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Odd bedfellows: psychotherapy, history and politics in Britain

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Psychotherapy and politics have not fitted naturally well together. But since Britain grooms its political elite by means of privileged abandonment in childhood, this dangerous liaison can no longer be avoided. The fall-out of sending young children away to be educated in hyper-masculine institutions can be catastrophic. 'When innocence has been deprived of its entitlement, it becomes a diabolical spirit', as psychoanalyst James S. Grotstein has put it. But the boarding habit is so *normalized* in Britain that we ignore how extraordinary it is to foreigners, how traumatic to children, how regressive for society. Normalization is a powerful and overlooked defence mechanism operating on a systemic rather than individual level. Limited by the myth of individualism, psychotherapy runs shy of the political, avoids generalizations, systemic perspectives, national characteristics. This affects how we see our clients, and the author argues that in a class-ridden society like Britain, such attitudes court irresponsibility.

Keywords: boarding; elite; unpeople; normalization; class; privileged abandonment; myth of individualism

The history of a habit

Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if I had stuck to working with the mid-life crises of meaning that psychosynthesis had prepared me for, or the elegant meta-interpretations of my family therapy training. Instead, I ended up specializing in gender – where you always end up treading on someone's hallowed post-modernist turf – in couple relationships, where the difficult road to intimacy challenges not only the clients, and in ex-boarders. The latter has proved the greatest challenge, not least personally: having invented the course I needed myself, my being the 'expert' on the subject has made my own ingrained ex-boarder habits even harder for my partner to live with.

I have spent 25 years studying how children in boarding school survive institutionalized life without parents, and pioneering psychotherapy with them as adults. I have had luck with media coverage, beginning with an article commissioned by *The Independent* in 1990 (Duffell, 1990). But even with two books on the subject I still meet a wall of resistance, and regularly have to reinvent the wheel each time I put the case. Why should this be, and why is the subject important?

Crucially, boarding is so *normalized* within Britain that we – like fish that don't notice the water they swim in – are unaware how extraordinary it appears to outsiders. Society institutionalizes it as the 'Independent System', favourably polarized with state provision. Blinded by terms like 'parental choice', what parent who had the

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money would not want 'the best' for their children? And the socialization process of these cherished hothouses for raising our elite to positions of leadership *does* work, providing the right accent and a good footing on the social ladder. The confidence that ex-boarders learn to project (and cover their internal immaturity) *is*, apparently, what most people want, as Scottish *Newsnight* reminded me last November, after we had surprisingly run away with an Edinburgh University debate about banning boarding for the under 16s (Boarding School Association, 2015).

There are frequent references to some of boarding's downsides in literature, but usually within a typically British 'only joking' style. Even powerful films like *Regeneration*, based on Pat Barker's books (e.g. Barker, 1992), fail to make serious links to the problem. The film depicts W.H. Rivers, the military psychiatrist, treating shell-shocked soldiers in Edinburgh in 1917, saying that mutism did not affect officers, but omits his reasoning. In her masterful study of madness, Elaine Showalter points out that: '… for the public-school boys, the university aesthetes and athletes, victory seemed assured to those who played the game' (Showalter, 1987, p. 169).

Showalter tells how Rivers – in the first psychological commentary on British educational elitism – noted that the officers, whose 'rate of war neurosis was four times higher … than among the men', expressed their sickness differently. With the 'benefit' of public school, trained to withhold their personal responses, officers had learned '… successfully to repress, not only the expression of fear, but also the emotion itself' (Rivers, 1922, p. 209).

Only the Brits and her ex-colonies favour the habit of sending young children away from home. In my book *The Making of Them*, which set out my clinical findings, I attempted to trace the genesis of this habit to what I called 'the British attitude to children' (Duffell, 2000). I knew how boarding had become the perfect way of raising administrators for the Empire, and I imagined that the loss of images of Madonna and Child in the Reformation had somehow hardened us to devalue parenting. But recently an academic wrote to me to tell me that a Venetian ambassador had noticed something odd in early sixteenth-century Britain:

> The want of affection in the English is strongly manifested towards their children; for after having kept them at home till they arrive at the age of seven or nine years at the utmost, they put them out, both males and females, to hard service in the houses of other people, binding them generally for another seven or nine years. (Anon, 1847, pp. 221–222)

