

# The social unconscious and ideology: in clinical theory and practice

*Farhad Dalal*

## *Introduction*

Let me begin with two questions: why is it that in the psychoanalytic world, we find ourselves in this curious position of *having to argue for the social*? And why is it that the argument tends to have a defensive quality about it, of having to justify something that seems to go against the grain?

In part, this is because of the established norm in the psychoanalytic mainstream, this being that the social is secondary to, and born of, the psychological. It is perhaps not surprising to hear Klein say, “the understanding of [the individual’s] personality is the foundation for the understanding of social life” (Klein, 1959, p. 247). Neither is it surprising to hear Bion say,

I think that the central position in group dynamics is occupied by the more primitive mechanisms [of] . . . the paranoid–schizoid and depressive positions . . . [It] is necessary to work through . . . *the more primitive anxieties of part-object relationships* . . . [as] I consider [them] . . . to contain *the ultimate sources of all group behaviour*. [Bion, 1961, p. 189, my italics]

Both Klein and Bion have their genesis in the later Freud. But, unlike them, Freud does grant the social an actual presence in the psyche in the shape of the superego. The Freudian superego is, in part, constituted by internalized elements of authority figures (in contrast, the Kleinian superego is constituted by elements of the death instinct). But one of the primary reasons that it comes into existence is to do the work of repressing primitive impulses: for example, incestuous desire. Thus, ironically, a part of the work of the representative of the social in the psyche (the superego) is to *increase* the dominion of the unconscious through its activity of repression. However, when humans gather in groups, then the superego loses its grip:

when individuals come together in a group all their individual inhibitions fall away and all the cruel, brutal and destructive instincts, which lie dormant in individuals as relics of a primitive epoch, are stirred up to find free gratification. [Freud, 1921c, p. 79]

Freud also says, “how well justified is the identification of the group mind with the mind of primitive people” (*ibid.*).

But, surprisingly, even the relationists like Fairbairn and Winnicott, despite their best efforts, also ultimately collapse back into individualism: Fairbairn’s claim that “all sociological problems are ultimately reducible to problems of individual psychology” (Fairbairn, 1935, p. 241), finds an echo in Winnicott’s “the clue to social and group psychology is the psychology of the individual” (Winnicott, 1958, p. 15).

This, then, is the dominant view in psychoanalysis: that the internal *primitive* psychology is prior to the individual, who, in turn, is prior to the social. The social itself is an expression of a *pre-existing* psychology within the individual. In other words, the psychological is the “cause” and the social is its “effect”. Thus, the social has little status since it comes third in order of importance: first, the internal psychology, then, the individual, and finally, the social. And it is because this is the context that we are speaking into that the tone taken by the arguments which seek to privilege the social is defensive; it is an argument against an established, taken-for-granted norm, an argument against the grain.

*The positivist schema*

This norm arises out of a particular positivist world-view, a world-view that continues to dominate not only psychoanalysis, but many other disciplines. It is also the basis of the thinking of policy makers in the UK, permeating all territories from mental health to the economy to ecology.

The positivists hold that the objective world-of-things exists before individual humans, and individual humans exist before society. In this view, society is not just secondary, but *tertiary*, since it arises because of individuals joining together with other individuals. It can be depicted as shown below (Figure 1).

In this “picture”, there are two distinct regions. The space between the individual and the world of things is where objective science is said to happen. Science, in this account, is the activity of the individual studying the world of things. Meanwhile, it is supposed that it is in the other space, between *the* individual and society, is where politics happens, politics being the various (problematic) engagements and struggles individuals have with each other in their attempts to join together and form society.

From this depiction, it would appear, then, that the two regions—science and politics—have nothing to do with each other, as they each occupy different “spaces”. This is the basis of the claim that politics has nothing to do with science, and so politics ought to be kept out of science (and art, and sport, and everything else).

