

War as the Enactment of Perinatal Struggle



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Birth is the mother of all battles, the matrix of human conflict. It constitutes the first experience of a blood bath. The impingement of parturition is encountered as a battle for survival in which a comparatively impotent and helpless victim is subjected to massive environmental onslaught. It is starved of resources, deprived of *Lebensraum* and faced with the intense pain of crushing in wave after wave of constriction. The initial proactive response of rage is swamped by the rising terror, which can in turn give way to despair as heaven transforms into hell and 'no exit' is the title of the drama. Here is the archetypal conflict with the monsters of the deep. Winning through requires willingness for the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of both container and contained. To fail is to suffer a crushing defeat.

Case studies of perinatal abreaction abound with images of suffocation, stran-

gulation, crushing, being sucked down into a vortex, devoured in the maw of death. They are precipitated by awareness of malign encirclement, pollution and resourcelessness. Movement through and out of the birth canal is accompanied by images of fire, burning, explosion, volcanic eruption, leading on to the most incredible experiences of relief, euphoria and triumph.

The fixation of the foetal unconscious during the last stages of tolerable stress before the trauma of parturition, together with the intense repression and defence mechanisms brought into play to ensure that the subsequent hyperstress is obliterated from conscious recall, conspire to ensure that this titanic event, carried forward within the unconscious of the maturing adult, is always imminent. It is feared, expected, to be avoided at all costs and yet also to be prepared for at all costs.

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The expectation is of an imminent life-threatening onslaught from the environment. Any trigger in the life situation can serve to reactivate the perinatal imprint and precipitate a psychodrama of birth, acted out as heroic struggle in the displaced adult context.

Social Armour and the Reification of Defence

The paranoid phantasies of perinatal struggle are vested in the boundary of the group, which constitutes the event horizon of the common, collusional foetal unconscious. Since the boundary symbolises the most intense impingement of the birth trauma, it also becomes by displacement the area of the most intense defence. Provided the defensive ring holds in place, those within can live in peace and safety. Physical mobilisation of resources follows the pattern of projection from every person to the boundary, in defence against the commonly anticipated environmental aggression. In this process we see the aggregation of the concept of armouring from the individual to the system itself. The more intense the collusional paranoia the more resources are invested in the defence of the realm. Under conditions of intense restimulation, the system or nation state may be placed on a 'war footing' and its total activity mobilised to ward off the invasion. If a political leader can identify an enemy and unify corporate projection and perception around the particular object of paranoid displacement, then the power vested in the political leader becomes almost absolute.

Since the primary purpose of the defences is the repression of anxiety, the defences themselves may bear little or no

relation to the realities of environmental threat. Even a benign environment may be populated with mythical monsters, evil spirits and threatening demons. The paranoid phantasies are reified in a metaphysical psychodrama of perinatal struggle often requiring a sacrificial victim at its climax. At this point we see the coincidence of religion and war as a congruent continuum of psychic defence.

No group is an island and the environment is in fact populated by other similar groups, also engaged in parallel armouring and enactment of paranoid phantasy. In these conditions the generalised paranoid phantasies vested in the boundary are consistently displaced onto the congruent outgroup. The signals exchanged justify and reinforce the armouring, setting up an inter-group feedback loop whose signal confirms the phantasy paranoia of each grouping, so accelerating the armouring, reifying the process, divorcing it from its original ground and creating in the realities of the present environment a causal matrix for the very anxieties which the defences were intended to repress.

Even without the feedback loop generated by encounter with an equally psychotic outgroup, the defensive armouring of a system tends to increase with time. Once a given level of defensive armour has been erected, it soon becomes a familiar part of the environment. Phantasy anxiety continues to irrupt from the boundaries of the common foetal unconscious and its repression demands a continuous improvement or increase in the defensive armouring of the system. Enough is never enough.

Over time the events, objects or environment against which the defences are

erected becomes a reified displacement of the repressed perinatal event, a symbol of the cervix. With the displacement links broken and denied, the ungrounded phantasy is reified, mythologised and takes on a life of its own within the paranoid psychosis. The process outworked in communal psychodrama, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy generating in displacement the onslaught feared in phantasy.

