Commentary

Killing and dying for the sacred object: Commentary on R.D. Hinshelwood, 'Ideology and Identity: A Psychoanalytic Investigation of a Social Phenomenon'

Richard Koenigsberg

Library of Social Science, 92-30 56th Avenue, Suite 3E, Elmhurst, New York 11373, USA.
E-mail: rakoenigsberg@earthlink.net

Q2

Abstract   The primary task of an ideology, Hinshelwood says, is to promote 'devotion to, and survival of, ideas held by the group'. How does it happen, then, that an idea can become such a powerful dimension of the psyche that people are willing to kill and die for it? In this paper I examine how people attach to 'sacred objects' that are conceived as more significant than the self. Collective forms of violence are generated on the basis of a perception of 'enemies' that are imagined to be acting to destroy a sacred object that constitutes the foundation for one's society. Enemies represent that which is separate from the self – and they challenge the group's fantasy of omnipotence. People kill and die in the name of defending their fantasy of omnipotence. The psychoanalysis of culture and society seeks to interrogate ideas and ideals that generate collective forms of violence. We become capable of doing so at the moment we begin to abandon our own identification with ideologies conceived as omnipotent.
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Killing and Dying for the Sacred Object: Response to Hinshelwood

In 'Ideology and Identity: A Psychoanalytic Investigation of a Social Phenomenon', Hinshelwood observes that in ideological groups, when there is an equation of the self with the idea, the idea becomes an end in itself. As so much hangs on the idea for each individual – in terms of personal identity and worth – individuals and group alike pursue the idea or ideal for its own sake. The primary task of an ideology, Hinshelwood says, is to promote

'devotion to, and the survival of, ideas held by the group'. Why would an idea become an 'end' in itself? Why have certain ideas and ideologies attained such extraordinary significance and power that people are willing to kill and die for them? Why do some people so deeply identify their sense of being with an idea?

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When Rudolf Hess introduced Hitler at mass rallies, he asserted, 'Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler' (cited in Koenigsberg, 1996, p. 14). In Nazi ideology, Hitler was equated with the group ideal, Germany. But what exactly was the meaning of this ideal, 'Germany'? One may pose the question more broadly: 'What are countries and why do people get so excited about them?' Scholars deconstruct many things, but nations remain icons. Indeed, people seldom think of nations as ideas. We exist within nations like fish in an ocean, barely conscious of this 'environmental mother' that contains and surrounds us.

A leader, Hinshelwood says, has a 'particular relation with the idea'. By virtue of the leader's own identification with the idea, he enables group members to 'identify with the ideal through him'. Hitler, for example, profoundly identified himself with Germany and presented himself as a role model, seeking to persuade others to devote and bind themselves to the idea or ideal to which he had devoted and bound himself.

Hitler implored the German people to 'take a vow this evening, at every hour, in each day, to think of Germany, of the nation, of our German people' (cited in Koenigsberg, 2009, p. 5). He claimed that individuals could not exist in a condition of separation from their nation. 'Your life', Hitler explained, is bound up with the 'life of your whole people' (cited in Koenigsberg, 1996, p. 14). The relationship that people have with their own country is an example of what Hinshelwood calls the 'equation of the self with an idea'. So close is the identification of oneself with one's nation and national experience that most people barely think of their own nation as an 'idea'.

The Body Politic as a Prosthesis

Professor Hinshelwood discusses Freud's idea of how a particular aspect of someone's mind can be removed, 'amputated as it were' and replaced by something else. This something else can be another person, for example, a hypnotist who can effectively replace certain psychic functions of the subject who is in a trance. Such an amputation with a substitute psychic prosthesis, Hinshelwood says, can occur in groups as well. A political leader can function as a prosthesis, but so can an idea. *An ideology can replace certain psychic functions.*

The word prosthesis is defined as an 'artificial substitute or replacement for a part of the body' or as an artificial device used to replace a missing body part,

such as a limb, a tooth, an eye or a heart valve. When he speaks of a 'psychic prosthesis', Hinshelwood is suggesting that an idea can become a substitute for a dimension of the psyche. Hitler instructed his people, 'You are nothing, your nation is everything' (cited in Koenigsberg, 2009, p. 8). What Hitler effectively was asking each German to do was to abandon the idea of a personal self and to replace it with the idea of Germany. One's nation would become like a prosthesis, a substitute for the self. How can an idea or ideology become an element of psychic structure? What might motivate someone to amputate a part of his or her mind and replace it with 'something else'?

