

Hans-Jürgen Wirth
9/11 as a Collective Trauma

SERIES »PSYCHE AND SOCIETY«
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AND HANS-JÜRGEN WIRTH

Hans-Jürgen Wirth

9/11
AS A COLLECTIVE
TRAUMA

AND OTHER ESSAYS ON
PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SOCIETY

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PREFACE

Psychoanalysts and psychologists are generally not asked for advice on politics, power, terrorism and war. Military experts as well as scientists of political science and Islam, journalists, diplomats and the secret service are responsible for these issues — and if a child has already fallen into the well, historians will be asked.

On the one hand, the injured child, the traumatized people and the scared population are indeed areas which psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, social workers and psychologists, child and youth psychotherapists and volunteers are sent to. Their job is to undo what cannot be undone. These attributes apply all over the world. Sometimes the members of these psychosocial professions agree with this description of their work: They do not feel responsible for such obscene issues as power, threats of violence and terror.

On the other hand, there is hardly any other group in society which has the same intimate knowledge as psychosocial professions of the psychological and social background and the consequences of violence, war and terror. Their experiences emphasize that the economical, power-political and military explanations of terrorism and war are not thorough enough if they leave out the psychological dimension. Considering the background and the consequences of terrorism as well as the American reaction to terrorism, the psychological aspects are much more important than most politicians are willing to accept.

All the more, the psychological perspective gains more importance if one deals with humanitarian problems. The psychotherapeutic sphere is one of the few fields in society in which the ideas of being a human being are openly discussed and proved of their validity. The vision of humanitarian conditions and standards are not created in an environment where everything is better, faster, higher, not where it is prettier and more aesthetic, and not even where it is peaceful and harmonic, but they are developed through dealing with the dark sides of life, with illness, pain, suffering, traumatic experiences, farewell, mourning and death. Therefore, psychotherapy is one of the few social fields in which new visions of human culture could be developed.

The attempt to build bridges between politics and what we know from the field of therapy and applied psychoanalysis are currently not especially popular. Psychoanalytic enlightenment collides easily with individual politicians who are interested in having power, because this enlightenment uncovers their strategies of denial and cover-up. In this sense, investigative journalism and psychoanalysis share the same fate. It is difficult for them to convince the public because political leaders do not simply fall into categories of »good« and »evil« but represent, in a certain way, the ideology and defense mechanisms which the population expects of them.

September 11 still has an enormous impact on the thoughts of politicians and society worldwide, consciously and unconsciously. It is also one of the main issues in the media. It is even used to justify a completely new world order. War could have almost become acceptable if in the meantime, all of the fake secret service reports, lies and tricks during the war on Iraq had not become public.

With the help of these collected papers I would like to stimulate the reader to use the psychoanalytic method not only for clinical questions but also for cultural, social, his-

torical and even political problems. I can, therein, rely on Sigmund Freud, who, at the end of his great paper *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), in the night before the National Socialists came into power raised the question whether »we [may] not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization — possibly the whole of mankind — have become ›neurotic?‹« (ibid., p. 110). As Freud's own works on the psychoanalytic theory of culture show — for instance, his social-psychological analysis about the relationship between the individual, mass, leader and institution which he presented in *Mass Psychology and Ego Analysis* (1921) and his critical view on religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) — that psychoanalytic knowledge can be transferred successfully to a single phenomenon of culture as well as to the whole culture.

In the course of the medicinalization of psychoanalysis, the culture theory has been neglected. After Freud, the application of psychoanalytic knowledge on social, cultural and political phenomena has remained a ›stepchild‹ of psychoanalysis. Therefore, the situation of psychoanalytic culture theory is ambivalent: On the one hand, the majority of psychoanalysts concentrates on the therapeutic application of psychoanalysis and their interests are focused on purely clinical theories and phenomena. On the other hand, the sciences of culture, society and literature and the social and human sciences have discovered psychoanalysis and used it for their own purpose. One cannot overlook the influence psychoanalysis has had on the sciences of literature, ethnology, sociology, academic psychology, the studies of religion, theology, peace and conflict research, philosophy, qualitative social research, biographical research, political psychology, historical science, theory of art, sexual research, etc. Psychoanalysts did not try to influence these other sciences; rather,

9/11 AS A COLLECTIVE TRAUMA¹

»The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction (...) Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety.«
Freud (1930), pp. 111 f