The Historic Evolution of Defensive Implacements

Earliest defences made use of natural phenomena, the cave or high walled ravine, with a narrow defendable entrance, the island and the hill top fort. Slowly natural defences were reinforced by human activity, the wall and ditch of the Iron Age hill forts became increasingly castellated. Superstructures moved from wood to stone as the heavily armoured castle was evolved. The keep guarded its most vulnerable parts. The outer walls, moated and only pierced by the narrow tunnel of the main entrance itself, were guarded by portcullis, drawbridge, boiling oil and molten lead. Defences were reified, petrified in stone, boundary markers of a settled state, or centres of power in an intergroup struggle. The perinatal symbolism of the laager, immortalised in stone in the Voortreker Monument, provided a more mobile example.

There has been continuous technological evolution of the means of defence. Through stone axe, spear, arrow, to gunpowder, projectile, shells, bombs, rockets and the thermonuclear device. Places of safety have evolved from the cave to the

armoured bunker, as the means of attack have mobilised from ground and water to air and space. Today the boundaries of national safety can only be drawn symbolically at its borders. In reality the boundary is omnipresent, precipitating anxiety at all points of the system. The potential restimulation of perinatal impingement is constantly in place and the resources vested in sustaining its repression and mobilising the defences continue to escalate as the psychosis gathers momentum.

The powerful seduction of Star Wars lies precisely in the phantasy that it could provide a shield against perinatal restimulation at every point within national space. Popular images of the rainbow-coloured umbrella, arching across North America, offer a symbol of the impregnable distended womb of the great mother, affording protection to the foetal being within. Today the displaced symbols of perinatal defence also have to take into account the surgeon's wound, the ripping apart of the dome of heaven and the plunging hand violating inner space during increasingly common delivery by Caesarian section.

Idealisation and the Dehumanisation of the Out-Group

The boundary between the inside and the outside, us and them, is marked by the defence of idealisation or splitting. Insiders are the goodies, outsiders are the baddies. Repression, oppression and the means of social control are mobilised internally to deny and repress all possible irruption of the intolerable negativities into the inter-

nal space. Denied, displaced and projected, the idealised negative field is placed outside the group. Defences utilised intrapersonally and collusionally to repress the internal badness are mobilised at the boundary to defend the ingroup against its implosion from beyond.

Idealisation of the out-group also takes place in parallel but reversed process. If the saints are within, then Satan rules without. All good qualities are stripped from the character of the out-group. Only bad elements can be perceived; the good is denied and repressed. So the boundary is a false dichotomy between congruently defended elements of the human species, separating good and bad artificially to create a shadow of the self reflected in phantasies of the other.

As idealisation progresses so the out-group is effectively dehumanised, reduced to the nature of an object, a sub-human, even inanimate, part of the environment. It is a process which justifies retaliation, the holy war, genocide and the 'final solution'. Caught up in mirror forms of parallel psychosis the out-group perceives the in-group in a similar light and acts towards it in a way which justifies the in-group phantasies, so reifying in the present a displaced causal ground, a source of re-introjection, which justifies the insane phantasies of war. Under these conditions atrocities have no meaning. They are only condemned in retrospect once the group phantasies have decayed. Murder of the enemy is sanctioned as a good action, casualties in the out-group can be ignored. It is merely collateral damage. An example fresh in mind is the repeated political statement that 'there were very few casualties in the Gulf War'.

The Disturbance of Defence and the Irruption of Anxiety

Let us take as a starting point a defended system in a condition of stable equilibrium. The anxieties vested in the boundary of the common collusional foetal unconscious are effectively contained by the defences in place. Maintenance of the defences is sustained partly at the cost of an increasing level of sophistication in the armouring of the boundary, together with cyclic patterns of repetition ritual, whose task is the maintenance of the repression mechanisms. There is some reserve capacity in the defence effectiveness: small disturbances of the system may lead to short periods of irruption of psychotic anxiety, but these are quickly damped down again, the system modified slightly in an attempt to prevent such restimulation in the future. Society may feel a little more oppressive, a little more controlled, freedoms may be slightly eroded, but the costs are deemed worthwhile in order to purchase peace of mind and social stability. The perception of the system is that it is flexible and resourceful.

