of money. Large quantities of money provide enough omnipotence, on a mundane level, that it becomes possible to imagine a more absolute form of invulnerability with only a little more money. For the upwardly mobile, the rich—with their chauffeurs, their supposed ability to be free from worry about money, their autonomy, their yachts, and their world tours—might well seem to have it made. In the 1990s, those who got started making large amounts of money ended up chasing absolute freedom like a thirsty person chases a mirage. The *New York Times* during those heady days once published an article about how much was "the figure": the amount of money one needed in order to retire in one's 30s. Many people thought they'd feel ready to retire with a million dollars in the bank. But then they found that the city apartment on Park Avenue and the country house in the Hamptons quickly required much more than a million to maintain. So the figure became ten million. In manic days on Wall Street, that's doable. But then, why stay in hotels in Aspen, why not have a house there and one in the south of France, for vacations? Once you're on Park Avenue and in the Hamptons, everyone else has houses there, and after a while they become your reference group. Twenty-five million. Of course, with houses around the world like that you may as well get a private jet.

Like a mirage, the promise of absolute freedom, omnipotence, ever recedes. It is not only the rich who end up on this treadmill. The American ethos encourages all to believe that anyone can make it here—can be free, secure, happy. The latest version of this promise is presented in advertising, that encourages us to identify with young, beautiful, smiling people. The utopian images of a happy life are associated with the use of one or another product. The brilliance of this advertising strategy is that it exploits the irredeemability of the consumerist promise to keep people consuming at a faster and faster

pace, entranced by the ever-receding fantasy of happiness, freedom, power. As a result, many Americans work harder and harder to keep up on the payments for their credit cards, if not to save for a blissful old age. The other side of the coin, of course, is that Americans also know, at some level, that the American dream is built of sand and that it can collapse at any time. With job security only a memory of bygone days, with massive corporate layoffs a recurrent reality, corporate employees are intimidated into accepting unlimited work-related demands on their time. As external demands tend to become internalized values, being on-call at all times has become a marker of status and prestige. For example, the *New York Times* reported that on New Year's Eve 2000, when people worried about Y2K collapses, it was a sign of one's having "arrived" that one had to be at work that night, unable to party.

This double-sided chase after freedom/escape from insecurity has led the affluent children of some baby boomers to become obsessed with obtaining admission to the most selective colleges in the United States. On December 7, 2000, the *New York Times* reported that the admissions director at Harvard said that students who had driven themselves into the ground to produce an unassailable résumé for his school were prone to burning out quickly upon admission. In New York and elsewhere, parents have become frantic about obtaining admission to nursery schools that offer entrée to an inside track, and first-graders bring home stacks of homework. Academic achievement is increasingly measured by standardized test scores, in recognition of the fact that the one kind of achievement that makes sense these days is of the concrete, easily quantifiable,type. Ineffable values like a sense of meaningfulness and integrity are irrelevant to the functional self of the early 21st century. We see here the triumph of the action orientation, the collapse of psychic space, characteristic of the manic defense.

Projective Identification

Of course, there are large segments of our society for whom the American dream is a cruel joke. That brings us to the third aspect of the manic defense: projective identification. I suggest that the creation and maintenance of an impoverished, left-behind group of people in our society serves functions for the American psyche analogous to

the function of projective identification on an individual level.[3] First, this impoverished group of people is experienced as other, whether by virtue of race, social class, or culture (cf., the culture of poverty, or cultural difference based on ethnicity or national origin). In this connection, stereotypes, images, take shape of mainstream, homogenized, Americans—white and middle class, while prejudicial images take shape of the racial, ethnic, or class-based "other". These images operate like collective internal objects, templates, preconceptions (J. M. Davies, personal communication).

Second, the acts that create and maintain this group of people in their status as underprivileged and other operate unconsciously, for the most part seemingly without anyone's intention. The idea that anyone can make it in America leads to overlooking the ways in which the deck is stacked against poor American children from the start, in the sequelae of poor schools, pervasive racial prejudice, police brutality, inadequate health care, and so on. Societal actions and capitalist structures that maintain the poor in their deprived state are often rationalized in one way or another, taking the focus off the impact on human beings. For example, a politician opposing a program to extend health care benefits to the children of the working poor might frame this opposition as intended to reduce the role of government and keep taxes low. A means is thereby provided for the populace to "selectively inattend" (Sullivan, 1953) the ways in which the oppression of poor children is maintained.

