

RETRO-ARTICLE

Psycho-Environmentalism: A Psychodynamic Paradigm for Environmentalism¹

By Richard House

Introductory note: This article has been reproduced virtually word-for-word from its original 1996 version, save for the footnoting system being largely updated to the in-house style of this magazine. While I stand by the broad thrust of the argument some 24 years on, I would likely have written it differently today – for example, from a Critical Psychology viewpoint, I would eschew the discourse of ‘psychopathology’ today. So I invite the reader to read it in part as a historical document. The article was originally written as a research proposal, and its somewhat over-formal style reflects this. And I think it shows how psychodynamic thinking can work together with a humanistic and transpersonal perspective to generate a rich approach which neither on their own can achieve.

The article has recently been drawn upon to write a contribution to a forthcoming book on climate emergency to be co-edited with Drs Alison Green and Rupert Read, the new piece provisionally titled ‘Psychological and psychodynamic insights into human planetary abuse: contexts and insights for deepening climate-emergency praxis’. This new chapter will in particular showcase the work on climate change by psycho-social and climate systems analyst David Wasdell, Director of the Apollo-Gaia Project (whose work features prominently elsewhere in this issue of the magazine).

It is not possible for persons to get further in society building than they can get with their own personal development.

D.W. Winnicott²

A consideration of the environmental crisis from the standpoint of psychodynamic theory strongly suggests that unless we individually and collectively address the psychological rootedness of environmental abuse in our unintegrated and unconscious psychopathology, then there is very little hope of our achieving a sustainable environmental future. A new paradigm of ‘psycho-environmentalism’ is proposed, of which the central theme is a commitment to an *experiential* engagement with

our deepest psychic pain and deprivation – the healing of which will lead to a dramatic reduction in narcissistic dysfunctional human behaviour, of which environmental abuse is but one, albeit crucial, aspect.

I believe that never has the need for a meta-view of the nature and the evolution of human consciousness been so urgent.^{3,4} The rest of this article will attempt to justify my argument for a new ‘psycho-environmental ideology’ based in holistic thinking and the principles of psychodynamic and Humanistic Psychology.

The Personal and the Political

I have reached a point in my own personal development where I see the creative integration of the ‘personal’ and the ‘social/political’, the micro and the macro, as the most urgent task facing our species. From my early thirties onwards I have become increasingly disillusioned with the possibility of human advance towards ‘the good society’ through political structures and macro-level change; and as a consequence I have for a decade been deeply concerned with my own therapeutic journey and personal development in group and individual contexts, exploring my own psychic history for the roots of my own neuroses. In the process I have trained as a counsellor and a psychotherapist and have been working professionally with individuals and groups for the last six years.

I have become increasingly concerned with the way in which individual-level (mainly unconscious) psychic processes manifest themselves at a macro level (whether it be family, group, community, region, nation or internationally). And it is as I have entered into this new phase that I’ve begun to realise how urgent is the task of articulating the links between the individual and societal levels [‘self’ and ‘society’], as I see the crises we are experiencing as being driven by and rooted in processes operating at the level of the individual human psyche, and as therefore being insoluble at the macro level (although that is predominantly the level at which we are quite inappropriately attempting to solve them).

I believe that there is an urgent need for *experientially* based research on the psychodynamics of environmental destruction, as a contribution to a desperately needed evolutionary shift in human consciousness, which I see in turn as a necessary precondition of our continued survival as a species.

The Development of Psycho-Environmental Awareness and Research

Being cross-disciplinary in nature in what is perhaps most accurately termed ‘applied

psychodynamic and psychosocial studies’, such research would aim to lay bare and fully articulate the deep, normally unconscious psychological processes whose understanding is, I maintain, an indispensable prerequisite of our successfully addressing the pressing issue of environmental destruction. The existing literature in the fields of environmental psychology, environmental policy and environmentalism in general almost completely ignores (with the exception of certain strands of analytical and transpersonal psychology)⁵ what I suspect to be the most crucial factor underlying our despoliation of the environment – namely, unconscious psychopathology, leading in turn to unconscious ‘acting out’ of unresolved psychic material in our normal everyday lives, both individually and collectively (cf. Wasdell’s concept of ‘the pathology of the norm’).⁶

The latter view is in stark contrast to the conventional wisdom, expressed, for example, by Dickens,⁷ who writes that ‘There can be little doubt that the causes of contemporary ecological and environmental problems are largely associated with social relations, social pressures and political institutions’. Similarly, Warwick Fox’s book, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*,⁸ has been widely praised for its comprehensive grasp of the fundamental role played by human psychology in our ecological situation. Yet nowhere in his book does Fox pay any attention to either pre and perinatal psychology or to psychoanalytic object relations theory, there being just a couple of fleeting references to psychoanalytic theory; and there is only a very cursory and overly simplistic discussion of the psychic roots of human attitudes towards the environment in terms of the Adult/Parent/Child typology of transactional analysis.⁹ The only authors who, to my knowledge, have even begun to touch on the issues I will be considering are Stan Grof [note 3], Guy Claxton,¹⁰ David Wasdell [note 4], John Barkham¹¹ and Andrew Samuels [note 5].

