

Le mécano de la scène mondiale

Séminaire de John D. Cash •
N° 1 • 24 novembre 2009

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Passionate
Attachments
Conflicted Relations

En partenariat avec l'École doctorale du Département de science politique de l'Université Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne, Chaos International a organisé un séminaire de recherche en langue anglaise le mercredi 15 septembre autour de John Cash. Professeur de philosophie et d'anthropologie sociale à l'Université de Melbourne, ce dernier a délivré une communication intitulée *Passionate Attachments, Conflicted Relations* qui partait de *L'Homme aux rats* de Sigmund Freud pour en venir à une lecture critique des travaux d'Alexander Wendt et à une réflexion plus globale sur l'état actuel de la scène mondiale.

1. *In the Rat man story, Freud, tells us that when Ernst was 3 or 4, he has experienced a moment of terror, violence and fury, during which he tried to insult his father. But he failed, because he has no words. Consequently, he just screamed "lamp, towel and so on..." It was a kind of a childish attitude and, by the way, a dehumanizing move of doing and treating an "enemy".*

Question: In genocide and mass crimes, we are of course confronted to a collective dehumanizing move. Do you think, there is also a childish dimension in that process?

And, if you answer, "yes", as I expect you to do so, could you recount the different steps and conceptual links from childish way of doing (willpower) at the individual level to the death drive at the macrosocial level?

In a way this is an invitation to rehearse my argument, but with special attention to situations of genocide and mass crimes against humanity. First of all, let me say that you are absolutely correct to identify this as one of my principal concerns. The effects of globalisation combined with neo-liberal economic policies have produced an increased sense of insecurity that haunts contemporary Western and Westernising societies, as Robert Castel, Ulrich Beck, Richard Sennett and others have explained. This is why any resort to mentalities that are organised by the friend-enemy distinction and the psychic processes of splitting and projection are so readily mobilised and so threateningly dangerous.

Regarding the issue of whether there is a childish dimension to such processes of genocide and mass crimes against humanity, I would characterise that a little differently. Psychoanalytic theory tells us that in becoming a human subject we rely on defence mechanisms to organise our psychic life and to take a position as what I prefer to term somewhat civilised subjects. Of course, this initial psychic organisation and entry into

culture occurs in childhood. However, it is not subsequently superseded and sloughed off, as it were. Rather it leaves a significant trace that marks both psychic life and what I have termed the cultural unconscious.

Regarding the psychic life of individuals, we can usefully distinguish between becoming a human subject and being a human subject – with all that psychoanalysis tells us about the divided, desiring and decentred subject. Being a human subject involves psychic discontents as well as an ordering or civilising of psychic life; hence the somewhat civilised subject. It involves continued reliance throughout life on the psychic processes first developed in childhood, particularly the defences against anxiety and insecurity. This is why Melanie Klein refers to her two fundamental psychic constellations as positions rather than stages. Yes, they first occur in childhood, indeed in infancy, and they concern the organisation of psychic life and defences against anxiety and insecurity – including, of course, ontological insecurity. However, as positions, they remain available and may be turned, or returned, to. In particular, Klein's paranoid-schizoid position, reliant as it is on psychic defences of splitting, projection and projective identification, remains available and may be utilised at critical moments. My further point is that these same psychic defences are embedded within cultures as features of that culture's cultural unconscious. Hence, they are intersubjectively available to individuals and collectivities. If legitimated by political or other leaders, or by established cultural authority, they become the proper way of thinking and feeling about the self-other relation and they establish what counts as proper forms of power, authority and violence. In such circumstances dehumanising or persecutory mentalities become both predominant and proper, hence hegemonic for the moment – think of Nazism and, more recently, Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Israel-Palestine, etc. A very long and very depressing list could be added here. As your question suggests, there is an uncanny closeness between such dreadful situations of genocide and mass crimes against humanity, on the one hand, and scenes of childhood aggressivity and anxiety, such as that recounted by Freud in his case-study of the Rat Man, on the other hand.

2. It seems that a psychoanalytic approach enables us to understand better the "cultural frame" in which policymakers are evolving. But can we extend this focus to more grassroots organizations? For example, how the persecutory position can suddenly emerge during demonstrations or collective actions?