Third, in certain people, behavior is induced that seems to confirm the prejudicial stereotypes just mentioned. Poor people engage in more crime, for example; or people who go to inadequate schools get discouraged about the efficacy of education as a means of social mobility. Preconceptions of ghetto residents as criminals and as lazy thus seem to be confirmed, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle. Seeing themselves in these negative terms in the public eye, in the media and in personal contacts, of course, leads to an internalized poor self-image in ghetto residents, for example, which powerfully reinforces the vicious circle.

---

[3] On a socioeconomic level, one must keep in mind that a pool of unemployed people serves the corporations by keeping wages low and maintaining a sense of insecurity among workers so that they tend not to protest.

The result is that Americans who can identify with the image of the mainstream American are able to disavow a variety of psychic qualities and locate them in images of the "underclass," the "not me" group of people in American society. Examples here include members of a Congress that refuses to pass campaign finance reform locating exploitativeness in welfare cheats, or the violence of police brutality, on behalf of mainstream America, being overlooked in favor of a focus on the violence of ghetto residents. To point out the projective processes at work here is not to deny that there are people who exploit the welfare system, or that there are violent ghetto residents. The fact that these behaviors and psychic qualities are induced and maintained in images of the other makes it possible to believe, at any point, that the criminality, exploitativeness, and violence of the ghetto were always there. These processes serve defensive functions for the mainstream psyche in terms of enabling a disavowal of the pervasive exploitativess and violence throughout our society. Ironically, and in the fashion typical of projective identification, a prime example of exploitativeness and violence on the part of mainstream America is the creation and maintenance of an underclass, starting with slavery, that then creates the conditions in which some of us can accuse these others of being exploitative and violent.

The poor in America also serve as containers for the suffering, the sense of limitation, constraint, and vulnerability that tend to be disavowed by middle-class Americans, especially in manic defense mode. Toni Morrison (1993) points out that European immigrants came to North America to feel free, religiously and economically. Once here, they may have found religious freedom, but they soon enough encountered one or another of a whole new set of constraints, as is the lot of humankind. They found new opportunities but also disease and death, war with the native inhabitants, the trials and tribulations of trying to turn forested land into farms, crop failures, and on and on. In the face of the limitations and vulnerability inherent in human beings, what better way to hold on to the sense of freedom, asks Morrison, than to enslave a group of people defined as other? Slavery and genocide, from this point of view, are part and parcel of the American self-perception of this nation as the land of the free and the home of the brave. The psychoanalytic perspective, with its elucidation of unconscious processes, dissociation, and projective identification, shows how we maintain the contradiction between the fact of slavery

and oppression and the ideology of America as the land of the free, indeed how we could not have the one without the other.

Manic Defenses and Guilt

In a Kleinian framework, the manic defense can operate as a defense against depressive guilt. How might this play out on the American social scene? Before considering this question, it will be helpful to take a short excursion into the nature of guilt.

Guilt, most generally, is the affect associated with the realization that one has betrayed one's own values; more specifically, guilt is often associated with the realization that one has caused damage to someone one cares about. Mitchell (2002) has pointed out that much of what is commonly called guilt is, in fact, a defense against guilt, a warding off of guilt.[4] For example, saying "I'm sorry" is often a request for expiation so that one can delete the sense of destructiveness, rather than an acknowledgment of damage done, pain caused. It is extremely painful to acknowledge to oneself that one has damaged or hurt someone one cares about, inadvertently or advertently. This pain is what makes attaining the Kleinian depressive position an achievement; the achievement consists of bearing the sense of being destructive in the face of the love one has toward the damaged person. From a Kleinian perspective, true reparation can only flow from a realization of, a frank confrontation with the fact that damage has been done. This damage is irreparable, in the sense that the past cannot be undone. Reparation is different from repair: repair is fixing that which has been broken; reparation is compensation for damage that cannot be fixed.

