

VICTIMS, BYSTANDERS AND PERPETRATORS IN RECENT TIMES APPLIED TO THE MENTAL HEALTH FIELD

ASTSS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE 17TH JUNE 2000

INTRODUCTION

In January this year I attended an unprecedented conference in Stockholm called the International Forum on the Holocaust. It was attended by 46 heads of state and their retinues, and the world's top Holocaust scholars. The purpose of the forum was to learn from the watershed and certainly best documented catastrophe of the civilised world in order to prevent such catastrophes in the future.

The emphasis was on education, the assumption being that if people know the facts of the event, they will prevent such facts from recurring. I suggested that this was not enough. It was necessary to understand the perpetrators and why they did what they did. It was also necessary to make education experientially relevant to people in their current contexts. This was possible, as at all times we are all to variable degrees victims, bystanders, and perpetrators.

So this talk is a little different to the usual, where victims evoke our compassion and we are all united and feel good in making their lives better. I will challenge you as victims, bystanders and perhaps even perpetrators in current times. Further, I will not desist from politics, in the safety of hermetically sealed science. I cannot do it, as perpetrators, victims and bystanders occur on all levels including political, and on that level they are perhaps most noxious. And we cannot avoid politics; we either acknowledge it, or become its passive quarry.

As if this was not bad enough I will also challenge conventional moral values and beliefs. Like religions, they help to explain and guide when we know no better in difficult times. I will show that while the roots of morals are real and innate, ordinary people in certain circumstances will perform acts which in different circumstances may evoke moral horror.

A digression on how moral rule may be hazardous. It was morally clear to the West that they could not stand by and see the Serbs succeed in their goals in Kosovo, goals they failed to achieve in Bosnia. In the background was the voice of Elie Wiesel interrupting President Clinton as he was opening the Washington Holocaust Museum: "Mr President, I am this moment thinking of what is happening in Yugoslavia." Yet European attack on Yugoslavia resulted in Serb atrocities and temporary cleansing of Kosovo. The jury is

still out on whether this was worth it in the long run. The point is, that moral impulses have to be scientifically understood and applied to current reality.

This long introduction is to enlist your cooperation with me in a difficult task. I will not speak of victims out there, but ordinary people like us who may range from victims to perpetrators. By using recent examples I may make you uncomfortable, hostile or defensive. I am taking a risk because I am among professional friends. And if I cannot do it here, who can do it where? So please remember that any feelings aroused are those very same ones aroused or suppressed in crisis situations which we need to learn about.

The Thesis of This talk

My thesis is that in times of major stress, crisis or stringency, at whatever social level, one or more of a small limited number of strategies arise to deal with the circumstances. Sometimes people give to each other generously and altruistically, and rescue others at risk to themselves. At other times they struggle with each other for privilege or supremacy. Sometimes they work hard for goals, at other times they surrender them. At times they fight the situation, at other times they escape them. The implication is that at times of crisis people do not lose their morality and become bad, but they take opportunities to survive and make something of their lives and of those they feel close. Their moralities follow such situations. The moralities may differ at different times. Sometimes sacrifice of oneself will be seen as moral; at other times so will be. Sometimes fighting and killing is a sacred duty, at other times it a supreme sin. These matters depend on specific appraisals at the time.

But two strategies I want to look at today I call fight and competition. The former deals with enemies through getting rid of them, the latter with rivals against whom one struggles. All strategies can be adaptive and maladaptive. Each has its separate moral judgements, values and ideals.

These two strategies, fight and competition, will be looked at in some detail, and applied to questions such as how did we stand by and let our health services get run down, how did we allow the Kennett government to erode democracy, propriety and social welfare? How come we are standing by while refugees are treated worse than criminals within our shores? And in the background and foreground, how did the world allow the Holocaust to happen, and our aborigines to be denied basic human rights to life, family, property, and way of life?

Fight

Fight is pictured paradigmatically as defending one's life against a predator, these days enemies. The appraisal is that if one does not get rid of the enemy one will be killed. Killing is not the prime objective, riddance is. Social animals draw lines and territories, with those inside being allies and those outside enemies. Outsiders are identified by

physical features - colour, smell, physiognomy. Threats are meant to deter them from attacking. Intrusion or attack by enemies is countered by retaliation and revenge. If these do not work, fight strategy may escalate to hatred, persecution, need to eradicate, killing and destruction. Safety can only be achieved by ridding the enemies totally, hence genocide.

The killers, soldiers, are seen as heroes, defenders of life and ways of life their missions are sacred. It is only when seen from the other side, or later when it is seen that the outsiders did not present danger, that they are seen as wanton killers who committed atrocities.

How does it happen that people turn on other people with the aim of exterminating them, when in retrospect this was excessive?

