

UNCONSCIOUS POLITICS

Alienation, Social Science
and Psychoanalysis

R. D. Hinshelwood



KARNAC

firing the mind

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Having come somewhat late to reading Marx because of hesitancy over Soviet Marxism, I want to acknowledge, first, the encouragement of Nick Manning, and then the mentoring of Bob Young. I have benefited from discussions with many more people over many years, including Arturo Varchevker, David Bell, with the seminars organised by David Morgan for his Psychoanalysis and the Political Mind series, and recently with Giuseppe Caruso and with Luke Manzarpour.

The realisation dawned many years ago that without being an ideological Marxist, one can still gain from Marx's psychology. There have been so many influences that have shown me the importance of individuals within their social context (and their stand-alone independence), but perhaps a deep and long-lasting one has been my allegiance to therapeutic communities and the close correlation between mental health problems and social/political problems. I should also include my mostly left-facing family background with at least two secretaries of trade unions in two different generations. In addition, my own personal analysis prompted much thought about sibling rivalry, elitism, and egalitarianism. I learned from political action when I was in my early adulthood, that while accepting one's own political stance

(if one can bear the responsibility of having one), one has to keep track, with respect, for others committed to alternatives. So, I acknowledge the colleagues from the brief period of activism as a student when my understanding of the complexity of joining together commitment with community began to take shape. An opportunity much later to embed myself for a while in an academic career allowed a wide expansion of the relevance of developed Kleinian conceptions into the social field. Finally, and not least, I appreciate very much indeed the illustration on the cover of a hidden and emerging menace; and am grateful to Ella Norman-Nott for this perfect image of the unconscious.

About the author

R. D. Hinshelwood is a fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society and a fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He worked in the National Health Service for more than thirty years and then as professor at the University of Essex. In the 1970s, he worked at the Marlborough Day Hospital as it became a therapeutic community, and in the 1990s he was director of the Cassel Hospital. He has written widely on Kleinian psychoanalysis and on the application of psychoanalysis to understanding organisational and social dynamics.

Foreword

During my time as an analyst working in the NHS, I encountered individuals who were deeply affected by poverty at emotional and socio-economic levels of deprivation. For example, while facilitating a group for distressed refugees, I became acutely aware of their urgent need for warm coats to survive the harsh British winter, as well as their need for protection from other forms of coldness they faced. While I could address some of these needs through therapeutic interventions, such as exploring alienation and projections, the issue of material deprivation required a broader sociopolitical approach that extended beyond the confines of the therapy room. This is especially relevant today, given the ongoing attacks on our health and welfare systems driven by political motives.

Despite my training in deep transference work as a Kleinian analyst, I always felt a tension between focusing solely on clinical techniques and addressing the social realities that contributed to my patients' suffering. This dilemma is poignantly illustrated in a recent paper by Christopher Scanlon (2015) titled "On the perversity of an imagined psychological solution to very real social problems of unemployment and social exclusion".

In my search for analysts who could bridge this gap between clinical practice and social issues, I came across two figures who profoundly

influenced my thinking. Joel Kovel, an American psychoanalyst, emphasised the role of deprivation, class, economic inequality, and even climate change in shaping individuals' mental health. Similarly, Bob Hinshelwood, drawing from the anti-psychiatric movement, explored the societal factors contributing to mental illness, particularly in individuals affected by war, famine, and displacement.

Bob Hinshelwood's work at the University of Essex, where he served as a professor for psychoanalysis, delved into the intersection of psychoanalysis and social structures. His insights into the unconscious dynamics of organisations, group behaviour, and societal anxieties have been instrumental in understanding the complexities of human experience within larger social contexts.

In his latest book, Hinshelwood masterfully intertwines psychoanalysis and politics, urging us to consider the interplay between individual psyches and the broader political landscape. By highlighting the connections between politics and psychoanalysis in areas such as representation, alienation, labour, and political action, he challenges us to rethink our traditional understandings of both disciplines.

As someone who has convened seminars on *The Political Mind* at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, I have long believed in the potential of psychoanalytic thinking to inform political discourse and action. Hinshelwood's work serves as a testament to the transformative power of integrating psychoanalytic principles with political analysis, offering a fresh perspective on how we can navigate the complexities of today's polarised world.

In conclusion, Bob Hinshelwood's contributions exemplify the depth and richness of psychoanalytic thought when applied to societal issues. His work inspires us to engage with the intersection of psychoanalysis and politics, empowering us to not only enhance our clinical practice but also to actively participate in shaping a more socially conscious and inclusive world.