From a Kleinian point of view, those who cannot bear depressive guilt, and all of us when we cannot bear depressive guilt, resort to defensive measures to try to avoid it. One such measure is splitting, that is, we can try to keep separate those we love from those we hate, so that damage is never done to one we love. In a variation on this theme, we can blame the victim, that is, we can try to claim, to

---

[4] Mitchell's point that the word *guilt* often refers to guilt-avoidance makes some (Adrienne Harris, personal communication) suggest that we use the word *remorse* rather than *guilt*. I will continue to use the word *guilt* to be consistent with Kleinian usage, while acknowledging that *remorse* is a less confusing term.

ourselves and others, that the ones we hurt brought the damage on themselves—they deserved it. Guilt can be projected onto the victim, as occurs massively in a lynching when the mob jumps to the conclusion that the person lynched must be guilty of some heinous crime. In a further variation on this theme, we can try to objectify those to whom we have caused damage, denying that they are people like us. They are commodities, or subhuman in some way.

Manic defenses counteract depressive guilt at the most fundamental level by foreclosing the psychic space within which guilt might arise. As Ogden (1986) points out, at the paranoid-schizoid position to which the manic defense takes us, we lose both subjectivity and history. The space between the experiencer and the experience is lost. One is one's experience; the subject that has experience does not exist. History depends on the continuity of the subject over time; in the paranoid-schizoid position, one moment's experience yields fully to the next moment's experience. As Ogden puts it, history is rewritten from moment to moment. (p. 80) That is how splitting works; the fact that a person was good or bad yesterday is of no relevance to how he or she is perceived today. And so the integration of love and hate, or love and destructiveness, that leads to depressive guilt cannot occur. Reflective thought is foreclosed, because the experiencer, the one who has experience to reflect on, does not exist. In its place one finds unreflective action, the evacuation of unwanted feelings, intolerance of limits and frustration, that is, omnipotence.

The effectiveness of these defenses in shielding us from depressive guilt is tenuous. There is a constant danger that we will realize that we have mixed feelings toward someone we hate, or realize that our enemies are people like us, or that maybe someone did not fully deserve his or her fate. In fact, for many people, for all but the most psychopathic, the inability to bear depressive guilt that makes the manic defense necessary often derives, in part, precisely from an underlying extreme sense of responsibility for real or imagined damage. Children, in their egocentrism, normally feel responsible for all sorts of bad things that happen: sickness or death of a parent, divorce, all kinds of accidents. This sort of egocentrism lives on, more or less consciously, in adults, alongside their more rational sense that "shit happens" out of their control. It is often more difficult for adults and children to realize that they live in a dangerous, unpredictable, and chaotic world than to blame themselves for things that go wrong, for if such were the case, one might be able to make things go right.

Furthermore, as psychoanalysis has taught us, people, not only children, tend to equate the wish and the deed, so that even a transient destructive wish toward someone who later suffers a bad fate can make one feel responsible for that fate, consciously or unconsciously.

Not only is guilt deeply embedded as a reaction in the human psyche, but conflicts inherent in human affairs tend to make guilt inevitable. As pointed out by Isaiah Berlin (1969), our values often conflict, so that to act under the influence of one set of values can lead us to betray another set of values, thus provoking guilt. For example, in this culture, many of us value achievement, competition, ambition. Many of us also value compassion, equity, justice. Sometimes we cannot have it both ways. When we compete, sometimes we win and others lose (or we may imagine it so); the capacity to bear depressive guilt in this case would mean to be able to tolerate winning, while still caring about the person who loses. An inability to tolerate winning if others must lose can lead to self-sabotage, or to denigration of the loser. Many of us wish that those we love have the best possible educational and material opportunities available to them. At the same time, we feel responsible for the homeless, the downtrodden in society at large. But in particular instances, as noted above, we make choices to provide comforts to our families when we might otherwise be able to make contributions to social service agencies, for example. Guilt, at least in the background, is unavoidable in such a case. If we had made the opposite choice, some guilt with respect to family members might have been inevitable. In short, guilt is inherent in living and choosing. Guilt is thus a powerful force, prone to activation even when it is not warranted, rationally speaking, and so defensive measures against guilt are both highly motivated and extremely tenuous, always in danger of collapsing. This state of affairs accounts for the desperate and violent resistance to anything that would undermine defenses against guilt.