In My Lai, during the Vietnam War an American platoon exterminated hundreds of civilians including women and children, and even animals. This was in the context of the platoon losing men through mines and guerilla tactics, not being able to retaliate. The soldiers saw the massacre as a way of fighting for their lives, telling themselves that the villagers were Vietcong.

At Jozefow a German police platoon was ordered to shoot hundreds of Jews in a forest. Ultimately they obeyed the order, though with some difficulty.

In Tasmania white people wanted to solve the aborigine problem. The country was in panic of being killed by them. Aborigines killed their sheep because they denuded kangaroo country and their food. They also killed outlying farmers. One way to solve the problem was to ethnically cleanse them by moving them to a Bass Strait island, or to systematically kill them. Both methods were used.

The Germans took Aryan looking Polish children to Germany to assimilate them. Australians took half caste aborigine children to assimilate them. Both actions were part of a greater plan to be rid of lower races.

The killing was necessary in each case because it was appraised that the enemy would kill them. The enemy was both demonized and dehumanized. For instance, the Jews were seen to be wealthy capitalists, communists, as suited, but in each case conspiratorially seeking world dominion, especially over right Germany. On the other hand they were vermin, an infection to be eradicated. It is obvious that while in nature predators and enemies needed to be defended against and even killed, in civilized societies it is the reawakening of old fears, their use for political purposes, and for scapegoatism that they are used for. In addition, group pressure, state terrorism demagoguery all channelled force against enemies. Bastardization, dehumanization, terror, group pressure in army training prepares to kill enemies.

The White Australia Policy also demonized and dehumanized Asians. They were potential enemies who wanted to overtake Australia. The yellow hordes had to be kept

out. Mr Ruddock still plays this game with current refugees. He maintains there are hordes who want to come. Those who eventually make it from their tyrannical lands are treated here as criminals to be sent back.

Once enemies have been identified, values, principles, ideology, religion, wisdom, all swing into action to support their eradication. This can occur at all social system levels. Lines may be drawn between spouses, parent and children, gangs, groups, cultural groups.

Analysis of when such persecutions and eradications occur indicate times of great insecurity and fear for life. Prior to the Holocaust Germans had recent memories of defeat, economic collapse, starvation, and humiliation. White settlers in Australia had memories of hardship, starvation, persecution, humiliation and ostracism, coupled with fears of their new environment. Harnessing group cohesion toward scapegoats gave in each case temporary focus, and hope for better times once the causes of their miseries were eliminated.

Competition

Struggling for the same resources and survival of the fittest is a Darwinian principle, which neo-Darwinians till recently have misquoted to justify racism. For instance, aborigines were seen to be an inferior race bound for extinction. The Nazis had an elaborate racist theory of superiority and extinction.

And yet competition in nature works according to hierarchies of dominant and submissive chains for the welfare of the community as a whole. In the pecking order of the farmyard, scarce resources are distributed according to superiority, but all get something. If indeed there is not enough for all, the weakest are eliminated, but the group is preserved, and indeed the best of the group.

Hierarchical advantages include everyone knowing their place, duties of care down the line, respect up the line. Hierarchy saves constant struggle.

Hierarchies may be exploited by the dominant, whose power and greed may lead to excessive oppression and exploitation of those below them. Struggle may ensue for goods and privileges.

Hierarchical morality includes law and order, rewards for strength, superiority, effort entrepreneurship, superior caste, wealth, lineage. The dominants are seen as superior, those below inferior, but when accentuated the former may assume near divine proportions and those below be seen as contemptible and subject to humiliation. Ultimately the oppressed are terrorized, marginalized and eliminated.

At times of stress or perceived stress when resources are felt to be limited, competition ensues for them. Apart from food, resources may include wealth, money, occupational

status, lineage status. Competition may occur between parents and children, spouses, groups. In each case of struggle for position, the other is seen as inferior, contemptible, to be marginalized and exploited, possibly plundered and thrown away as useless. When defeated the oppressed may see their oppressors silently as inferior, or may submit to their opinions of themselves. This is akin to children or conquered people believing that they are worthless.

Such takeovers by some over others are called by different names, such as (personal) dominance, power, political oppression, tyranny, in international terms colonization.

Let us take a relatively minor example of colonization - that of the health system, of which I have some experience, but I imagine the same happened in teaching and other welfare institutions, and even in businesses. Remember, that the process is insidious, and has some internal logic at the time, and is supported by sufficient proportion of the population to be effected, or at least bystanders taking no action. The colonization took place by government managers of the health system, which was previously administered by the medical professions.

The first jostling was through propaganda. The population was told that it was milked by health professionals especially doctors. They created illness to make themselves rich at the expense of the otherwise well who are made to think of themselves as sick. Ideological and management infiltration occurs as it does with colonizers and missionaries. Next loyal locals are enlisted to serve the new masters, and they are rewarded with money and privileges. Doctors who never made it now became part of the managerial system. Eventually non-doctors and non-medical personnel were installed on hospital boards. They were merged and shuffled so that the government had control but no responsibility. Well paid managers with local power were the coalface colonists.