One of the virtues of a psychoanalytic political theory approach, I think, is that it is applicable to small groups and organizations as well as to much larger collectivities. My earlier response to Professor Laroche's question (1 above) is relevant here. So, what I'd now like to pick up on in your question is your reference to how such a turn to the persecutory position can *suddenly* emerge – with an emphasis on its suddenness. First, just notice that the notion of positions that may be taken up and then, subsequently, surrendered or displaced already allows for such suddenness. Second, my emphasis on the internal differentiation of cultural fields highlights the availability of the persecutory position as part of the cultural repertoire that subjects draw upon in order to respond to changing circumstances or directives – as in the directives of political or other leaders. Hence this approach can make good sense of the suddenness that is often observed in the way self-other relations can quickly deteriorate and become destructive and even murderous or genocidal. The Rwandan genocide is one extreme example of such a sudden deterioration in self-other relations. But in some ways the former Yugoslavia is even more instructive. In a

flash, as it were, neighbours who were on good terms with each other awoke the next day, so to speak, to be confronted by a cultural shift in which they were now enemies!

If we now take this to less organized settings such as demonstrations or collective actions – a principal and the initial focus of Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* as it happens – the same point about psychic positions applies. The dynamic suddenness of a shift to the persecutory position is always potential. The internal differentiation of the cultural repertoire is an interesting issue here. There is, of course, a tradition of how demonstrations and the like should and do proceed that can be drawn upon. Often, these same traditions of confrontation will be invoked and legitimated by leaders of any demonstration or collective action. And then there is the situation itself allied with the insecurities that accompany any political action that is likely to meet with hostility from authorities and aggression from the police or army. Together these features explain how a sudden shift to the persecutory position is always a possibility, especially as confrontation begins to crystallize and the friend-enemy distinction consolidates itself.

3. In your opinion, persecutory modes of culture and identity are promoted by insecurity and uncertainty and so could become the current reality principle, unlike the idealistic vision of the Lockean and Kantian Anarchy formulated by Wendt. How do you then explain the choice of US citizens for Obama, whose ideas about multilateralism and cultural recognition in particular are close to the inclusivist position?

Yet again, this is an excellent question. In responding, I think I would, first of all, point to the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004. This was already three years after September 11, 2001 and approximately eighteen months after the invasion of Iraq in March and April of 2003. Yet there is every reason to believe that American foreign policy was being addressed through a persecutory mentality that was first invoked by Bush's mantra, almost immediately following September 11, that "[e]very nation, in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists". For a lengthy period of some years this was regarded as the proper way of construing the situation by, I think it is safe to say, a majority of Americans. An anecdote may help illustrate this. I was in California visiting the Critical Theory Institute at the University of California-Irvine soon after September 11, 2001. Almost every car on the road at that time and place – for example Southern California – displayed an American flag. At one point in Los Angeles the supply of American flags ran out – so LA Lakers' flags were substituted – clear evidence of the intense attachments that can form to a sports team, by the way! Equally instructive, a close friend of mine who displayed a sticker opposing the war would frequently find herself being abused in supermarket parking lots and similar locales.

You are also right to suggest, or at least imply, that phenomena such as the invasion of Iraq do question what I have termed the monological character of Wendt's Lockean and Kantian cultures of anarchy. The disruption, although not negation, of the hold of the Lockean culture on international politics, as the decisions about the Iraq invasion were taken, highlights the plurilogical character of the American political culture; the internal differentiation of that cultural field and, hence, the availability of the persecutory position at a moment of national crisis. That President Bush chose to construct the situation through a persecutory mentality, or found himself constructing it in that manner, was not inevitable. However, once his authority as President was used to propagate and legitimate such a mentality, it is not surprising that its spontaneous emergence, as one possible response to September 11, was consolidated as the proper response.