The term body politic has been used throughout Western history as a metaphor for nation or country. To the extent that individuals identify with their nation, they are equating their own bodies with the body politic. When Hitler said, 'You are nothing, your nation is everything', he was asking individuals, in effect, to abandon their own bodies and replace them with the German body politic. One's nation under these circumstances becomes like a prosthesis: a substitute or replacement for one's own body.

Nazi ideology revolved around the fantasy that one can cast off one's own body and replace it with another body, a gigantic body: the German nation or body politic. Each German would become like a cell of this enormous body. Hitler insisted that to create the omnipotent body that he dreamt about, every German be thrown into the 'great melting pot, the nation', in order that people be 'purified and welded one to another' (cited in Koenigsberg, 1996, pp. 7–8).

Rescuing the Sacred Object

In the twentieth century, Hinshelwood observes, ideology played a fundamental role in 'channelling the destructive power of mankind'. Then, and even now, millions upon millions of lives have been sacrificed for belief in an idea, whether the idea is Christian, Muslim, socialist or fascist. For some people, certain ideas come to possess enormous psychic weight are considered more significant than the self. People are willing to kill and die in the name of ideas or entities given names like 'Allah' or 'America' or 'Japan' or 'the people'.

At the core of each society lies a 'sacred object' that constitutes the foundation of the society. For people within the society, the sacred object represents a non-negotiable reality or truth. This object cannot be abandoned and rather must be defended at all costs. Political violence occurs when the sacred object is imagined to be under attack. The enemy or infidel symbolizes another societal group that is imagined to be working to destroy the ideal of the societal group with which one identifies.

People often view leaders as the source or cause of political violence. As Hinshelwood notes, according to Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, however, there is 'no absolute leader without an ideology'. The leader is an intermediary who

negotiates between 'the people and the ideological illusion'. A political leader represents his society and acts in the name of its sacred ideal. Hitler achieved power and could initiate acts of violence only because he represented 'Germany'.

Because political violence is undertaken in the name of a sacred object, societal violence is therefore performed in a spirit of self-righteousness. Hitler declared, 'We may be inhumane, but if we rescue Germany, we have performed the greatest deed in the world' (cited in Koenigsberg, 2009, p. 2). This statement may be viewed as a template for most forms of political violence. 'We may be inhumane, but if we rescue … we have performed the greatest deed in the world'. I theorize this structure of thought as the source of most forms of violence undertaken in the name of societal groups, regardless of the specific idea or ideal. The structure of thought that generates collective forms of violence has the form of a binary. On the one side, we have a sacred object that constitutes the foundational ideal on which a society has been built. On the other, there is another group or class of people – enemies or infidels – imagined to be acting to destroy the ideal. Political violence occurs at the moment when the sacred object is believed to be under attack. The enemy or infidel must be eliminated if the good object is to be sustained. Political violence articulates a rescue fantasy.

Truth

The idea that defines a group, Hinshelwood says, leads to a particular emotional attitude towards another group, namely, scepticism. In the destructive group, individuals validate the beliefs and ideas of the group simply by being a member of that group. For one's own group, there is a conviction of the truth of one's ideas, which are unquestioned, whereas there is scepticism towards the ideas of other groups. Fanatic believers are excited by their 'revelation' and by their identification with these unquestionable truths.

Franco Fornari (1966) stated that verification of social phenomena occurs according to a process of 'coparticipation'. The validity of an idea is based on its being 'shared by individuals belonging to a group' (p. 141). Truths put forward by a group grow out of a symbiotic-narcissistic bond, which constitutes an 'autonomous source of validity'.

The 'truth' of Nazi ideology was based on the fact that so many people rose to their feet and shouted, 'Heil Hitler'. By virtue of their passionately agreeing with the words spoken by Hitler, his ideas became true for the Germans. Hitler's ideas were verified according to the process of coparticipation. What Hitler said resonated with the German people. The fact that people became hysterically excited when he spoke proved to Hitler that the ideas he presented were true.

Killing Other than the Self

As the Nazi movement picked up steam, Hitler insisted that *everyone* had to participate. He declared that no one could be 'exempt'. Not a single person could 'exclude himself from this obligation'. Identification with the nation had to be total. 'This Volk', Hitler explained to his people, is 'but yourselves'. He asked the Germans to overcome 'bourgeois privatism' so as to 'unconditionally equate the individual fate with the fate of the nation' (cited in Koenigsberg, 2009, p. 6).