This schema is *linear*. And it is this very linearity that allows it to seem that politics and science are very different *kinds* of activities that have nothing to do with each other. One of the points I want to flag up at this early stage is that the diagram and the way of thinking that it illustrates is already an expression of a certain ideology,

(*autonomous rational*)

First, the world of things → then *The Individual* → then the social world

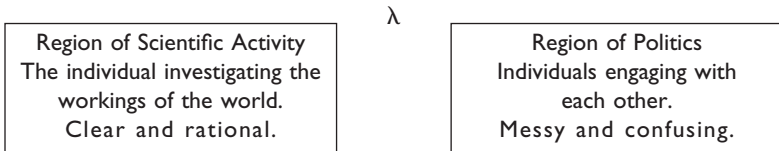


Figure 1. The positivist world view.

an ideology that privileges the individual over the social. I will say more on ideology and related matters as I proceed. But, for now, I want to make the point that the apparent “obvious” division between the objective world and that of human interaction only appears to be so obvious because of the premises utilized in constructing the diagram. The diagram is not a straightforward description of the natural state of things (which is how it looks on first impression), but a division generated by a particular ideology, an ideology that serves particular ends. As we will see shortly, there are other ways of representing and thinking about the situation, and these give rise to other “outcomes”, other ends.

Anyhow, it is on this kind of basis that politicians claim that, although they are in the business of politics, the decisions they take are fully rational because they are made on the basis of scientific evidence. (Consider, for example, President Obama’s recent reversal of George Bush’s ban on stem cell research. Obama said that his decision was driven by scientific evidence, whereas Bush had made his decision “in consultation with God”.) However, there is no discussion as to what constitutes scientific evidence, as this is a part of the taken for granted. The taken for granted always pushes in certain directions, always towards certain ends, *but always surreptitiously*. A case in point is the current reorganization of psychological therapies in the UK. The government demands that psychological therapies ought to be “evidence based”. But what *counts* as evidence privileges a certain kind of therapy (the cognitive) over other kinds. It is not surprising, given that the scientific methodology being used to gather this “evidence” is positivist, that it ends up finding in favour of a psychological modality that is also positivist. The *ends* are already present in the *means*. The ends that are being served are manifold: a great many people are apparently treated, rapidly and cheaply, and the government is seen to be doing something helpful, while, at the same time, managing to “save” money. And the entire enterprise is legitimated by apparently being “scientific”. The sting in this particular serpent’s tail will, no doubt, be felt in the not too distant future.

Anyway, let me return and attend more directly to the positivist schema. According to the rationales of this schema, it is possible to figure out how the world-of-things works, because it works according to the rules of cause and effect. These rules can be worked out

through the rational individual doing objective science. However, what constitutes science is not a given, although the way the situation is set up, it appears that this is so, and that, therefore, there is nothing here to be questioned.

This kind of understanding of science arises from the positivist world-view in which there is the priority of “things” over “ideas about those things”. You see what you see because what you see is real and plainly there to see. It exists as itself, before you see it. You speak what you see. Observation is direct, unproblematic, and value free.

So, on the left hand side of Figure 1, above, we have the possibility of clarity and predictability, while on the right hand side, in the region of politics, humans seem to behave in ways that appear irrational and, therefore, unpredictable.

(Let us note one other thing: although this linear story begins with the world of things, *agency* is located in the autonomous rational individual.)

So, on one side of the picture we have clarity, and on the other side, confusion. The question we are now faced with is why, despite their rational capacities, do humans behave in seemingly irrational ways? As we have seen, some of the psychoanalysts above (in particular, Bion) have answered that they behave in these irrational ways because of the eruption of the primitive in the psyche. I will sketch Freud’s version of events.

### *The Freudian schema*

Freud (1930a) famously gave an explanation for the irrationality of humans through a description of the way the mind comes to be structured. In his view, the mind was as it was because of the residue of two histories, the first history being that of the human species (the primal horde and so on). The effects of these primitive and powerful themes from the dawn of humankind are laid down in the psyche in the form of the instincts. The second history is that of early childhood and of psychological development. This is the story of what happens when the first history (in the shape of the primitive instincts) are confronted with other people and objective reality in the present.