How does all this play out on a societal level? Even a cursory look at American history reveals plenty to feel guilty about: the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of African-Americans, the ongoing inequities in this society and around the world. How can we speak of guilt with respect to events that took place long ago or are a function of systemic arrangements, such as a capitalist socioeconomic system, so that the sense of individual responsibility is diffused? On one level, one can speak of a sense of collective guilt that arises from the sorts of group identifications that also produce national pride or

national shame, when a war is won or lost, for example. Such "group affects" can lead to group behavior, as described by Bion (1989) in terms of small groups, and social defenses, as described by Jaques (1955) and Menzies (1975). One can extend this idea to include manic-defense behaviors on a group level that defend against, or foreclose, a sense of collective guilt.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, one way that such group identifications can work at an individual level is via unconscious fantasy. That is, destructive consequences of the behaviors of others with whom one identifies, or destructive consequences of systemic arrangements with which one colludes, can join with an unconscious sense of personal responsibility for damage done to loved ones. A translation, as it were, takes place between events that occur in the outer world, in which one participates vicariously, and happenings in the inner world. This sort of translation takes place most powerfully when one has personal contact with those who are suffering or who represent those who are suffering or who have suffered. These processes take place in the idiom of the unconscious, in which secondary process concepts of time and place and identity are not operative. Consider the level of clinical interaction between a European-American therapist and an African-American patient, such as I have described (Altman, 2000a, b). Here the history of oppression of African-Americans by European-Americans in the past and the present, on a social level, can join with a personal unconscious sense of destructiveness and guilt from the personal past/present to create a powerful emotionally charged matrix in which personal and national history, the inner world and the outer world, coincide and reinforce each other.

These dynamics operate on a two-way street: not only does the inner world structure experience of the outer world, but the outer world structures the inner world. This point has been well made by interpersonal and relational theorists (e.g., Mitchell, 1988) with respect to how early family history contributes to structuring the inner world. I think the point can be extended to the influence of the social, political, and economic environment. That is, the sense of personal destructiveness in relation to internal objects, for example, can evolve under the influence of a competitive and exploitative socioeconomic and cultural matrix, as well as under the influence of a particular sort of early family environment (which itself, of course, is influenced by the cultural matrix). From a psychoanalytic point of view, we must

always think about the unconscious meaning of a particular cultural matrix to the individual, as this meaning is mediated by early family experiences, and so on. But, given that in the idiom of the unconscious, there are no distinctions between inner and outer, past and present, it is equally true to say that these unconscious meanings reflect the influence of the cultural and socioeconomic matrix.

To sum up, I am arguing that many of the shameful moments in American history can be understood in terms of guilt avoidance. In the American South, for example, the violent resistance to the civil rights movement can be understood in terms of the overwhelming sense of guilt about the human damage done by slavery and its aftermath that would be unleased if it were admitted that African-Americans are human beings with the same human rights as European-Americans. The ever-increasing marginalization of the poor in our society can be understood in terms of an effort, on the part of many middle-class Americans, to remove their suffering from our sight in order to avoid guilt, as well as to reinforce the sense of the poor as different, to avoid a guilt-inducing sense of identification.

Conclusion: Society in Depressive Position Mode

What is to be done with this diagnostic and psychodynamic assessment of contemporary society, since we cannot put society on the couch? First, I think that the psychoanalytic assessment of society is of value in the psychoanalytic understanding of individuals. That is, if one believes that the lines of influence between the individual and society travel on a two-way street, then one needs to understand manic defenses at the individual level in the context of manic society. One point of value in using psychoanalytic concepts at a social level is that doing so provides conceptual linkages between the individual and social levels, if we can avoid reductionism. There is a danger of reductionism, given the history of psychoanalytic concepts, in their origin within an individualistic and medical context. The sort of analysis I have offered here may need to be complemented by one like Fromm's in which concepts with origin at the social level are applied to the individual psyche (e.g., the marketing personality). If we can thus hold the individual and social levels in mind at the same time,

we can perhaps begin to transcend the dichotomy between work on ourselves on the individual level in therapy, and social action. If we believe that individual psychic structure affects the nature of one's political involvement, and that one's social context affects one's psychic structure, then it will advance our thinking and our action to work toward such a transcendence.