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, boarding is reinvented as an industrial process, a hard expression of deliberate social engineering, as I explained in *Wounded Leaders* (Duffell, 2014). By 1914, the climax of the Age of Privilege, Britain ruled over 444,000,000 people worldwide (Follet, 2011). The public school ethos had become a micro-managed cult: a porridge of muscular Christianity, the classics, chivalry, *noblesse oblige*, *Boys Own* adventure stories, sentimental poetry and obsessional *esprit de corps* (that began with the boarding house and ended in Empire), flavoured with homo-eroticism, entitlement, misogyny and racism. Deluded into imagining war as a kind of rugby game or cricket match, where what counted was 'fighting the good fight' and 'playing the game', thousands of boys became instant officers, and, since their tailored uniforms singled them out from the squaddies, instant corpses. The memorials to the fallen at their schools are testimony to this fantasy in an archaic language that exalts their dying.[1]

In bed with politics

Even though the Empire is long gone, many of its values have translated into global predatory capitalism. We are still manufacturing the same kind of wounded leaders, trained very young to be duplicitous, strategic and mistrustful of women, compensating for their loss of attachments by an unconscious sense of entitlement. Socially, Britain is far behind her European neighbours having not yet achieved a social democracy; instead, a class-ridden *top-down* society colours everything here, and keeps us miles from any kind of progressive politics. Our parliament meets in an adversarially designed building, like a public school chapel, beset with bullying. No wonder women find it hard work there. It may well be that – even more than nationalism – getting shot of all this was the main motivation for the recent near breakout by the Scottish nation in the referendum on independence.

The anachronistic top-down nature of British society means that all strata are unwittingly obliged to imitate the behaviour of the elite. Its causal nucleus is the boarding system. If the psychological impact on our children of being sent away were not enough to wean us from our addiction, this political fact ought to be. But we remain blinded, and a huge financial lobby supports its continuation.

Back to normalization. Normalization is not just what happens, but, from a psychohistorical perspective, is a very powerful defence mechanism, operating on a systemic, and therefore social, rather than individual, level – although individuals do participate. Psychotherapy can get bogged down in the myth of individualism, running from the political to hide in the private, morbidly afraid of generalizations, systemic perspectives, national characteristics. Such attitudes affect how we see our clients and their issues, and in a class-ridden society like Britain are, I believe, irresponsible.

Not one single theory of child development – excepting the Spartans and the Jesuits – supports boarding. Evidence about its harm now includes several thousand unsolicited letters that I received over the last quarter of a century from members of the public who expressed relief that the taboo on speaking about the negative effects of boarding was lifting. Now, many practitioners want to find out about this little-known subject, and a growing number of senior clinicians and neuroscientists are taking it very seriously.

Previously, I tried hinting at some of the political implications of 'Boarding School Syndrome', a term coined by Professor Joy Schaverien, but I was wary of fully entering in. I knew what difficult bedfellows psychotherapy and politics are – for many reasons, including their values: the former favouring caution and privacy, the latter strategy and publicity, for example. The 2010 general election in Britain shocked me. Now I saw the majority of the new members of the cabinet displaying recognizable examples of what I call the 'Strategic Survival Personality Disorder'. Watching the news, I daily saw defensive boarding school survivor behaviours, self-invention, duplicity: Prime Minister David Cameron puffing himself up to *look* concerned, or letting his guard down and inappropriately bullying; Mayor of London Boris Johnson's buffoon act, that seemed to charm and fool the public; former government minister Andrew Mitchell's daughter saying 'I know Daddy is telling the truth' in the 'Plebgate' affair.

The pseudo-adult children running our leaders alarmed me: boarders have to develop very quickly; their self-reinvention can last a lifetime, unnoticeable to the creator. I noted how their inability to understand the vulnerable echoed the contempt

for vulnerability that boarding perforce requires. My work had shown me how the entitled attitude that sees the world made up of us and 'plebs' is a compensation for the loss of childhood, of all spontaneous emotion, except irritation. (Of course no one bothered to ask why Andrew Mitchell lost his temper in the first place.) Knowing that ex-boarders feel shy of belonging, because it is something that as children they never had enough of, I saw our media ignore the evidence that European politicians were not going to be bullied into the absurd notion that Britain should be 'leading' Europe when its government was profoundly ambiguous about joining.

