

PC 699 Special Topics: Psychoanalytic Interpretation of War

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COURSE OUTLINE

Class 1: Culture and Unconscious Fantasy

Class 2: The Symbolic Meaning of the Enemy

Class 3: What are “Nations,” and why are we so attached to them?

Class 4: Fanatic Belief

Class 5: Warfare and Self-destruction

Class 6: Societal Violence as Collective Psychopathology

Class 1: Culture and Unconscious Fantasy

Psychoanalysis extends its scope and impact by using its concepts to interrogate—not only the internal world—but the external world. This course presents methods and theories for studying the interaction between psychological motives and culture forms. We will study how unconscious fantasies—projected into social reality—shape and give meaning to ideologies and institutions.

We will present a method for uncovering unconscious fantasies contained within ideologies. One may view political rhetoric as manifest content. By identifying recurring images and metaphors, it is possible to decipher the latent meaning of political texts. Ideologies generate historical action, allowing shared unconscious fantasies to become articulated in social reality and acted out.

Ideologies are cognitive structures or templates for action. However, why do people embrace ideologies? How are we to account for their power and persistence? I suggest that ideologies constitute *modus operandi* for expression and acting out shared fantasies. Ideologies are manifest content containing a latent meaning, allowing fantasies to be externalized and activated in the world.

War is thought of an activity or form of behavior. Perhaps it is more productive to view warfare as an idea or social construction. Upon what psychological roots is the idea of war constructed? This course will identify and interrogate the desires, fantasies and anxieties that are bound to the ideology of warfare.

Class 2: The Symbolic Meaning of the Enemy

To comprehend the sources of collective forms of violence--manifest as war, genocide and terrorism—we will focus upon the psychological meaning of “the enemy.” Warfare is generated based on the assumption that another group or class of people constitutes a mortal threat to one’s own nation, God or ideology. Why do enemies evoke profound anxiety and rage?

Nazism represents an excellent case-study of the psychology of enemy-creation. Since Jews did not constitute an actual threat to Germany or the German people, this case allows us to examine how enemies are constructed based on the projection of symbolic or unconscious meaning. Hitler was attempting to eliminate an idea that was projectively

identified with the Jew. By seeking to destroy Jews, what was Hitler seeking to destroy? We shall articulate the “logic of the Holocaust:” the mental processes that generated hatred of the Jews and belief that it was necessary to exterminate them.

The national group coalesces through identification of an enemy that needs to be destroyed. The reality of one’s nation is established by doing battle against another nation or ideology. The existence of an enemy gives men the opportunity to prove their masculinity—by their willingness to die and kill in the name of defending their nation.

Class 3: What are “Nations” and why are we so attached to them?

Human beings in the contemporary world live within nations as if fish within an ocean. Because we are so deeply identified within our own countries, the idea of “the nation” rarely is interrogated. What is the nature and meaning of peoples’ attachment to nations? Why do people bind their identities in such a radical way with the idea of their own nation? In the name of protecting, preserving and rescuing one’s nation, violence is conceived as good and just.

Nations symbolize a gigantic geographic space or body politic with which the individual identifies his own ego. Most of us exist in a symbiotic tie to our nation and its national life. We “love” or “hate” our nation, and readily valorize or condemn it. To provide a degree of psychic distance from national and political ideologies—allowing us to analyze them—this course will develop a posture of analytic neutrality.

The idea of the enemy is inseparable from the idea of one’s nation. Enemies provide citizens of a nation with a “rallying cry” that allows people to unite or coalesce or come together. Conceived as groups or classes of people that threaten to destroy one’s national ideals, enemies generate the desire and effort to “rescue” one’s nation and its ideals. Violence is considered moral because it is undertaken to preserve a good object—threatened by an evil or destructive object.

Class 4: Fanatic Belief

Collective forms of violence seek to assert the power of one’s own belief-system in the face of competing belief-systems. Fanatic believers profoundly identify themselves with an omnipotent object; equate their sense of being with this object; and become infuriated when they realize that others do not worship the object that they worship.

Just as Hitler expected everyone to love and worship Germany, so did Osama bin Laden expect everyone to love and worship Allah. Fanatic belief requires absolute faith. Those who do not worship the object that one worships oneself are conceived as ‘infidels’. Collective forms of violence articulate the idea: ‘Death to the non-believers’.

Rage is directed toward those who do not worship the object to which the believer has devoted his life. The believer wishes to *punish* those who do not bow down to his nation or God. Collective forms of violence such as terrorism and war seek to demonstrate the power of the omnipotent object with which the believer has become identified; to compel others to submit to this object.

Class 5: Warfare and Self-destruction

Class 6: Societal Violence as Collective Psychopathology

Two-hundred million people died in the last two-hundred years as a result of violent actions initiated by nation-states. Psychiatry claims that individuals are disordered. Yet warfare and other forms of collective violence are conceived as normal dimensions of the historical process. The DSM-V (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) lists nearly nine-hundred distinct forms of psychopathology, yet nowhere a “war disorder,” or “genocidal disorder.” This course explores the concept of collective psychopathology: disorders that may be inherent within the structures of society or civilization.

Daniel Goldhagen’s study of the Holocaust concludes that the Nazis were in the grip of a “hallucinatory ideology.” Their anti-Semitic writings, he says, resembled the “collective scribes of an insane asylum.” In the midst watching a film depicting battle, people often reflect, “War is insane.” Yet we do not think of collective forms of behavior—however bizarre or destructive—from the standpoint of psychopathology.

It’s not a question of Hitler’s or Stalin’s disorder, or the disorder of any leader. Psychopathology is contained within the structure of civilizational ideologies. We don’t experience these ideologies as crazy or insane because we live within the midst of them. The objective of this course is to develop a psychic space *separate* from those shared fantasies that define society. In order to “awaken from the nightmare of history,” one first must realize one is living within a dream.