So, how do I explain the election of President Obama, who, as you say, constructs the international field through ideas about multilateralism and cultural recognition that are close to – or instances of - the inclusivist position? Of course, there were many factors leading to Obama's election, including his campaign's ability to attract young voters and many people, including many African-Americans, who would not have otherwise voted in such large numbers. But it is clear that his inclusivist message, both nationally and internationally, was a significant aspect of his appeal. The multicultural constituency that celebrated Obama's presidential electoral victory in Grant Park in Chicago was mirrored across the globe as the vision of a future that only an inclusivist mentality – perhaps even a Kantian one – could deliver was glimpsed after the eight destructive years of the Bush administration. As I have suggested in response to earlier questions, both the internal differentiation of cultural fields and the dynamic way in which psychic positions may be adopted and then relinquished enable us to understand how, after eight long years of the Bush administration and two wars that were bringing more and more dead young Americans home in body-bags, and with a faltering and soon to fail economy, the apparent certainties of the persecutory position had been fractured. It is in these circumstances that Obama's inclusivism – with its promise of remedying America's image abroad and self-image at home – suddenly appeared so attractive. Of course, the same election also spawned Sarah Palin and was the seeding of what has become the tea-party, another, rather extreme, iteration of the persecutory position trying to claw its way back to power.

4 Narration, hypnosis, "free association" and Rorschach tests are fundamental investigation tests of the psychoanalytic approach. What would be the key research methods for psychoanalytic political studies?

Narration that follows the rule of free association is, of course, fundamental to psychoanalysis and the Rorschach test is a standard test developed and used by psychoanalytic psychiatry. Hypnosis is a technique that Freud abandoned early in his career and thereby shifted to the so-called talking-cure. Narration, free association and the Rorschach test each work with language and use psychoanalytic theory and its principal concepts such as drive, desire, phantasy, anxiety, defence, identification, object-choice, condensation and displacement as the basis for interpretative procedures that reveal the workings of the unconscious and the distortions of psychic life. The key research methods for psychoanalytic political studies follow the same general approach. For instance, a major aspect of the Frankfurt School inspired study *The Authoritarian Personality* involved the analysis of detailed in-depth interviews with research subjects. The standard tests (such as the F-Scale) that became the hallmark of *The Authoritarian Personality* study were developed on the basis of a psychoanalytically-oriented analysis of the spoken answers to semi-structured interviews. Adorno's "Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda" article used concepts derived from Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* to analyse the power and attraction of fascist propaganda. Likewise, my own approach focuses on political discourse and uses psychoanalytically-derived concepts as the basis for an interpretation of the desires, phantasies, defences and the like that organize the ways in which a political discourse is structured and, in turn, constructs the field of political identities and relations. A major step in extending the analysis onto whole societies and the field of international politics involves developing an approach that survives what I termed the insertion of the bar of the social into the analysis, while retaining the strengths of psychoanalytic theory. Discourse analysis or ideology analysis, appropriately handled, offers

such an approach while preserving the strengths – and, hence, the attraction - of psychoanalytic theory.

5. *Freud's concepts of the reality principle and the pleasure principle oppose constraint of our desires to fulfillment of those desires. Would those two concepts be useful to explain the socio-political tensions against religious institutions, regarding the anchorage of the consumer society?*

This is also a very interesting question and I'll try to answer in accord with psychoanalytic theory. Let me begin by suggesting that both religion and consumer society provide scope for the fulfillment of the pleasure principle and both are regulated, in various ways, by the reality principle. If we take religion first, while most religions require submission to an ethical code – which serves as a kind of reality principle – most major religions also hold out the prospect of wish-fulfillment and support our illusions, themselves developed as defences against human vulnerability in the face of disease and death. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud very clearly identifies the psychic origin of religious ideas in wishes – which of course are best satisfied by the pleasure principle. Freud regards religious illusions as fulfillments of the oldest, strongest wishes of humanity; protection against human helplessness and mortality. At the same time, as your question suggests, the major religious institutions impose their authority and, typically, establish a reality principle of abstention, obedience and deferral. Typically, the wish must be deferred.