David Morgan

Psychoanalyst

Chair and organiser, *The Political Mind* Seminars

Editor, *The Unconscious in Social and Political Life* (Karnac, 2019)

Introduction

This book is not just about the psychoanalytic unconscious. It has had to attend to a prior problem:

Nor is there the least doubt that these sciences [Marxism and psychoanalysis] are directly opposites. The question is, are they dialectical opposites? (John Strachey, 1937, p. 7)

It can appear that the social sciences and psychology are incompatible. Or worse, in the words of the early anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski commenting on Freud's *Totem and Taboo*: “[Psychoanalysis] is an infection ... of the neighbouring fields of science—notably that of anthropology, folklore and sociology” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 650). The two disciplines see the origins of human experience from opposite directions—either the inner world of the individual or the demands by society to conform. Individuals are always in a context of social and material conditions, and equally social and political policies are always in the context of the mental potentials of the individuals who make up the social group.

There is a tendency for politicians as well as social scientists to ignore the psychoanalytic unconscious, or at best use the idea for their own reasons:

[W]here psychoanalysis has something valuable to say of a political kind, it will mostly be where its contribution is counter-intuitive or even paradoxical. Where psychoanalytic observations about politics fail to surprise in some way, the risk is that they are doing no more than give a psychoanalytic legitimacy to ideas which their proponents hold for other reasons. (Rustin, 2010, p. 472)

And there is a tendency for psychoanalysts to assume that all political policies and actions can be explained in terms of the human unconscious, without facing the complexities of society, economics, history, etc. So, while each discipline ignores the other, both are rooted in humanity, either the individual or society. After all, society is the great and noble creation of the human species and social science and psychoanalysis need to acknowledge the creation of the human mind in all its aspects, and indeed no human mind develops except in the context of a society. Bringing these two closely associated perspectives into range of each other has given rise to a long-standing complex debate, and rivalry.

With the origins of a more scientific sociology out of philosophical thinking in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the enthusiasm for Marx after the Russian Revolution (in 1917), as well as the growing respect for psychoanalysis after the horrors and degradation of the First World War, the twentieth century has spawned many theories and ideas, basically of two kinds:

- Society is formed by individuals, and so the Oedipus complex (or other elements of the unconscious) determines social cultures; or,
- The individuals' minds are determined by conformist pressures from society.

While *we* face the imminent collapse of human civilisation, and maybe the extinction of the human species, as a result of the damage caused by economic exploitation of the earth's resources, competitive wealth accumulation, and an unrestrained imperialist nationalism, it is

important, even now, to try to understand this inevitable process. This book is not about capitalism as such. It is an attempt to understand the impetus of its set of attitudes and behaviours that have been taken as incontestable and which Zaretsky (2015) calls the “spirit” of capitalism, after Weber. Hopefully, it is not too late to plan for the future. But we need to find how the forces of society and the imperatives of our individual selves converge in these particular threats that currently diverge as marked out in Part I.

However, to regenerate some real optimism for our future and that of younger generations, we must urgently investigate how we got to where we went wrong. And that almost certainly requires exploration of what hidden experiences lie within ourselves, interacting and interfering with our good sense about the real and collective world we live in. The unconscious roots of the hyper-individualism at the foundations of contemporary capitalism, and the aloof downgrading of civilisation’s central principle of collaboration, constitute the pervading reflections of Part II on the nature of humanity. However, immediately, if we acknowledge the collaborative nature of civilisation, we need “social” science (Part III); and above all, therefore, to bring a meeting, a betrothal, between the two. And in consequence a collaboration on what has gone wrong. In this project, I have turned to psychoanalysis, as the importantly *subjective science*, to balance the attempted objectivity of the social sciences. Moreover, I have turned to that brand of psychoanalysis which has the capacity to understand the intrapsychic in its interpersonal encounters with others or so-called “objects”.

The dialectics

John Strachey (already quoted) was a writer and later a member of the Clement Attlee government in 1940s Britain (Thomas, 1973). He was a one-time member of the Communist Party (in the 1930s), a beneficiary of a personal psychoanalysis, and a cousin of James Strachey, the translator of Freud. The question which John Strachey had posed was constantly provoked in the two decades between the two World Wars, and thereafter.

Strachey’s question expresses the almost irreconcilable differences. But could these two discourses yet be reconciled? If dialectical, then we need some synthetic model that brings them into connection. The whole

field of political thought, debate, decision-making, and practice needs to acknowledge the undercurrents in individuals' minds; while it needs to recognise that their standard interpretations of individual unconscious dynamics cannot encompass the whole political spectrum which proceeds with immense conscious thought and emotion.

Today, a century after Freud's (1921c) *Group Psychology*, we still need to forge some theoretical combination to create a social psychology—or a “sociopsychanalysis” (Long, 2013)—which will work at both the level of the individual's psychology and at the level of society that holds the individual psychologies together.¹ This background issue will pervade the book.