My contention, then, is that a necessary condition for a sustainable environmental future will involve the often painful and challenging task of our each facing up to how we are psychically implicated in the process of environmental destruction. Thus, all the policy prescriptions and exhortations

imaginable will not bring about a sustainable future for our species unless, both individually and collectively, we become fully aware of, take full responsibility for, and integrate within our psyches the deep psychopathology which lies at the root of environmental despoliation.

Psycho-environmentalism is both theoretical and experiential in nature, with each informing the other in dialectical fashion, for both are a necessary prerequisite for grappling with material against which we are so deeply and determinedly defended. Thus, as Ludwig Janus has written: ‘research in the psycho-social field always entails the involvement of the researcher himself and is a process of consciousness transformation. The actual research process changes the researcher *and is thus also limited by his personal resistance*’ (my emphasis).¹²

Theoretically, the following fields (listed chronologically in terms of accretion within the psyche) hold within them important clues as to the roots of our environmentally abusive behaviour:

1. Pre and Peri-natal Psychology
2. Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory, and notions of psychic defendedness and perceptual splitting.
3. Developmental Psychopathology, and notions of the ‘wounded child’.
4. Group Dynamics and the Psychodynamics of Societal/Social Processes.

The aim of psycho-environmental awareness and research is to demonstrate, through psychosocial analysis,¹³ how our environmental behaviour is unconsciously driven and informed by unconscious psychodynamic processes laid down early in our lives, both pre- and post-birth.

Experiential information also constitutes a key input to psycho-environmental awareness – both from one’s personal psychotherapeutic experience (including primal integration work), and from reported clinical case material from clients in individual and group psychotherapeutic settings.

The nature of the so-called ‘culture of narcissism’ is also highly relevant^{14, 15} along with

psychodynamic critiques of capitalism,^{16, 17} for as the psychotherapist Lowen¹⁸ writes, ‘there is something crazy about a culture that pollutes the air, the waters, and the earth in the name of a “higher” standard of living’ (my emphasis).

It is also important to locate psycho-environmentalist thinking within the evolution and history of human consciousness, and notions of ‘the self’ in order to gain a contextual and reflexive meta-view of our current evolutionary predicament. This involves a detailed consideration of philosophies of mind and theories of what, precisely, psychotherapeutic change actually consists in. In the process, such an approach goes beyond existing conceptions of human consciousness in the ecological, eco-philosophical and ‘New Age’ literature¹⁹ – which, from a psychodynamic perspective, are based on very naïve and unrealistic assumptions about how an evolutionary shift in human consciousness towards a more sustainable future might actually come about. It will also be highly relevant to incorporate current thinking within the nascent academic field of evolutionary psychiatry and psychology.²⁰

Finally, what might be expected to emerge from a (research) agenda such as this? First and foremost, it would have enormous implications for our collective environmental future. Specifically, it would yield important pointers to the kinds of shifts in human consciousness which are a necessary condition for a sustainable ecological future, in order that we might arrest our current headlong rush towards the destruction of the environment on which we depend for our continued existence.

Implications for Practice

...there can easily be the smell of grandiosity about the idea of a [cultural critic].... It is not on the whole favourable to making an effective intervention in debates in the public sphere to have as a major premise that, to put it crudely, we are living in a madhouse. Barry Richards²¹

I am all too aware that what I have written here opens me to the charge of ‘grandiosity’; and that from the standpoint of the politician, it might well

be very difficult to make any connection in their conscious experience between the radical psycho-social ideas expressed in this article, and their day-to-day practices in the world of *Realpolitik*. My response to this concern may not appear very satisfactory: for I believe there to be no straightforward, *formulaic* answers that will satisfy those looking for such neat solutions to the issues I am highlighting.

The epigraph from the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott at the beginning of this article sums up very succinctly my position – that is, that it is only through facing up to the difficult and personally deeply challenging process of addressing their own personal development and integration that ‘society-builders’ (as Winnicott calls them) can even begin to build a healthy and functional society. For in terms of psychoanalytic object relations theory, *what human beings create in their outer worlds and environments inevitably mirrors and parallels the degree of integration in their inner mental worlds*; and it follows logically from this that the limiting factor on healthy society-building, and on healthy human relating more generally, is set by the limitations and pathologies of our own inner psychologies, which are in turn deeply affected by our respective developmental histories.

