

Psychoanalysis, Latin American States of Terror, and American Neoliberalism

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Review Essay of Nancy Hollander, Uprooted Minds--Surviving the Politics of Terror in the Americas (New York: Routledge, 2010, xi-xvi, 403 pages, ISBN 978-0-88163-490-7)

By Nancy Hollander, Ph.D.

Uprooted Minds is a tour de force, a book that represents the best in the growing genre of work on the intersection between psychoanalysis and society. The book covers so much territory and has so many themes that a review of this length cannot possibly do it the justice it deserves, so I will limit myself to highlighting a small selection of subjects with full recognition that the book does much more than I can capture in this writing. Like the best of literary works, *Uprooted Minds* is written on two levels. The theme of the work is the transition in and out of states of terror in the Southern Cone, i.e., Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, in the 1970's and 80's and the relevance of this sordid period of South American history for the contemporary United States. To bring the reader into the world of these terror states Dr. Nancy Hollander uses in-depth interviews with socially active analysts who lived through the transition of the three nations from democracies to brutal dictatorships. At a deeper level the book is about the intersection of psychoanalysis and societal structures and practice and in that area presents a compelling case for a socially active psychoanalysis.

Hollander does an excellent job of not only describing the horrors of living under states of terror and capturing the experience of all her protagonists, but also of providing a psychoanalytic understanding of how existence under such conditions subdues independent desire and critical thinking. Although each interviewee struggled to maintain his/her identity in the face of massive repression designed to eliminate it, Hollander emphasizes that hegemonic ideology was remarkably successful in each nation in penetrating the psyches of the citizenry. Terror subdued the citizens, but without compliance and a willingness to acquiesce in the destruction of their democracies, the military could not have succeeded in transforming democratic societies into dictatorships ruled by fear.

All the protagonists sustained their social activism to the point of danger by denying the immanence of the threat to the country and themselves. One interviewee, Marcelo Vina, an Uruguayan analyst, spent several months in jail. These brave souls continued to oppose governments that were becoming increasingly autocratic and repressive. Another analyst, Tato Pavlovsky, a playwright, was ordered to shut down his dissident play by the Argentine military and refused to do so, telling them they would "have to do it themselves." Hooded, armed men broke into a group therapy session Pavlovsky was conducting, and he barely managed to escape by jumping out a window only to find out his home had been ransacked. After living underground, he fled into exile. Such stories show the depth of the denial common among the citizenry of these countries who could not fathom the terror that was to take place in their homelands.

These analysts were further confronted with facing the reality that the implications of this personal struggle could not be kept out of the consulting room. How does one maintain “neutrality” when the patient is reporting terror of a police state that is all too real? How does the analyst manage the countertransference when the analyst’s fears mirror the patient’s paranoid dreads? The possibility of neutrality became the critical issue in the short-lived split in the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association between the “old guard” who maintained that analysts must remain neutral and the younger analysts, such as the interviewee Juan Carlos Volnovich, who maintained that under dictatorial conditions neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. This difference is a source of heated debate within psychoanalysis to this day, as can be in disputes currently being fought in the Division of Psychoanalysis of the American Psychological Association between groups very much parallel to the two Argentine factions.

The most agonizing decision for each protagonist was whether to suffer the guilt and feeling of cowardice of fleeing or the terror of staying under a dictatorship that was incarcerating, torturing, and killing anyone remotely suspected of dissenting from the government line. Inevitably, the interviewees suffered the guilt of leaving behind others who had to continue life under the repression of dictatorial regime. When they were able to return to their countries, all felt that they, their friends, and country had changed so much after years of terror and repressive rule that they were not coming home, but departing once again. These uprooted minds remained uprooted even after their return from exile because they had changed and so had the country and the people who survived.

The stories of these analysts are moving and compelling, but they are not the focus of the book as much as a means for exploring the relationship between psychoanalysis and society. First, and perhaps most importantly, the impact of the terror state and its supporting ideology on analytic patients indicates that the analyst cannot understand the subjectivity of her patient without grasping the extent to which the dominant ideology is internalized in the patient’s experience. Hollander makes clear that such considerations do not mean the analyst imposes her beliefs on the patient; it means that the analyst has to be aware of the influence of cultural beliefs and attitudes on the psychic structure of the patient.