Social forces impact on individuals; and society is but the creation of individuals themselves. The whole then reacts back on the individuals. We need to integrate the social influences that press on the individual as forces outside, while, at the same time, those external forces arise from and are sustained by the individuals they impose upon. Thus, factors from the two sources can both have validity and must impact on each other. They may reinforce each other or obstruct each other. Some interaction must resonate between individual and society. The disciplines need to converge without dismissing each other. It cannot but be complex.

Although I have touched on the apt quotes from Strachey and Malinowski, we should note there are a considerable number of people who have attempted over the course of a century to recognise the two sparring disciplines. A full survey cannot be conducted here but an abbreviated scoping of the literature will be found in the Appendix. On the whole, these persistent efforts have attempted to bring together the diverging models at a conceptual level, but in the present work, I have started with a singularly interesting convergence *at the level of observation* (Chapter 2).

As the Soviet system put into practice an ever-increasing emphasis on social relations, it tended to minimise the experience of individuals, on the basis that if we get the system right then all individuals

¹See also the remarkable initiative of nearly a decade of seminars at the British Psychoanalytical Society, “Psychoanalysis and the Political Mind” organised by David Morgan (2019, 2020), as well as the encyclopaedic volume edited by Stavrokakis (2019).

will flourish. Unfortunately, it transpired that the emphasis in pointing away from the individual's experience tended to leave the individual unrecognised. So, in terms of government policies, individuals were merely rather abstract entities, and thus already alienated. We could say they were turned from subjective and sentient beings into collective and objective quantities, from subjects into objects. However unfairly extreme this description is (and in practice, it may not have been so unrealistically extreme), it gave rise to reactions in left-wing circles known as Western Marxism, based in part on Georg Lukács (1923) and his concept of false consciousness. This attempted at least to keep alive a bi-focal emphasis—on the individual as a conscious experiencing subject, as well as being a cypher in the social relations of political economy. But such a refocusing in two directions still left the ambiguity and the conflicted thinking.

The risk in this kind of investigation is constantly to lose the elusive subjective quality of the subject. There is in the cognitive world of the Enlightenment a duality of personal experience as subjectively recognised or as objectively observed. It is a slippery floor to walk across, and in academic writing it is so easy to fall into wise discourses about abstractions that are remote from experience. There is a tendency, seemingly valid, to turn to psychoanalysis as the prime subjective “science” to keep grounded with one foot in personal experience. However, as is often remarked, psychoanalysis in our cognitive age is not itself immune from slipping across the floor towards a fascination with its own metapsychological abstractions. But at its best, I hope to see how psychoanalysts can tether themselves to both of the foci we need.

In fact, the access to mental health issues and subjectivity, which psychoanalysis offers, could be useful if we note that the term alienation (in English at least) has been in use for some 500 years, and was originally a description of the mentally ill, who were deemed to be alienated from themselves, to have “lost their minds”, and were treated in fact by “alienists”. Despite the more usual meaning of alienation to denote a stereotyped (and even derogatory) identity given to others, here the term alienation retains that original meaning of an alienation from one's self, a self-alienation.

The attempt here has been to recognise the human individual as potentially alienated from himself, and his faculties, a state of mind not

so foreign for all of us, since we can all feel we are “going to pieces” when under stress. Psychoanalysis is a useful access into what happens in such states. Psychoanalytic help may itself be contested because the human experiencing that is imputed or inferred is often deeply unconscious; it can be easily attributed as merely the theoretical fantasies of psychoanalysts. Indeed, even in psychoanalysis there can be a debate about whether unconscious events and processes can be called experiences. Nevertheless, here I do indeed refer to “unconscious experience”, and consider that dreams can be regarded as valid enough evidence of unconscious experiencing. It is not proposed to continue this debate about the unconscious here, important though it is; it can be held in abeyance in favour of the pursuit of an interdisciplinary reconciliation. Psychoanalysis remains close to personal experience in its actual practice where relatively few psychoanalytic conceptualisations are in use. I shall accept Wallerstein’s (2005) claim that the common denominator of psychoanalytic schools is mainly the anxiety–defence structure and transference that distorts the awareness of reality. I do however stress the role of the defensive processes of splitting and projective identification which are implicit in self-alienation and depersonalisation.

I have used this idea of the unconscious need to cling resistantly to inadequate and often self-disadvantaging situations, relations, working conditions, and exploitative pay, to try to understand how they become politically accepted. The unconscious does not speak loudly in politics: Michael Rustin understood clearly when he wrote:

The sense of the unexpected, unwelcome and even intolerable that often accompanies new insights in psychoanalysis, arises from the resistances which have to be overcome before unconscious desires or beliefs become accessible to reflection. (Rustin, 2010, p. 473)

However, this book approaches from the other direction—when political movements advance successfully in “unexpected, unwelcome and even intolerable” directions, then we must at least consider the insights of psychoanalysis.

Please note that the text includes various philosophical and scientific threads, each with its own terms, including complexity theory. To help with these terminologies there is a Glossary at the end of the book.