Second, using psychoanalytic concepts to think about society may help us develop a positive vision of society to work toward, a sense of what we need as individuals and as a society, not only what is wrong. With this in mind, let us imagine society in depressive position mode as opposed to paranoid-schizoid/manic mode. In my view, government would be a key factor in society at the depressive position. Government, alone, has the capacity to take account of and balance the interests of various groups, even when they diverge. In this sense, government performs a quintessentially depressive-position function, that is, the reflection on diverse perspectives and self-states (corresponding to various groups of people, with diverse interests, on the societal level), with choices made from this integrative and reflective position. The American federal system, in particular, balances the interests of diverse states, regions, and interest groups. There is an effort to make room for diverse ways of thinking, such as the action orientation of the executive branch, the rule-oriented mode of the legislative branch, and the interpretive mode of the judicial branch, in interaction with and balanced against one another, with an abstract set of values, in the form of the Constitution, in the background. The system recognizes the inevitability of narrow interests, or tyrannical people, seeking power; it seeks not to repress them, but to balance them one against another. It could be argued, however, that the American government fundamentally serves the capitalist system and the interests of the large corporations. From this point of view, New Deal and Great Society reforms were not efforts to balance capitalist values with more humanitarian values but rather preserved capitalism at times of socioeconomic distress by making minor and, ultimately, temporary concessions to human suffering. The goal of such programs, then, would be primarily to diffuse discontent that could otherwise lead to revolt.

In recent years, the depressive mode functioning of the American system has been undermined by paranoid-schizoid and manic influences. In particular, the influence of special interests has mushroomed as a result of the need for large amounts of money to

finance campaign advertising, thus undermining the balancing and integrating functions of government. The American democratic political system and the capitalist economic system have always been uneasy bedfellows. The value system of the former revolves around equality and fairness, while the value system of the latter revolves around competition, the survival of the fittest. In some balance with one another, perhaps, these two value systems can make room for a wide range of human modes. Any such balance, however, is tenuous, requiring constant vigilance lest greed and the lust for power, in particular, overwhelm the integrative, balancing forces. What we are seeing at the moment, with capitalism ascendant, is just such a perversion of the political process in this country. The current unpopularity of big government, the resistance to government interference in people's lives, the desire to return power to the smallest units of government (which are most responsive to local interest groups)—all reflect the weakening of popular support for government in its depressive position mode.

Finally, the analysis of society in terms of the manic defense highlights the importance of our tolerance or intolerance for guilt at a social level. One implication of this analysis is that political leadership ought to be leading the way in facing up to the destructive as well as constructive aspects of American society, accepting that destructiveness is inherent in human activity, and that truly reparative action can grow out of this recognition.[5] Such leadership, however, will entail providing people with psychic pain, even if eventually promising a more truly constructive society in the longer run. In the present political climate, it may seem politically suicidal for leaders to model tolerance for psychic pain and guilt, when other potential leaders are more than ready to run on a feel-good platform that ignores human suffering. Jimmy Carter may be thought to have foundered politically as a result of his public display of guilt, although the problem may have been that he failed to provide an inspiring vision of reparative action. Lyndon Johnson, in different times, did manage to help us as a society tolerate guilt for past and present racism in the context of constructive activity to ameliorate racism. Their speeches advocating civil rights legislation now seem anachronistic; they

---

[5] Samuels (2001), similarly, has advocated that political leaders provide leadership in the "art of failure."

provoke nostalgia. If we look back to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s for inspiration and guidance, perhaps what we find there is an increased tolerance for guilt as a function of the availability of reparative action (voter registration drives, civil rights legislation, and so on). Modern Germany may provide a model of the capacity to tolerate the guilt involved in taking responsibility for massive atrocities, while the Catholic church has shown itself willing and able to take responsibility for its collusion, by silence, with the Holocaust.

But in the United States, at least for the moment, capitalism is ascendant, leading to a vicious circle in which exploitation of people leads to potential guilt that is warded off by manic defenses, which in turn create more potential guilt.