These colonists hid behind fortresses in offices, and issued memoranda like laws in colonized countries. Their language was foreign, in this case using commercial terms. Medical units for instance, became business centres. Previous language to do with quality of service, ethical standards and so on was ignored or seen as mildly traitorous. Those who resisted were redundant, and some of the most competent people were eliminated from the hierarchy. An effective weapon in colonization is to divide and rule, or make the oppressed compete for scarce resources. This makes the struggling antagonists pliable to the superior powers which dispense resources.

In the Holocaust these processes were taken to the extreme. In this sense other nations had inferior racial characteristics and therefore were to be eliminated by nature, or this could be hurried along so that in the meantime they do not consume too many resources. In the meantime their resources and labour, ultimately their bodies could be plundered, before cast off into smoke.

The same ways of thought were applied to the aborigines. This was especially so by the lowest parts of the white hierarchy, the convicts. Of the 12 whites who massacred aborigines at Myall's Creek, 11 were convicts or ex-convicts. The 12th man who turned

them in was not. Australia whites also thought of themselves as superior by race and civilization, the aborigines being fated to die out because of their physical and morally and culturally savage inferiority.

Even where aborigines were helped or given resources, it was from a position of superiority. Thus what was given did not carry the dignity which was required to be helpful. One of the benefits of saying sorry is that the person saying it puts himself or herself on a lower hierarchical level than the victim. Resources should then flow back to those who were plundered, this time with respect, with the prospect of eventually doing away with hierarchical distinction. That is, whites and blacks are equal physically, mentally morally and spiritually.

Recently there was community anxiety about state resources. Kennett, previously thought to be a bit of a buffoon who fancied himself as a leader on the model of an army in which he had been a sergeant, was elected leader. He established a technocratic economically rational style of rule, with an autocratic supercilious downputting mien. Lacking a sense of propriety and empathy, he established a managerial privileged class, lacking somewhat a sense of institutional and democratic propriety. However, this was allowed because it was considered that strong leadership was necessary to pare away the stagnant parasitic ballast of inferior people and give the superior entrepreneurs the freedom they needed.

Indeed, the economy improved. Whether this was because of the reasons put forward, history will tell. It could also have been due to plundering the family silver and the weakest sector of the community - the ill, the uneducated, those willing to listen to the state virtue of gambling.

The point is that at certain times people were willing to forego chunks of democracy. It was also the period of One Nation, attacking foreigners and aborigines for stealing jobs and money. Looking back, it seems incredible that so recently these movements were supported by large sectors, that Kennett was reelected with a massive majority. But survival strategies even if they include the pain of unemployment for large sections of the community, were seen as worthwhile, to preserve the productive majority. With scarce resources, there seemed to be no alternative.

It may only be left to state that when survival strategies fight and competition combine, they are particularly virulent if wrongly applied. Thus in the Holocaust Jews were seen both as an exploitative powerful elite who had to be put down and a foreign invader who had to be killed. The misapplied perceptions led to the Germans following their all powerful divine leader who oppressed them and the world, and intruded and was the predator who himself together with his followers had to be annihilated.

Tangentially to the main thrust of my talk, other factors too enter perpetrator and bystander psychology. They include macho images, technocratic and psychological manipulation of others, victims' and bystanders' intimidation and obeying the leader, hypnotic unquestioning following in certain situations, and fear of disobedience, and

escape, even if only into one's mind or away from reality through denial or lesser degrees of awareness.

Also, of course, professions like medicine may not only be victims. Often they are bystanders. Occasionally they are perpetrators, as when doctors and nurses killed disabled children, cripples and the psychiatrically ill under the Nazi regime. (This was the logical conclusion to getting rid of the ballast.) Doctors separated those who would be gassed or were fit to labour in concentration camps. Doctors and psychiatrists administered and developed racial theories of inferiority e.g., of aborigines and Afroamericans till quite recently. Doctors and nurses were almost totally quiet as hospitals were dismembered and patient care plummeted recently.

However, in conclusion, I do not want to portray a culture of guilt, even if warranted. What I want to portray is the need to look at why and when certain events are likely to happen. For instance, we know that cycles of violence and victimhood, and probably bystandership and silent witnessing occur. We need to know why, how, when, how to prevent it.

I suggest that the answer is not a moral issue of maintaining goodness against evil. Because they will vary according to how events are seen at a particular times. It is more important to see how people wrongly see their survival to be at stake, and how they choose options which seem rational and necessary at the time when they are not so. Such impulses need to be made conscious and their sources made aware, and alternative hopeful solutions must be presented, before democracy suffers, and leaders misappropriate what seem to be survival necessities into their opposites.

And this applies to our everyday ways of being. For we are all to some extent always victims, perpetrators and bystanders.