Although the developmental process is mostly and more or less successful, human rationality during adulthood is always compromised by the residue of both histories, that of a particular developmental story, as well as that of archaic primitive processes. Both of these continue to have a life in the unconscious, from where they come to have an invisible role in our seemingly rational life. It follows then that our *rationales* for doing things are always, to some degree, *rationalizations*.

The Freudian model is akin to that of Kant in the following sense. Kant (1999) thought that humans were born with certain categories of logic already present in the mind, and said that humans experience the world through these categories. So, Kant is called an idealist, because he privileges these *a priori* ideas (categories) over things. In this context, what *a priori* means is innate knowledge, which is to be contrasted with knowledge gained through lived experience. This *a priori*, innate knowledge not only exists prior to experience, it also forms that experience. The categories inform what we are able to see and the way we see it. The Freudian equivalent of Kantian categories (Figure 2) is that of the instincts. Freud would say that we come to experience the world and others in the ways that we do because our experiences are mediated and permeated by the instincts (Klein calls these, innate unconscious phantasies).

When it comes to *classical* psychoanalytic treatment, the situation is complicated (I am oversimplifying the situation to tease out the points of interest). On the one hand (as Freud himself proposed), the psychoanalyst is conceived of as a scientist, a scientist capable of objective rational thought and observation. The patient, however, is a Freudian creature, in that the patient's rationality is subject to, and permeated by, unconscious processes. The patient is placed on the side of things—an object being investigated by the rational psychoanalyst. The purpose of the investigation is to expose and understand the workings of the two histories within the unconscious, so that the patient has more possibility of operating

World of things → *The Individual* → The social world  
 (*Freudian*) patient ←←← (*rational*) psychoanalyst

Figure 2. Classical treatment according to the positivist/Freudian schema.

rationally. In this world-view, the analyst is confident that his observations and deductions are value free and objective. The methodology is “scientific”, consisting of observation, hypotheses formation, testing the hypotheses, and so on.

In sum, the psychoanalytic method is the use of scientific methodology, drawn from the left hand side of Figure 1, to bring more clarity and understanding to the messy right hand side of Figure 1, human motivation and behaviour.

*The Eliasian/radical Foulkesian schema*

But what if we come at this scenario from the opposite direction and redraw the picture? In this case, the social precedes individuals and we will arrive at a radically different understanding of human motivation (Figure 3).

The first thing to note is that the social, by definition, *is* the domain of the political. The political is an eternally conflicted field, generated and constituted by **p;ower** relations, of which it is an expression.

What is important about this “picture” is that it makes clear that *as* power struggles and politics are there at the beginning of the picture, they *must* permeate all that follows. This includes not only the psyches of the individuals that are born into the social, but also the relations that take place between them. But most importantly for our purposes, the logic of the picture exposes the fact that politics and power themes must necessarily permeate the *activity* of science—the study of how things work.

This picture is also linear, and so, as a representation of the processes of human existence, it, too, is an over-simplification. But,

First, the social world → The Individual → Then the world of things  
(permeated by the social)

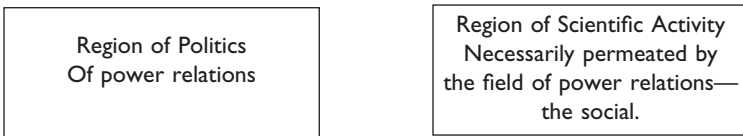


Figure 3. The Eliasian/radical Foulkesian schema.

despite this obvious limitation, its virtue resides in the fact that it shows how and why the activity of science is, of necessity, imbued with the agendas of the human beings that engage in it.

### *The developmental story*

There is a critical consequence for the developmental story in this scenario.

What becomes clear is that, as each particular individual is born into the social milieu, he or she cannot help but imbibe the dominant discourses that are embedded within that milieu, and these must become fundamental and integral to the developing individual self.