The analysis I have developed in this paper suggests, further, that a social movement would be well-advised to avoid splitting, in the sense of demonizing some people (corporate or government leaders, for example) while regarding others—the reformers—as morally superior. The fact is that we are all beneficiaries and casualties of the capitalist system; none of us has clean hands when it comes to colluding with exploitation and oppression. For reformers to stake out the moral high ground would be, in itself, a guilt-avoidance maneuver and would only fuel the guilt-avoidance efforts of those who oppose change.

Postscript: Methodology

In this paper, I attempt to link the psychic and the social realms. This project is part of a larger one: to discover and articulate the social relevance of psychoanalysis, while simultaneously demonstrating some of the ways self and society constitute each other. Ultimately, my effort is to show how, while the psychic and the social domains need to be seen as distinct on one level, they are two ways of looking at a common underlying reality on another level. On the first level, the level on which distinctions are made, we need to avoid reductionism, that is, the denial of the integrity of either the psychic or the social domains by collapsing one into the other. On the other level, we need to avoid reification of either domain, as if either psychic or social level could be considered without reference to how it is constituted by the other.

Reductionism can operate in either direction: human behavior can be explained as a function of social class as in Marxist analysis, for example, in ways that ignore the uniquely individual dimension of motivation and experience. To focus on psychodynamics at the expense of factors such as the influence of culture, social class, and other socioeconomic structures like capitalism, however, is equally one-sided. As an example of the latter approach (which is a precedent for the approach of this paper), Jaques (1955) coined the term *social defense system* to describe social phenomena that he thought served to defend against primitive anxieties on the social systemic level. Menzies (1975) applied this approach to the nursing service of a hospital, showing how anxieties related to disease and death were managed with distancing defenses such as assigning nurses to tasks rather than to patients so that they would not get too attached to those in their care. While this analysis is highly illuminating, it may be incomplete in ignoring factors that are more systemic in origin, like the perceived economic inefficiency of nurses who become attached to their patients stopping too long to talk to them! Of course, one could always trace back this mechanical, inhuman approach to patient care to anxiety avoidance, but then systems such as managed care, which put a premium on efficiency, are a function of capitalist dynamics in the health care marketplace as well. In short, it is difficult to keep in mind how the personal and the social levels are mutually imbricated, how the impact of one's social position is always experienced through the prism of one's personal meaning-making system, and how one's personal meaning-making system is saturated with social influence. The pitfall to which the present paper is particularly prone is that of reducing the dynamics of society to a psychological defense mechanism—the manic defense—while ignoring the structure of power relationships and privilege that can explain the same phenomena differently, with reference to the consequences of a socioeconomic system. A similar tension exists between family systems theory and therapy, and psychoanalytic theory and therapy. The same behavior at the individual level can be explained with reference to individual psychodynamics, or with reference to the person's place in the family system. Either point of view, taken on its own, fails to do justice to the other. I acknowledge that the point of view in this paper is partial and needs to be complemented with a more sociopolitical perspective that would redescribe what I have called the manic defense as, perhaps, a function of a particular socioeconomic setup.

In moving between the psychic and the social levels, one needs a specific framework or strategy. In this paper, the conceptual link is provided by the notion of the defense mechanism presumed to operate at the individual and social levels in similar or analogous fashion. It is a familiar idea that anxiety and guilt are hard to bear for individuals, that individual people often seek to avoid such distressing states of mind. It is perhaps less familiar to think that, first, social patterns may evolve to further the psychic defensive operations of individuals, and that, second, social groups may have collective anxiety and guilt, as it were, that provoke collective defensive operations. This point of view is diagnostic and psychodynamic. Psychoanalytic diagnosis always involves a description of a set of anxiety- and guilt-avoidance activities, activities that produce the negative consequences we call symptoms or character structures. Cure is defined as increased tolerance for anxiety and guilt, either through enhanced ego mastery via insight, or through increased containing capacity. But I think most analysts would agree that the human capacity for tolerance of anxiety and guilt, for bearing the pain of the human condition, is not unlimited, and so something like the manic defense may be part of the human condition. We may thus be led to a tragic perspective that, ironically, can itself promote tolerance for anxiety and guilt by breaking into the vicious circle by which the manic defense produces more anxiety and guilt. Nonetheless, there is also a moral position implicit in this diagnostic perspective that moves us inevitably to political implications and thus reconfronts us with the social level of analysis. Thus, I was led to a vision of society in depressive-position mode with a particular kind of leadership in bearing anxiety and guilt. The possibility arises that the collective anxiety and guilt we feel, as Americans, is a function of our particular socioeconomic system and could be alleviated by changes in that system to reduce its destructive impact. Such political change would depend on recognition of the destructive aspects (as well as the constructive aspects) of our socioeconomic and political system. This recognition would require more of a capacity and willingness to tolerate anxiety and guilt than we, as a nation, appear to possess at present. This paper ends, thus, with what I hope is a constructive, psychoanalytically informed vision of some of the necessary conditions for social/political change.