Even in a stable state, anxieties tend constantly to irrupt, requiring periodic ritual psychodrama for their discharge: ritualised combat, sporting events, consistent scapegoating, persecution of deviant sub-groups, conflict and competition in the political, economic and trading systems — all carry the perinatal psychodrama in a subdued displaced mode.

Over time, however, such a system may be exposed to a series of events or trends which may begin to push its defences towards their limits. Higher levels

of chronic anxiety are experienced, reflected in increasing use of anxiolytic procedures, drugs, alcohol, fundamentalist religion, with oscillating patterns of passivity and irrational outburst, indicating that the edge of a catastrophe surface has been approached. The system is reaching the limits of stability and may change state from sustained repression to sustained acting-out with only a comparatively minor further stimulus. In other words the system moves to a condition of unstable equilibrium.

Factors which may move it in this direction may be overcrowding, population explosion, inadequate resources, famine, natural catastrophe, flood, plague, drought, earthquake, or there may be political revolution fermented from within or aggression experienced from without.

Responses are varied. Initially there may be an attempt to reinforce the defences by rapid increase of armouring, by mobilising consensus around religious myths and rituals, by suppression of internal difference and an increase in the forces of law and order. If the stimulus is sustained, defence reinforcement can only bring a transient relief. Stimulation of psychotic anxiety continues and the system may move to a sustained pattern of regression, fight or flight. The position of regression is characterised by intense passivity, despair and acceptance of the lot of the victim, boundaries implode and internal structures are flooded with terror to the point at which the terror itself becomes unfeeling and numb, demonstrated in paralytic impotence and a resigned acceptance of fate.

At another level the response of flight may be mobilised. The geographical loca-

tion, political structures or other system dimensions may be deemed no longer tenable and a whole population may move out. There may be a massive conversion reaction by which the in-group joins the structure of the out-group, so effectively eliding the boundary and redrawing it around the enlarged grouping of the new system. The flight may take on physical proportions, as in a migration, moving away from a more powerful and warlike neighbour, to relocate where the resistance is lower than the power exercised by the mobile group, who are themselves perceived as a war-like aggressor invading space. Ripple migrations of this kind can be traced throughout history. If the migration is in flight from flood, drought, pestilence and famine, the population may move en masse to a more resourceful, secure environment. In which case there may again be a battle at the boundary between the indigenous and invading populations. While the means of waging war were comparatively low tech, such a migration would have an armoured front. Today the poor no longer wage war, power is always in the hands of the rich. In the contemporary world migrant hordes are treated more as refugees, passive victims of circumstances beyond their control, to be contained, repatriated, victimised, supported, abandoned, at the whim of the international community. The pressures of containment at group boundaries are now much more acute than in times past when the invading throng would have arrived as a warring band, invading and possessing as pressure built up in the homeland and resistance crumbled in the new.

After repression, regression and flight

comes the possibility of aggression. If all other avenues of containment for the psychotic terror and rage fail, the whole system moves to one of unstable equilibrium in which a further small disturbance may precipitate massive restimulation and acting out in collusion of rage and retaliation, quite out of proportion to the triggering event itself. Even at this stage there may be attempts at restabilising the defence system, displacing the conflict into some limited symbolic engagement, an appeal to overarching religious values that can bridge the boundaries between the sub-systems in conflict and reify the combined projection to the wider system boundary. There may be intense political instability and the scapegoating of political leadership, but at some point the system runs out of further options and the defence structure breaks down.