The ideologies and belief systems to which we subscribe play a central role in the outer worlds that we create²² (including, crucially, our human impact on the environment). And our ideologies and belief systems will tend to be dysfunctional and unhealthy to the extent that they are emotionally and unconsciously rooted in our damaged inner psychological worlds. Yet because so much of our ‘inner-world damage’ has been repressed and denied (usually always for very good and understandable ‘survival’ reasons in early childhood), we are all enormously resistant to facing up to our deepest and earliest pain and betrayals. And it follows from this that only through embarking on the courageous journey of reclaiming our early histories, and revisiting our earliest damages, can we hope to restore our inner worlds to a state of good-enough health that will quite naturally lead to more functional and healthy ideologies and society-building. For I believe that it is *only when we have been able fully to experience on a personal level the ways in which*

our dysfunctional belief systems are constitutionally rooted in, and fed by, the early damage of our denied emotional life, that we will quite naturally discover the capacity to choose different, more healthy beliefs and ideologies whose seed-bed is personal integration and wholeness.

There are various ways in which we can all embark on this difficult and most challenging of journeys. The most obvious is that of our own personal therapeutic experience with a competent practitioner. But there is also a growing number of group-work situations where these kinds of questions are being addressed. To mention just two: first, there is David Wasdell’s ‘Meridian Matrix’, a form of group experience which aims to bridge the gap between group relations training and personal development, and which combines ‘opportunities for personal growth, primal integration and human potential development with the best practice of group relations training’.²³ In this psychodynamic approach, defensive dynamics are explored not simply as data about group behaviour, but also as pointers to those areas in the individual unconscious which still require resolution and integration.

Secondly, the recently formed Norfolk Institute of Relational Studies, founded in 1994 in Norwich by Lindsay Cooke and Jill Hall,²⁴ is striving to develop new ways of knowing, understanding and relating which transcend existing mechanistic and linear ways of thinking, and which recognize that there is an urgent need for a leap in the evolution of human consciousness if the healthy future development of our species is to be enabled.

The Meridian Matrix and the Norfolk Institute are at the leading edge of consciousness transformation in a world that is in desperate need for such an ‘evolutionary leap’ – not just for environmental reasons, but more generally to address the malaise that afflicts our species from the level of the individual psyche right up to the level of international relationships between nations.

In Conclusion

...it [is] the most private, personal, and apparently least social aspects of individual psychology that [are] actually the most important in explaining both individual and group life.

C.F. Alford²⁵

A cross-disciplinary, theoretically and experientially informed agenda such as that proposed here will require both academic excellence and a profound and ongoing personal commitment to working with the deepest levels of repressed psychic pain. This is an extremely rare combination of capacities, as the splitting of ‘head’ from ‘heart’ is perhaps the central leitmotiv of the modernist, technological ‘self’.²⁶ But what a full and productive engagement with psycho-environmentalism requires is *the indissoluble unity and holistic integration of head and heart*, of the intellect and the emotions – a truly humanistic perspective which develops the powers of rationality to the full in an embodied way which explicitly recognises *the crucial role that the emotional and the body play in our full human beingness*.^{27,28}

With great insight Scott Peck²⁹ has written that ‘much disease is the result of the attempt to avoid the necessary pain of living’; and Felicity de Zulueta³⁰ has shown how deep psychic pain leads to violent behaviour. Similarly, I believe that our *diseased* treatment of and *violating* behaviour towards our environment is rooted in the repression of our own psychic pain of living.³¹ And until we take steps both individually (through our own personal development and integration) and collectively (through a root-and-branch restructuring of our social and political institutions in accordance with the experientially based holistic values and moral imperatives of psycho-environmental thinking), we will continue to behave as ‘reluctant adults’,³² unconsciously acting out in a destructive way from our repressed, split-off and unintegrated psychopathology, and destroying the very environment on which we depend for our continued survival.

As a final note, I do not underestimate the resistance that is likely to these ideas from environmentalists with little or no direct experience of their own personal development – which is, of course, precisely the problem that I have been

addressing in this article (compare Wasdell’s insightful discussion of the defensive responses he has encountered to his work as a psycho-social analyst and commentator) [note 13]. I can only urge those who read it to tune in as openly and non-defensively as possible to their *emotional* as well as to their intellectual response to the ideas of psycho-environmentalism articulated in this article.

Notes and References

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- 24 [As written in 1995]...The Norfolk Institute can be contacted at 20 Unthank Road, Norwich NR2 2RA, England; Jill Hall's important book is cited in note 32, below.
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About the contributor [as written in 1995/6]

Richard House is a professional counsellor and psychotherapist in general, medical and private practice in Norwich (UK), a supervisor, a course tutor in counselling (University of East Anglia) and a group facilitator and trainer (Westminster Pastoral Foundation). He has recently completed a further diploma training in psychotherapy (Midsummer Training, Cambridge, 1991–5). His approach is humanistic and integrative with special interests in the philosophical understanding of psychotherapeutic change, pre and perinatal psychology and primal integration, group and organisational dynamics and Evolutionary Psychiatry and the psychodynamics of social systems. An Oxford graduate in Geography, he has a Ph.D. in Environmental Sciences from the University of East Anglia (1984). He has written and had published papers/book chapters on a diverse range of themes in the field of counselling and psychotherapy.