Second, Hollander, through the voices of her subjects, makes a case for the analyst’s involvement in activities beyond the couch to promote social justice. Analysis, in her view, requires societal freedom and respect for individual rights in order for the patient to elaborate her free associations and fantasies. Consequently, it is incumbent on the analyst to work for the kind of society that promotes, rather than impedes, social justice, democratic values and freedom. The bystander mentality, she argues, is a form of denial and disavowal. Any citizen who fails to oppose dictatorial policies is collaborating with the dictatorship by defending against awareness of it.

Furthermore, social justice movements can benefit from analytic input. One shining example of analysis beyond the couch is the worker takeover of the Grissinopoli factory in Argentina. Two analysts, Silvia Yankelevich and Cesar Hazaki, were instrumental in helping the workers deal with their timidity in opposing authority and uncertainty about whether they were, in fact, capable of controlling their working lives. The workers attitudes, in the view of these two analysts, reflected a concrete instance of the hegemonic ideology infiltrating and influencing the subjectivity of those oppressed by

it. The contribution of psychoanalysis is to bring these attitudes to consciousness and to help in the construction of alternative norms.

Third, Hollander argues that analytic ideas have much to offer the understanding of societal ills. All her interviewees emphasized that a movement based solely on political considerations risks ignoring the subjective experience of the individual citizens and, therefore, analytic knowledge is a necessary component of understanding social problems, such as dictatorship, authoritarianism, and torture. For example, she emphasizes that the mindset of the state terrorists is a primitive splitting of the psyche as the dissenters are reduced to sub-human poisons from which the body politic must be cleansed. Hollander notes that this bifurcation of a nation's citizens reflects a paranoid-schizoid state of splitting and omnipotent control over anything found to be unsuitable. Those who regard others as subhuman due to their disagreement have not advanced to the depressive position and therefore have no ability to appreciate ambiguity and complexity.

Hollander does a deft job of showing that the experience of state terror in the Southern Cone lays bare the connection between psychoanalysis and the wider culture, a situation that applies to our situation in the U.S. Hollander uses Baumann's phrase "liquid fears" to describe the contemporary consumer culture of quickly changing societal forms and needs that result in the loss of security for the pursuit of consumer goods, leading to the anxieties of fragmentation and dislocation, fears, that is, of uprooted minds. Hollander seems to be arguing that the contemporary consumer culture is a society of homelessness and purposelessness, a society of vulnerable individuals aching for a sense of security in a world of ever-changing goods, needs, and norms. Hollander warns that the consequence may be a willingness to accept loss of freedom, even totalitarian practices, to gain a desperately sought feeling of safety. In the wake of 9/11 and the economic crisis of the U.S., there is a quickly growing political movement favoring the practices of a police state, loss of privacy, acceptance of torture, acquiescence in the government's right to spy on citizens, and the secrecy of the governmental process. Those factors along with the Bush Administration's successful the exploitation of 9/11 for the invasion and domination of a sovereign country demonstrate the willingness of many American citizens to give up their democratic rights in favor of what they believe to be security. But, such tradeoffs rarely pay off even in their own terms. Hollander notes that when the 1973 Chilean coup deposed the democratic government, former president Eduardo Frei supported the military takeover, thinking that he would be back in power. The military held onto its police powers, committing large scale torture and genocide, for eighteen years. It is disturbing to think of how easy it is for the American people to acquiesce in the most horrific behavior. Here Hollander's words ring loudly and true: dictatorships cannot succeed without the acquiescence of the citizenry. Ultimately, then, this book is a call to U.S. analysts to use analytic understanding to confront the authoritarian tendencies growing quickly in today's political culture. If analysts refuse to participate in the opposition to the anti-democratic tendencies of their own society, they are assuming the defensive stance of the bystander denying the reality around them and collaborating in the erosion of democratic values, of their nation as they know it, and consequently, of their profession as they know it. And this is the message of this book: there is no neutrality, the psyche and the social are two sides of a coin. This point is demonstrated so well and interwoven with so many

valuable themes that the book is required reading for all who have an interest in the psychoanalytic project.

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