Such deferral runs counter to the reality of the consumer society, of course. The consumer society requires repeated consumption in order to reproduce its economy on an expanding scale. Growth and prosperity depend on the pleasures of consumption and the consumer society holds out the prospect of repeated pleasure. The new iPod, the new iPad, the latest fashion accessory; there is always something new to consume. Advertisements tell us this insistently. So timing and deferral seem to be what distinguish your two examples. With religion and its institutions illusions are paramount. Religion binds its followers through promising to realize their illusions, if only they in turn will obey its precepts. An ascetic reality now, for a utopian paradise later is the common implicit contract. Consumer society also offers to satisfy illusions of fulfillment, but without deferral. The reality principle and the pleasure principle tend to converge whenever we hold the latest purchase in our hands. Of course, they diverge again as soon as the credit card bill and the depleted bank account arrive and the insecurities of the labour market make *their* reality paramount. Until the next time, when we enter the consumption cycle again!

6. *Are the social and political rules determined by the unconscious perceptions between the international social actors?*

This is a difficult but intriguing question. Let me rephrase it somewhat by putting it as follows: to what extent are cultures of anarchy (the social and political rules) determined by the way unconscious processes affect, or overdetermine, the perceptions and understandings that actors within the international system have of each other? I hope my rephrasing captures the intent of the question.

My argument is that unconscious processes are central to the ways in which the respective cultures of anarchy construct the proper way of relating to others within the international system. Of course, conscious evaluations are recurrently being made, but these always incorporate an unconscious component. First, that unconscious component involves the psychic processes that organize perceptions and knowledge, and thereby

structure the self-other relation. These psychic processes range from splitting and projection through to reparation and sublimation; hence they encompass the Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian cultures of anarchy. Second, a performative slide between these cultures of anarchy is always possible and an accumulation of perceptions and understandings that challenge the established cultural construction, perhaps prompted by imperial ambition or the threat of conflict, may generate such a slide. So, in terms of your question, unconscious perceptions between the international social actors determine both the major characteristics of the established culture of anarchy and also the slide into an alternative culture, should that occur. This does not mean that conscious evaluations are not always being made. It simply highlights that any conscious evaluation also entails a set of unconscious processes and related phantasies that are not apparent to the actors themselves, although central to way their perceptions and actions are organized.

7. If one of the mechanisms of the individual unconscious to deal with repression is to project desires and anxieties on Others and those others can be exposed to be violently attacked; can we say that the fact that some states considered others and frame them as 'the axis of evil' is a way to project their own anxieties? And would it be one of the causes of confrontation and war?

Indeed this is exactly the case, however projection is usually regarded as different from repression. They are both defence mechanisms and repression is the most fundamental as it is the mechanism through which the unconscious is formed and the divided subject constituted. Projection involves the expulsion of some disturbing idea or phantasy – such as an aggressive phantasy – onto some other person or institution. That other is then regarded as the source of the aggressivity while the individual or collective 'self' preserves its self-understanding as civilized and rational, hence peace-loving. The West has often relied on projection to rationalize and justify its relations with the East – hence my interest in the story that the old Army sergeant tells about the rat-torture practiced 'in the East'. Similarly, race relations often involve the projection of unconscious erotic desires onto the other 'race' or group. Frantz Fanon wrote interestingly about this in *Black Skin, White Masks* and Malcolm X wrote about it in his Autobiography.

Identifying some other nations as an 'axis of evil' is a very reductive move that is characteristic of what I have termed the persecutory position – it involves splitting and projection. Within the international field this is a clear instance of the friend-enemy distinction becoming dominant and organizing the conduct of international politics. It is clearly confrontational and prepares the ground for an escalation towards war. Fortunately, as I have argued, such a persecutory position is not the sole available position and it is likely that in the framing of foreign policy some actors – and even the same actors at different moments – will draw on a more inclusivist and Lockean mentality to construct the other confrontational nations. Whether the friend-enemy distinction does become thoroughly hegemonic or, rather, is held in check, counter-balanced or even eclipsed by more inclusivist, Lockean mentalities – that is the central issue. The other point I would add is that when nations confront each other they both tend to project their own aggressivity onto the other. We have seen this process played out in the Israel-Palestine relation for decades.

8. In regard to Pierre Bourdieu's works, the theory of the international system proposed by Alexander Wendt could be labelled as subjectivist because it seems to infer practices from ideality, in other words actors' behaviours determined by a specific culture.