What is *prior* to the newborn infant in this scenario is what is written into the fabric of the social, thus effectively reversing the previous statements of the psychoanalysts:

the understanding of *social life* is the foundation for the understanding of [*the individual's*] personality (from Klein).

all problems of *individual* psychology are ultimately reducible to *sociological* problems (from Fairbairn).

the clue to the psychology of the individual is social and group psychology (from Winnicott).

What we are now faced with is a *social a priori*. One name for the social *a priori* is the Foulkesian one of the *social unconscious*. There are two dangers here. The first we have already noted, that this picture, being so linear, does not capture the complexities of human existence; the picture is a one-way street beginning in the social and driving right through everything that follows it. This, then, leads into the second danger that we now fall into: the error of social determinism, what Wrong (1962) has called the over-socialized conception of "Man". Both these dangers give rise, quite rightly, to the following objection.

### *An objection and a confession*

Surely, the individual infant is not a complete *tabula rasa* at the point of birth, entirely at the mercy of the social, with the individual being written on and into by discourse and ideology? Surely,



humans are more substantial than that? What of human autonomy and responsibility? Another way of putting the objection is this: what is the source of the *individuality* of individuals? If everyone were simply formed by discourse, then we would expect people to be much more regimented than they actually are; this is clearly not the case: individuals vary enormously, each individual is, indeed, unique. So, what is the basis of this uniqueness?

I agree with the objection, and am interested in the questions that it gives rise to, but do not agree with the ways that the questions are often answered.

The territory that this question is engaged with is that of the moment of birth. The question becomes one of what is already present at birth, and how is one to think about it? Or, to put it another way, what is the nature of the clay that is to be moulded by the psycho-socio-developmental processes, and how plastic or resistant is it to being moulded?

And here is the thing: the answers to these questions cannot help but be ideological, in support of this or that world-view. If the radical direction is right, then it has to be the case that the answers to these questions cannot ever be purely scientific, objective and neutral, but will have all sorts of other functions and purposes, some of which are known and knowable, and others not. In other words, this issue is already an explication of the theme of this chapter: that one cannot ever reside outside the ideological and, therefore, the politica, even in the clinic. This, however, is not to suggest that the only possibility before one is docile submission to the prevalent world order. This is because the methodology of Foulkesian group analysis has the potential to subvert and deconstruct ruling ideologies, even as it inevitably promotes alternative ones.

This is also true of me, of course, as well as of this paper—neither are ideology-free. So, let me come clean about where I stand, or at least as much as I know about it: I want to argue against the individualism and internalism endemic to much psychoanalytic discourse—the viewpoint that says that the source of all human life, as we know it, emerges from the asocial internal world of asocial individuals; a viewpoint in which introjection is the poor cousin of projection; a viewpoint that supposes that there can exist such a thing as “the” individual in the singular.

In saying this, I do not wish to claim that there are no such entities called individuals *per se*. I want, instead, to advocate for something similar to Hannah Arendt when she chastises Karl Marx, no less, of getting it wrong when he speaks of “Man”. She says that “the human condition [is that] of plurality . . . the fact [is] that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (1998[1958], p. 7). Human life begins and continues in the plural and has never been in the singular.

In my view, if we begin the story not with *the* individual (e.g., Klein, Freud), or with *the* individual-in-relation with another individual (e.g., Winnicott, Fairbairn), or with individuals-in-relation (e.g., Foulkes, Mitchell), but with individuals-in-social-relation (e.g., Elias), then we find ourselves in a new paradigm, in which not only the theory of human interaction, but also the practice and technique of psychoanalysis/psychotherapy is considerably different (Dalal, 1998, 2002).