Feedback Signals and Crossed Perinatal Projection

It is as if pressure builds up in the system until the repressed perinatal material erupts into consciousness and floods it with emotion. The violent feelings are still divorced and separated from their ground in the precipitating trauma of birth. They are perceived as being generated by and justified by the stimulating trigger or 'enemy'. This is an example of transference on a massive scale. If the 'enemy' can avoid counter-transference then war can still be averted. An excellent example of this occurred at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis when Khrushchev communicated with Kennedy in the words, 'Why should we fight to the death like blind moles in a tunnel?' The symbol of peri-

natal struggle provided sufficient insight for both sides to withdraw, even though in the aftermath Kennedy was assassinated and Khrushchev lost his job. Each had in their own way aborted the confrontation to which the inter-locked group phantasies of the super-powers had been driving them.

If on the other hand the 'enemy' responds with counter-transference, the escalating feedback loop is activated and the system 'slides helplessly' into war. Images of strangulation, snakes and dragons emerge in cartoon form. Emotion flares around real or imagined reports of child abuse, rape and assault on pregnant women. The drum-beat of martial music simulates the rapid maternal heartbeat of perinatal struggle. Whatever the reality, myths are of encirclement by the enemy who is portrayed as a ruthless crazed sink of evil. The in-group, denying all possibilities of common shared humanity, sees itself only in the white light of innocence, the champion of the victim, with a just cause justifying the ultimate sacrifice. Only by the artificial mechanism of splitting and denial can such images be sustained. The processes are reversed as in a mirror across the conflicted boundary. Myths of Armageddon emerge, the titanic struggle between the forces of good and evil is represented in the battle, leadership aggregates a kind of cosmic duty and a belief that their cause, defined as 'the right', must eventually prevail. The conflict betokens the birth of a new world. This is the war to end all wars, the boundary across which the new civilisation will emerge. And so across history the heroic myths are acted out in psychodrama after psychodrama of repetitive psychosis.

Military Leadership and the Management of Information

Promotion in the armed services depends overtly upon technical competence, strategic intelligence and certain more or less defined qualities of 'leadership'. At an unconscious level military personnel are elevated to positions of high command, in so far as their internal defences and the intensity of paranoid schizoid behaviour, denial, projection, and perinatal imprinting are not only acute but also a very close match to the defences of the corporate collusion core of the perinatal unconscious. As a result, resistance to any insight into the psychodynamics of human conflict is mobilised with the greatest intensity by those in the highest positions of responsibility for sustaining the psychotic behaviour. Any insight into systemic behaviour would also and at the same time expose insight into their own personal psychodynamics, laying them wide open to the restimulation of intense pre- and perinatal imprinting, with its accompanying intolerable levels of emotional and physical stress. It is intolerable for a military leader to recognise that he is working out on the enemy as victim the displacement of his own internal victim.

The repressed memory of perinatal impingement is so devastating that even the horror of war is to be preferred to a recognition of the original ground of trauma, provided that the horrors of war are not brought home too close to the population as a whole. It is better if war is waged at a distance. Information is selectively communicated. Reality is the first casualty. Representative fighting forces are projected to the boundary, placed as far away

from centres of population as possible. Even then the means of destruction are themselves projected at a distance from the fighting forces. It is not so emotionally disturbing to watch the effects of a laser-guided bomb on a computer screen hitting a simulated target. For those lacerated in the destruction of explosion, reality is not quite so comfortable. Even with the mechanisms of denial, repression, displacement and distancing, the experience of war may, for some, be so violent and disturbing as to break through all their defences and allow them to be flooded with primal pain. The adult consciousness is reconnected to the extreme of perinatal imprinting. The person concerned is deemed to have broken down in battle shock and is in need of psychiatric care. Even here containment is the order of the day. The causality of the disturbance is still held in displacement within the experience of adult conflict, rarely grounded to its causal imprinting in perinatal struggle. Possibilities of integration are therefore blocked, and eventually some kind of containing defensive structure is re-erected and repressive control regained.

There is growing evidence that the prospect of nuclear war, with its long-term effect on the holding environment, may be seen by many as even more traumatic than birth. We may already be experiencing an emergent consensus that it is better to deconstruct the psychotic defences themselves, and face the ground of imprinting which gives rise to them in all its raw emotional intensity, rather than face the consequences of unrestrained acting out of the material in catastrophic psychodrama. There is no birth beyond the bomb.