I now found it difficult to hold my tongue, and began including some of these observations in my writing. In 2011 I was required to remove overt political references by the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, *Therapy Today* magazine and even the newsletter of Boarding Concern (www.boardingconcern.org.uk)! However, last year, the *Zeitgeist* seemed to be shifting: *Therapy Today* kindly invited me to write what I wanted about how boarding produces wounded leaders. Yet in the following edition, several letters to the editor from outraged readers were published, many objecting violently to the idea that boarding damages all children, missing that I said that all have to *survive* it. Every boarding child has to survive its privileged abandonment, has *no option* but to adapt itself to the new life away from home.

This must be accomplished very rapidly, in three fundamental ways: dissociating from feelings, beginning with the sadness of homesickness and the rage at abandonment; giving up on trusting others; constructing an external shell, resembling the self-reliant, confident homogeneously well-spoken product, advertised by the schools in their glossy brochures to their customers, the parents. When journalists tell me they wish to visit a boarding school, I reply that they may be wasting their time, because the children there will already have their 'happy masks' on. It may take 20 or 30 years until the ex-boarder's behaviour in family life starts to raise questions. By adulthood, shame prevents admitting the difficulties, false confidence masks them, and fear of no longer being able to survive prevents recognition of the syndrome. The lost habit of talking about feelings completes the silence – as Schaverien explains, the boarding school child learns not to complain (Schaverien, 2004, p. 685), becomes 'lost for words' (Schaverien, 2011, p. 18).

Perhaps the ex-boarder writers of those *Therapy Today* letters were constrained by the shame at their privilege, the fear of seeming damaged goods. But what astonished me was the vehemence of their attack – not just disagreement or an alternative viewpoint, but outright rubbishing – and the fact that the magazine had printed them. Never mind that you know if is defensive, it hurts – and this is intended. It is how David Cameron hones his skills on Labour leader Ed Miliband, for example, as *The Guardian*'s John Crace recently recounted:

> He wanted more than just to get the better of the Labour leader in their exchanges. He wanted to grind him into the dust, and before long he had his chance. With his own backbenchers braying at the scent of the kill, Cameron delivered his coup de grace, which was to repeat a story that had appeared in the *Mail on Sunday*: 'We learned at the weekend what he can achieve in one week in Doncaster', he said. 'Where he could not open the door, he was bullied by small children, and he set the carpet on fire'. (Crace, 2015)

Importantly, it is sobering, too, because it lets you know that you have now properly entered the world of politics. Rubbishing those who spot that the emperor is naked is a

familiar reception for radical internationalists when they propose that our perception of the geopolitical scene is utterly slanted by Western media bias. For example, Andre Vltchek suggests that this unchallenged bias completely conceals China's remarkable social progressivism, because we prefer to have them as figures of fear; it hides India's appalling feudalism, because we prefer to hail the world's largest democracy, ignoring their right-wing parties' vote-buying monopoly (Chomsky & Vltchek, 2013).[2]

The most potent technique we use in the British media is *balance*, and probably many readers value it, too. But on closer examination, when you assemble Mr or Mrs X who thinks this, and Mr Y or Mrs Y who thinks that, you don't have a *balanced* discussion, you have a *shallow* one. And when Mr Y actually represents huge vested interests, such as the boarding school lobby, and Mr X presents 25 years of findings that society might find rather shocking, you don't just get a shallow discussion, you get a *slanted* one. And then a voice of change becomes marginalized, if not strangled.

Nor is the resistance within the therapy profession so surprising when we look more deeply. Therapy is mostly a middle-class profession, for those both delivering and consuming these services. Private education and boarding is today commonplace in these social classes, as it was a century ago. Much of the early psychoanalytical and attachment theorizing will have been done on ex-boarder patients, never identified, and in whom poor attachments and split-off emotions were taken as read. Even today, some in the profession prefer a safe, non-political stance, proposing that not *all* children are damaged by boarding. Unfortunately this both ignores the survival imperative and comes perilously close to the Boarding School Association's defensive claim that *not all* children are cut out for boarding, implying that those who feel they suffered there were over-sensitive weaklings – definitely not officer material.