Let me return to the objection itself, and the way it is often answered. The answer begins with the truism that the infant comes into the world already formed to some degree. The moment of birth is often described as one where a new psycho-biological being is born into, and, *for the first time*, is confronted with an established social order. This newborn is a unique body, certainly, and, being body, it is thought of as pure biology. This infant also has its own unique responses to its environment and carers, which, being unique, is described as its character. And being there right at the beginning of its life, before the social has had any chance of doing its work, it would seem that this uniqueness *is* its true nature—a unique nature that is personal, because it is prior to, and unsullied by, the social. To this way of thinking, the true self resides in the domain of Nature, a domain that is continually being threatened and distorted by the domain of Culture.

There are several points of disagreement here.

The first disagreement is with the wish to fix what is present at the moment of birth as “true character”. Given that character continues to change right through one’s life, what are the grounds on which it is claimed that it is at this moment that the individual’s personality is at its truest and purest? In saying this, I do not wish to fall into the alternative error of claiming that this moment—of birth—is of no more significance than any other. That, too, would

be nonsense. Birth is obviously a highly charged and significant moment when family and infant meet each other face to face for the first time. It is also the case that much experience has already taken place in the womb. Where are we to insert “the beginning”? In this discussion, the Vitalists might perhaps use the language of “soul” and “the spark of life” to capture the unique mystery that is individual human aliveness.

We should also note, in passing, the claim made by some psychoanalytic schools that those suffering from character disorders cannot change, while those suffering from neurotic disorders can.

My second point of disagreement is with the Humanistic claim that the shape of the character at birth is the “true self” and the changes that take place through the psycho-social-developmental process constitute a dilution and contamination of this true self. I would also disagree with the classical psychoanalytic formulation in which the psycho-social-developmental processes are conceived of as consisting of modulating something primitive in the shape of instincts or drives into something civilized.

My ethos would find affinity with *aspects* of the psychoanalytic schools of relationality (e.g., Winnicott and Fairbairn), attachment (e.g., Bowlby and Holmes), and most closely, intersubjectivity (Mitchell), *but with the following important caveat*: that the processes of relationality, attachment, and intersubjectivity take place in a sociological milieu, and that their shapes and forms are driven by the discourses that prevail. What this means is that power relations are intrinsic to relational, attachment, and intersubjective processes: it is this that is the essence of what the social unconscious.

The body, being body, is readily thought of as a biological entity. It is. But it is also a sociological entity. Over the aeons, our physical bodies have evolved always in relation to other bodies. In other words, sociological themes have always been present throughout the biological evolutionary processes and so are embedded in the structure of our bodies, into our biology. Thus, the newborn’s biological body is already social. The birth of an individual is not the first occasion on which biology meets society. As Elias says: “Human society is a level of nature” (Elias, 1991, p. 85). He continues, “humans are *by their nature made* for a life with each other, *a life which . . . includes* interpersonal and inter-group struggles and their management” (*ibid.*, p. 91, my italics).

So, something about what Kant and Freud say is right after all, but not quite in the ways that they meant them. The infant does come into the world knowing something, but not exactly with Kantian categories (although Klein thought that this was indeed the case, that the infant comes into the world with the categories breast, penis, and vagina already present in the mind (Hinshelwood, 1991, pp. 324–326)). It does already “know” something about spatial and temporal relationships, cause and effect, and so on. The infant comes into the world not just ready to relate, but *already involved* in the process of relating. And, most dramatically, the intersubjectivists tell us that the sense of self itself comes to be constituted through the processes of relating. What radical group analysis has to add to this is the reminder that intersubjectivity and the processes of relating are always a *social* process, and this necessarily involves power relations, and so power relations necessarily come to have a formative role from the beginning in the constitution of the developing individual.

Let me now return to the main subject of this paper: the social unconscious.

### *The social a priori*

Foulkes is not the first, or the last, to come up with the idea of a social *a priori*; a great number and range of scholars have proposed some version of it. Hopper (2003, p. 159) tells us that “although Karen Horney was the first psychoanalyst to apply the [notion of] the social unconscious to clinical work . . . the concept was introduced by [Erich] Fromm”. Foulkes, however, makes no mention of Fromm. Hopper suggests that this is because Foulkes thought Fromm too left wing (personal communication).