Thus, would you say that a move towards psychoanalysis could allow an approach balancing action and subjectivity?

I think Wendt's approach does appear to infer practices from ideality, but I'm not convinced that it actually does exactly that. First, his account of the international system or international field is one that is consistent with Bourdieu's emphasis on recursive practices and what Giddens terms structuration processes. The international system is seen as a very autonomous field, but the cultures that organize the field are the products of ongoing practices – diplomatic gestures, foreign policy statements, confrontational or cooperative inter-State relations, military deployments, self-binding actions and the like. Wendt also proposes three levels of embeddedness for each of his three cultures of anarchy; he calls these degrees of cultural internalization. So, I think he is aware of the potential instability of the three cultures of anarchy. The more internalized they are the more resilient they will be in the face of crises and challenges. However the theory does regard them as alterable – and alterable by practices over time. My criticism via my argument about the internal differentiation of any complex cultural field involves pointing out that while at any one moment the Lockean culture of anarchy may be predominant, for example, it is only a part of a more complex cultural field that also already contains Hobbesian and, even, Kantian forms. So, I think it is the internal differentiation and potential dynamism of any culture of anarchy that Wendt overlooks – and this is why his approach appears more idealist and 'fixed' than it actually is.

9. Human narcissism is confronted by Freud and psychoanalytic theory; can we say that nationalism is a sword of State narcissism. And if we do so, can this statement be confronted by a psychoanalytic political theory?

This is a great question and it almost contains its own answer. It also intersects with your earlier question about projection. As with individuals, a degree of what we can call narcissism is also essential for institutions, including nation-states. What this means in this context is that nation-state discourses that circulate within the nation need to provide representations of the nation that the citizens can identify with. However, discourses that are entirely persecutory in form and that cannot admit any current or historical flaws in the practices of the nation involve a narcissism that generates serious misrecognitions of the nation and its place and orientation in the world-system. Splitting and projection are the major psychic mechanisms – secreted within the cultural imaginary – that support such an extreme narcissism. So, nationalism that is persecutory in form could be called 'a sword of State narcissism' – with the proviso that we recognize it as a double-edged sword that can damage the home nation as well as its constructed enemy. Psychoanalytic political theory can help us to analyse these mentalities better, I would suggest.

10. In your intervention, you have proposed a new level of explanation available for social theory and restoring the complexity of the actor divided, decentred and thus not so rational. Then, it seems to lead us to a reconsideration of the socialisation processes considered in a more dynamic way. What are the implications of such a shift notably towards Howard Becker's concept of career which implies a long-term learning of practices?

It is a long time since I have read any of Becker's work, but I think this is a very interesting suggestion. If, as you nicely summarise it, the subject is 'divided, decentred and thus not so *rational*', and if, as I have argued, the socialization model is generally over-extended, then Becker's concept of the career is an interesting extension. If the career is a sequence of roles taken on by the subject within a field of practices and conventions which are culturally established and policed, as it were, by others with authority to assess and label the subject with regard to career and the identity it confers - such that the particular identity becomes more established over time as the interpellation as doctor, criminal, deviant or whatever is identified with by the subject - then I think this model helps extend Wendt's account of varying degrees of cultural internalization, a feature of his argument I mentioned in response to an earlier question. My approach adds to Wendt's argument that those interpellations will be multiple and, potentially, developed by drawing upon recessed as well as dominant positions within the cultural repertoire - an implication of the internal differentiation of any complex cultural field. So, as well as consolidating an identity, disrupting and transforming that identity is also possible. Add to this that projection, as outlined earlier, may be involved in the assessments that actors make of the careers of others - hence involving, perhaps, the projection of deviance onto others - and you start to see how Becker nicely extends Wendt's argument and complements my own.

Conclusion

I think we need to finish up now, even though I think there are a few more questions left hanging. Hopefully I have said enough to give you a sense of how I would address those as well.

I want to thank each of you for such thoughtful questions, such interesting suggestions and such a pleasant and intellectually stimulating conference and discussion.

John Cash