»The narcissist must perpetually live with the divine.«
Grunberger & Dessuant (1997/2002), p. 379

The monstrous attack of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington has — in Freud's words (1930) — once again demonstrated to the entire world how difficult it is for »the human species« to overcome »the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction« (p. 111). However, Freud's hypothesis regarding aggression, self-annihilation, or the death instinct must not be truncated to a mono-causal interpretation of destructive action as though the terrorist act against the

¹ This article was previously published in Piven, Boyd & Lawton (Eds.). (2002): Jihad and Sacred Vengeance: Psychological Undercurrents of History Volume III. NY: iUniverse and a previous version in: The Journal of Psychohistory. Vol 30 No 4, 2003, 363 – 388.

World Trade Center could be »conceptualized,« explained, or understood simply by reference to aggressive-destructive human instincts.

Instead, the theoretical achievement of Freud's death instinct hypothesis lies in the mere insistence that each of us carries within himself the potential toward destructiveness. The terrorist act of Sept. 11, 2001 is not by any means one of »unimaginable cruelty«, as commentaries have frequently described it. Rather, such a scenario had been painted in detail by creative minds within Hollywood's movie industry years earlier, and a public numbering in the millions came to be entertained, fascinated, and horrified by it. The human destructive potential is ever-present: basically, people are capable of any act of cruelty the human imagination can conjure up.

However, to what extent the individual is beset by such destructive instincts and whether the destructive fantasies are acted out or remain within the realm of fantasy depends on many other complexly interlinked conditions — among them, those defined by the concepts of malignant narcissism, delusions of grandeur, feelings of powerlessness, individual and collective traumatizations, fanaticism, fundamentalism, and paranoid world views.



Max Klinger (1857–1919): *Third Future* (1880)

Neither are events such as the terror attack of September 11, 2001 »bestial« by the original definition of the word »beast« (wild animal, non-human) but, on the contrary, characteristic of the human species. Animals — barring a few exceptions for the sake of conserving their species — have an instinctual inhibition against killing members of their own kind. Animals are therefore not at all capable of committing any massacre of their own species. This is unique to humans. The potential for committing a monstrous crime is a



Alfred Kubin: War (1903)

fundamental component of the human condition. On the one hand, relative freedom from instinctual behavior holds the potential for freedom and creativity, for free decision-making, while on the other hand, it allows the freedom to choose evil. Without their freedom to choose evil, humans would not be truly free. We cannot have one without the other. »This makes evil the risk and also the price of freedom« (Safranski 1997, p. 193). It does not mean to surrender to evil. Instead, humans are confronted with the difficult task of fighting evil, yet without being able to eliminate it from human life altogether; for all attempts to do so will inevitably bring about further evil, as they prove destructive to freedom.

Freud's pessimistic image of human nature, as expressed in his death instinct hypothesis, refers to the

danger that even the victims of destructive force — on September 11, they were Americans — are not immune to becoming »powers of darkness« themselves in their resistance. The tragedy is that the struggle against evil engenders further evil.

The division of the world into rigidly separate categories of pure »good« and »evil« is one of the central psychological conditions for terrorism. Terrorists can only put their superegos out of action by dehumanizing their opponents and equating them with absolute evil. Conversely, in calling for a »battle of good against evil« and even a »crusade against evil«, U. S. President George W. Bush assumes the same mental division that is one of the causes of the problem — not its solution. Because in reality, as Freud (1915) wrote in »Thoughts for the Times on War and Death«,

»Evil cannot be »eradicated«. Psychological — or, to be exact, psychoanalytic — investigation demonstrates instead that the deepest essence of human nature consists of instinctive drives of an elementary nature that are equally inherent in all people and designed for satisfaction of certain basic needs. These instinctive drives are neither good nor evil in themselves (...) A human being is rarely completely good or evil, but mostly »good« in one relationship, »evil« in another, or »good« under certain external circumstances, and under others, decidedly »evil.« (p. 331 f)

Indeed, evil — currently embodied in terrorism — is a hydra: cut off one of her heads, and ten new heads will sprout from the stump (cf. Nitzschke 2001). The equivalent is true for American resistance. Whenever legitimate and necessary resistance itself resorts to terrorist measures and is carried out within the framework of a crusader mentality, it will continuously create its enemies anew while claiming to destroy them. An effective strategy against terrorism must address the glaring inequalities between the First, Second, and Third Worlds *and also*