The question being engaged with is this: how is it that (broadly and not without contestation) in particular times and places, humans (in the plural) come to *share* a view (more or less) of what is right, what is wrong, of the way things are, and so on? And that this is the case despite the range and variety of individual personal histories. In other words, how do we (in the plural) come to take certain things for granted, things that are not only outside the scope of our consciousness, *but the basis of it?*

And variously, the scholars all answer that the basis of these attitudes are to be found in the unreflected conventions that we are each born into, that we each imbibe, and that we each reproduce and reinforce, all without knowing that we are doing so (Table 1).

Perhaps the most well known of these scholars is Marx. In his view, the ruling classes deliberately (that is, consciously) promulgated a *false ideology* that the working classes were unable to resist, the purpose of the ideology being to convince the oppressed that there was no alternative to their exploitation because they were participating in the natural order of things.

Althusser (1969) went further, saying that ideology is unconscious, and unconscious not only to the oppressed, but also to the oppressors, with each genuinely believing that the status quo is an expression of the natural order of things.

Hegel (before Marx) had proposed that individuals came to think in similar ways to each other through participation in, and absorption of, the *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times). Hegel (1979), too, thought that there were *a priori categories* that existed prior to individuals, categories through which individuals experienced themselves and the world. But Hegel's categories differ from Kant's, in that they are to be found in the social that the individual is born into. (I am aware that, in speaking of *the* social, I am, in fact, reifying the process of ongoing human interaction. In doing this, I

Table 1. Varieties of the social *a priori*.

Scholar	Variety
Foulkes	Social unconscious
Marx	Ideology (conscious)
Althusser	Ideology (unconscious)
Hegel	Zeitgeist, categories
Barthes	Mythology
Lacan	Unconscious like language
Elias	Symbol, habitus
Foucault	Epistemes, discourse
Kuhn	Paradigms
Bourdieu	Habitus
Leyton	Normative unconscious processes

am giving succour to the view that *the* social and *the* individual are different and antithetical to each other. My view follows that of Elias, which is that notions of individual and social are both abstractions and aspects of the same psycho-socio-genetic process of human interaction.)

Barthes talks of these social conventions as *mythology*. He says,

myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal . . . [myth] has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature . . . *myth is depoliticized speech*. [Barthes, 1984, p. 142, my italics]

Elias (1991) says that we come to think alike because, through language, we all participate in a dimension he calls *symbol*; he also puts forward a notion of *habitus* to account for the unreflected consensual. Foucault (1972) has two terms for these habituated ways of experiencing and perceiving the world: *epistemes* and *discourses*. Kuhn's (1962) term is *paradigms*. Then there is Bourdieu (1986), who also speaks of *habitus*.

It is also the case that there are many scholars from within the psychoanalytic tradition itself (e.g., Marcuse, Habermas, Fromm, and Sullivan, among many others) who have also struggled with this sort of question. It has to be said, however, that mostly they are not considered to be significant and remain at the margins of contemporary mainstream psychoanalytic conversation. Perhaps best known is Lacan's (2007) explanation for the commonality of perception, this being that the individual's unconscious is structured like a language, and language is always communal, and prior to the birth of any individual. There are many others in the psychoanalytic field engaging with this kind of question, for example, Cushman (1994) and, most recently, Leyton (2006) has spoken to these themes through her notion of *normative unconscious processes*. Not to be forgotten is the work of Hopper (2003), and the other voices included in this volume.

This, then, is a way of thinking about the social unconscious: in any period, one or other particular world-view comes to prevail and extensively dominate one's faculties, and leads to particular ways of experiencing events. During these times, there seems no

sensible alternative to these world-views. To the flat-earth way of thinking, the idea of a spherical earth is not only implausible, but incredible, and obviously wrong. The spherical alternative belies their *actual experience* of flatness. These unreflected world-views are the basis of the phenomenon that we call *common sense*. It is a *sense* that is *common* to all, and is so obvious that, in the main, it does not even occur to one to question it. In the positivist schema (Figure 1), it is made *obvious* that politics can have nothing to do with science, and those that think otherwise are plainly mistaken, as is evident in the diagram.