The war on the indigenous

Actually, by the time I began to write *Wounded Leaders* I had had enough of the subject. What I now wanted to show was how societies that lack empathy, feeling, appreciation of the body, of vulnerability, veneration of the feminine, and deep spirit – all things that Humanistic Psychology stands for – had a consistent, traceable psychohistory. I saw that, through British imperialism, our elite led the world in engineering such a mind-set. It seemed to me a crime against nature, against Sacred Law, brought about through the sacrifice of their own children and the rank objectification of those who were seen as 'other'. George Orwell had a term for the latter: 'unpeople'. Noam Chomsky explains how we still live in the shadow of such a legacy:

> The world is divided into people like us, and 'unpeople' – everyone else who does not matter. Orwell was talking about a future totalitarian society, but it applies quite well to us. We are not concerned with what happens to them. (Chomsky & Vltcheck, 2013, p. 4)

A brief reading of Orwell's memoir of his prep school, however, *Such, Such Were the Joys*, which had to be first published in the USA, reveals him well prepped for 'Doublespeak' and total institutions before the age of 12 (Orwell, 1953).[3] From the later Penguin edition's back cover: 'I think the characteristic faults of the English upper and middle classes may be partly due to the practice, general until recently, of sending children away from home as young as nine, eight or even seven'.

In Britain the 'unpeople' extended to those disowned parts of the elites' interiority – vulnerability, childishness, femininity – as well to their own working classes and the whole of the 'savage' non-European world. Mark Curtis, former Research Fellow at Chatham House, uses the term in his study of British post-World War II colonial exit strategies (Curtis, 2004). Chomsky underlines our specific historical consistency:

> There are parallels with the treatment of indigenous populations of the so-called Anglosphere, the offshoots of England: the United States, Canada. Australia. These are unusual imperial societies in that they didn't just rule the natives, they eliminated them. We don't think about them. We don't ask what happened to them in the past. (Chomsky & Vltchek, 2013, p. 4)

This is most noticeable in the USA, where there is hardly any trace of First Americans – a visit to reservations in the South West is utterly shocking. But importantly, the British were also masters of 'unpeopling' the natives through psychological superiority, learned at public school, as they did in India and Africa. A handful of men ruled over vast continents of 'plebs', just as at home. Where it didn't work, where the indigenous refused to buy into the myth, in America and Tasmania for example, they were exterminated.

In retrospect, we British can hardly think about our own unpeople with much sympathy. In all the extraordinary programmes about the Great War shown over the centenary, I saw none that acknowledged how the rise of international socialism was dispersed by the bogus inter-national conflict, and only one that mentioned workers' action while the nation was at war.[4] Still today, foreign journalists are astounded at the lack of support shown in our media for any workers' strike action (Albert, 2012).

A war against the indigenous is ongoing: in our geopolitics, at home; our elite learn it in their minds when they are young boarders. Can things change? The opening out of politics in Scotland is one hopeful sign. Inspired by our debate, Vicky Allan, writing as a wife and mother, put the case better than I ever could in a *Sunday Herald* article, 'The Board Generation':

> Some may wonder why we should bother about a tiny fraction of the population to whom privilege bequeathed boarding school syndrome. When about 16,000 Scottish children are in residential care, why trouble over the trauma of a few posh kids?
>
> One good reason is that these are the people who rule and influence; who shape our culture, politics and economics. For me, there is another reason: the desire to understand my other half. I look at what, at eight years old, he was gifted as privilege. I see my own sons coming up to the same age and I am glad they, and I, will never have to experience that. (Allan, 2014)

Notes

1. If you have the stomach for it, no better exegesis of this ethos exists than Parker (1987).
2. Thanks to Helena Løvendal-Duffell for pointing me to this work.
3. Thanks to Simon Partridge for pointing out this quotation.
4. *World War One at Home: Whose Side Are You On*, broadcast on BBC4, Monday 19 January 2015. Programme notes: 'Historian Jean Seaton reveals that while the soldiers were away fighting on the battlefields, there was a conflict of a different kind going on in Devon during the First World War'.

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Nick Duffell is the author of *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System; Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion – A Psychohistory*; and *Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege: A Guide to Therapeutic Work with Boarding School Survivors*, with Thurstine Bassett (forthcoming). The co-author of *Sex, Love and the Danger of Intimacy*, he pioneered therapy with ex-boarders in 1990, and co-founded the Centre for Gender Psychology in 1996.

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