REFERENCES

Altman, N. (2000a), Black and white thinking: A psychoanalyst reconsiders race. *Psychoanal. Dial.,* 10:589–606.

——— (2000b), Reply to commentaries. *Psychoanal. Dial.,* 10:633–638.

Bader, M. (1998), Postmodern epistemology: The problem of validation and the retreat from therapeutics in psychoanalysis. *Psychoanal. Dial.,* 8:1–32.

Becker, E. (1973), *The Denial of Death.* New York: Free Press.

Benjamin, J. (1988), *The Bonds of Love.* New York: Pantheon.

Berlin, I. (1969), *Four Essays on Liberty.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Bion, W. R. (1989), *Experiences in Groups.* London: Routledge.

Botticelli, S. (2004), The politics of relational psychoanalysis. *Psychoanal. Dial.,* 14:635–652.

Bowlby, J. (1969), *Attachment and Loss.* New York: Basic Books.

Cushman, P. (1995), *Constructing the Self, Constructing America.* Boston: Addison-Wesley.

——— & Gilford, P. (2000), Will managed care change our way of being? *Amer. Psychol.,* 55:985–996.

Fairbairn, W. R. D. (1952), *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality.* London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Freud, S. (1929), Civilization and its discontents. *Standard Edition,* 21:64–145. London: Hogarth Press, 1961.

Fromm, E. (1947), *Man for Himself.* Greenwich, CT: Fawcett.

Jacoby, R. (1983), *The Repression of Psychoanalysis.* New York: Basic Books.

Jaques, E. (1955), Social systems as defense against persecutory and depressive anxiety. In: *New Directions in Psychoanalysis,* ed. M. Klein. London: Tavistock, pp. 478–498.

Loewald, H. (1988), *Sublimation.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Menzies, I. E. P. (1975), A case study in the functioning of social systems as a defense against anxiety. In: *Group Relations Reader I,* ed. A. D. Colman & W. H. Bexton. Jupiter, FL: A. K. Rice Institute, pp. 281–312.

Mitchell, S. A. (1988), *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

——— (2002), *Can Love Last?* New York: W. W. Norton.

Morrison, T. (1993), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.* New York: Vintage International.

Ogden, T. (1986), *The Matrix of the Mind.* Northvale, NJ: Aronson.

Pizer, S. A. (1998), *Building Bridges: The Negotiation of Paradox in Psychoanalysis.* Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.

Roland, A. (1988), *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Toward a Cross-Cultural Psychology.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Samuels, A. (2001), *Politics on the Couch: Citizenship and the Internal Life.* New York: Other Press.

Segal, H. (1964), *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein.* London: Heinemann.

Slavin, M. & Kriegman, D. (1998), Why the analyst needs to change: Toward a theory of conflict, negotiation, and mutual influence in the therapeutic process. *Psychoanal. Dial.,* 8:247–284.

Sullivan, H. S. (1953), *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry.* New York: W. W. Norton.
Winnicott, D. W. (1952), Anxiety associated with insecurity. In: *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis.* New York: Basic Books, 1958, pp. 97–100.
——— (1958), Psychoanalysis and the sense of guilt. In: *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment.* Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1965, pp. 15–28.
——— (1968), The use of an object and relating through identifications. In: *Playing and Reality.* Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1971, pp. 100–111.
Wolfe, T. (1987), *The Bonfire of the Vanities.* New York: Bantam.

127 West 79th Street, #3
New York, NY 10024
neilaltman@hotmail.com