These seemingly all-powerful world-views are not eternal, however. They are continually being interrogated by other options residing on the margins, and through this process, over time, the dominant world-views come to mutate into new shapes; on occasion the shift is not gradual, but sudden and cataclysmic. In other words, even in the time of the flat earth, there are others who are able to have alternative conceptions and theories as to the shape and nature of the earth—not all of them correct of course—and, depending, the other options are either treated as errors, ignored as idiotic, or attacked and repressed as heretical.

My purpose in listing these thinkers (and by no means does the list pretend to be a complete one) is not to tease out the differences in each of their conceptions of the social *a priori*. Rather, the purpose is to make the point that the idea that humans are both formed and constrained by the social orders they inhabit is hardly a novel one, although it appears to be so to many of those inhabiting some quarters of the psychoanalytic world. And they believe this, despite the fact that much before Marx, Arendt, or Elias, even someone like Thomas Aquinas (hardly a revolutionary left-wing radical) had already said that “man is by nature political, that is, social” (“*homo est naturaliter politicus, id est, socialis*”, quoted in Arendt, 1998, p. 23). The only way to explain how it is that this kind of tunnel vision continues to hold sway within certain psychoanalytic circles is to say that they are blinded by, and in the grip of, an ideology, an individualistic and internalist ideology.

Not all psychoanalysts and group analysts think like this, of course, as exemplified by those mentioned above. But they can hardly be construed as mainstream, particularly in the British context.

*The clinic: implications*

To begin with, let me summarize where I have come to and, in the process, say something about the relationship (as I understand it) between the two terms I have been using, ideology and discourse.

Ideology is unconscious. It is the taken for granted that is utilized in formulating ideas and experiences. It provides the categories we use in our thinking: ideology is the basis of what we call common sense. It legitimates the interests of interest groups, but in ways that are hard to recognize. This is because the work of ideology is to give the historical and contingent the appearance of the natural and inevitable.

As Harland says,

The individual absorbs language before he can think for himself: indeed the absorption of language is the very condition of being able to think for himself . . . Words and meanings have been deposited in the individual's brain below the level of conscious ownership and mastery. They lie within him like an undigested piece of society. [Harland, 1987, pp. 12-13]

Elias shares this view. Language, according to Elias, is not a passive means of representing the world; it actively informs the sort of world one experiences. He says that language provides people with "the means of orienting themselves *far beyond the field of their personal experience*" (1991, p. 125, my italics).

Here is the thing: the kinds of languages one is born into and absorbs both form and constrain thought, emotion, and experience itself. Note: I am speaking in the plural, of languages, not language, the significance of this being that the turbulent relationship between these languages/discourses opens up a space in which reflection becomes possible. This last point is critical. In itself, it is a description of group analytic methodology.

Discourse, on the other hand, is a more comprehensive notion. It includes ideology, that is, language categories and ideas, but also includes the forms of *practice* that are informed by that language. The theory and practice reinforce and support each other.

Discourses furnish the very criterion by which its results are judged successful. Discourses are self-validating. One cannot ask from within a discourse whether it itself is true or not, as it



furnishes the basis on which we judge what is true and what is good. Discourses impose a taxonomy on the world and the mind. Taxonomies are systems of inclusion and exclusion, and the means by these are achieved are never value free.

It follows, then, that the theories and practices of psychoanalysis and group analysis can also never be value free.

Those who would defend the view that the activity of analysis inclines towards the objective do so by claiming that the theory of psychoanalysis is based on scientific evidence gathered in the clinic through the practice of psychoanalysis. The defence is positivist, in that it presumes that theory and practice are distinct from each other, and that neither is tarnished by politics and ideological agendas.

But, as the psychoanalysts Greenberg and Mitchell remind us,

There are no purely objective facts and observations which lie outside of theory . . . One's theory, one's understanding, one's way of thinking, *determine* what are likely to be taken as facts, determine how and what one observes. Observation itself is understood to be "theory laden". [Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 16, my italics]

This chapter, then, is a reminder of something already well established, but hard to remember: that the therapist's perceptions and interventions are *inevitably* compromised by the ideologies that the therapist unwittingly subscribes to, as well as the discourses that the therapist unknowingly participates in. This results in the therapist/analyst unthinkingly reproducing and reinforcing these ideologies and discourses through their activities, *despite themselves*. As Elias says, structures have histories and histories have structure. In other words, history is structured into the psyche, a history of norms and values. In fact this is exactly how Freud describes the contents of the superego. These taken-for-granted norms and values, born of a particular history in a particular time, privilege certain ways of thinking while they close off others. And this takes place so powerfully that mostly one is not even aware of what has been closed off.

The powerful thing about discourse is that even as it privileges a particular way of seeing and experiencing things, in the same moment it closes off other possibilities so much that it does not

even occur to one that there are other possibilities there to be entertained. For example, if one conceives of human beings as ahistorical, differentiated, encapsulated entities, then it would seem that the only means for individuals to engage with each other are through the device of sending and receiving communications of various kinds. In psychoanalytic theory, these mechanisms are called projection, projective identification, and sometimes *massive* projective identification; they have become essential and key to understanding all clinical phenomena. The existences of these mechanisms are *givens* in psychoanalytic discourse. There is no discussion in mainstream literature about *whether* they exist; rather, the discussion is limited to how and why they take place, and their meanings and consequences. This is the dominant and prevailing view not only in psychoanalysis, but also in group analysis. This way of thinking also leads to the contemporary Kleinian premise that *all* the analyst's responses in the clinic are to be understood as countertransference, that is, in some way unconsciously provoked and *caused* by the patient's *projections* into the analyst. I would contend that it would be pretty much impossible for a candidate training to get through a psychoanalytic training while questioning the existence of these mechanisms. The trainee would be thought of as delusional or just foolish, certainly as someone not able to understand some fundamental things about the nature of human beings, and, therefore, not appropriate to become a psychoanalyst. What I want to make explicit here is that the workings of power privilege some ways over others, and that these are hard to resist swallowing whole. But these processes are not conscious, neither are they conspiracies contrived by the ruling elites (which is not to say that politicking does not take place on the committees of psychoanalytic trainings). The point I want to make is that, in the main, it does not even occur to many practitioners to question the taken-for-granted ground that their version of psychoanalysis stands on.

The notion of the social unconscious questions the individualistic premises of mainstream psychoanalysis and leads to other ways of reading clinical phenomena. What is being proposed here is that the analyst's responses to the patient are going to be informed by the discourses that the analyst inhabits as much as by anything else. And discourses, by their nature, are out of the scope of the analyst's consciousness as much as anyone else's. But, as I have

been arguing, there are alternative ways of thinking about human beings, ways that privilege their sociality. This way of thinking provides alternative metaphors for human communication. For example, in my view, Foulkes's notion of "resonance" is a potent alternative to that of "projection". I do not wish to go into the notion of resonance itself in this essay; rather, what I want to emphasize is that the notion of resonance *presupposes* some sort of connectivity between agents for the resonance to take place. It is the nature of that connectivity that is being thought about by the scholars mentioned above. And, while each gives answers that not only differ but sometimes also contradict each other, what they all take for granted is the connectivity itself—the key word in the previous sentence being "presuppose". This taken for granted is, of course, also an expression of a particular ideology—one, it so happens, that I sign up to.

Ultimately, there is no comfortable, ideology-free zone for the analyst to retreat to, no place of scientific objectivity from which they can feel confident that things are indeed as they are being perceived and experienced. This, in itself, is no bad thing. As Foulkes (1986, p. 129) counsels, doubt is the very basis of the attitude of "basic modesty" that ought to be central to, and cultivated by, every therapist.

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