Nevertheless, in spite of the success of the Nazi movement, Hitler imagined that there still were people who had not taken his message to heart. He ranted against 'incurables' who did not understand the happiness of 'belonging to this great, inspiring community'. Hitler declared, 'We are fanatic in our love for our people. We can go as loyally as a dog with those who share our sincerity, but we will pursue with fanatic hatred the man who believes that he can play tricks with this love of ours' (cited in Koenigsberg, 2009, p. 6). Hitler's rage was directed towards people who – he imagined – did not share his love for and faith in Germany.

Fornari (1966) suggested that the autistic quality of group life – the impossibility of social reality's becoming such except by coinciding with itself – causes anything that presents itself as 'other' to be perceived as a 'threat to the symbiotic-narcissistic unity'. What is outside the symbiotic-narcissistic group – that which is separate from the self – is felt to be incompatible with the 'group system of validation' (p. 145). Any situation that presents itself as other than the self, Fornari said, is perceived as a threat to, or destruction of, the reality of the self.

Collective forms of violence arise, I hypothesize, at the moment when believers begin to sense or perceive the presence of 'others' who do not embrace – who doubt the validity of – the group's fundamental idea. The enemy or infidel shatters the fantasy of absolute truth and goodness that holds the group together. One seeks to destroy the enemy, therefore, in order to rescue the idea of absolute truth and goodness. Political violence is undertaken to restore the fantasy of the omnipotence of the home group.

Killing of the other-than-the-self coincides with affirmation of the reality of the self (Fornari, 1966, p. 147). When two groups start a war, Fornari said, the process of killing is entrusted with deciding which of the two groups is 'right'. Killing performs a validation function. When a member of the enemy group dies, this is equivalent to proving that the enemy's idea is false. One kills enemies to invalidate the idea with which the enemy is identified. The enemy is experienced as a 'force that destroys our love object' (p. 163). Those who make war thus are driven not by a hate need, but by a 'love need' (p. 163). That which is fervently loved is the sacred object or ideal with which the believer equates himself or herself. The sacred object is defended at all costs. When nations wage

war, death is accepted as an essential part of the game. What is at stake is not so much the safety of the individual, but the 'safety of the collective love object' (p. 163).

'The People' and the Fantasy of Omnipotence

We can now return to one of Hinshelwood's central points, namely, his observation that, in the ideological frame of mind, the idea becomes an end in itself, which members of the group pursue 'for its own sake'. How can it be that an idea – a social construction or mental representation – becomes so significant? Why are people willing to kill and to die – to forfeit concrete existence – in the name of an idea or symbolic object?

Hitler claimed that the liberal *Weltanschauung*, in its 'deification of the single individual', must lead to the 'destruction of the people'. National Socialism, on the other hand, desired to 'safeguard the people', if necessary even 'at the expense of the individual' (cited in Koenigsberg, 1996, p. 15). What did Hitler mean when he spoke of his desire to safeguard the people – even at the expense of the individual? It is evident that when Hitler spoke of 'the people', he was referring to a concept or abstract idea rather than to actual people or human beings. Hitler thus stands in the tradition of many other political personalities that have waged revolution and war in the name of 'the people'. Like Lenin, Stalin and Mao, Hitler caused the deaths of millions as he pursued his fantasy of rescuing 'the people'.

'The people' is one of those ideas that becomes an end in itself and is pursued for its own sake. To understand why such ideas are embraced, one must reveal their symbolic significance. The fundamental meaning of the idea of 'the people', I believe – like that of the nation or body politic – revolves around the fantasy of an omnipotent object that is bound to the self. 'The people' represents the idea of culture – that which 'lives on' even though individuals die. The idea of 'the people' is container for the fantasy of immortality.

Academia and the Fantasy of Immortality

Nationalists throughout history have made such statements as, 'The individual must die so that the nation might live'. What is it that lives on when the nation lives? We have noted that one's nation may function as a prosthesis or substitute for the self. In nationalism, the idea of one's country represents a body politic fused with one's own body. The ideology of nationalism posits a domain of reality separate from concrete existence. It is to this other world – the domain of a reality that lives on – that people wish to bind themselves.

The ideology of the academic world, similarly, is rooted in the fantasy of a dimension of existence separate from the body and concrete existence. People like Foucault and Lacan, for example, successfully promoted ideas like 'discourse' and 'the symbolic order', implying a domain of reality that is not bound to human beings. Therein lies the fundamental flaw in academic discourse and the reason why the discipline 'psychoanalysis of culture and society' has taken so long to develop.

Academics bind themselves deeply to ideas like 'culture' and 'history', as if these terms refer to domains that operate separately from human existence. The fundamental delusion is that what occurs 'out there' is disconnected or separate from – not related to – what occurs 'in here', within our own minds and bodies. The notion of psychoanalysing culture and society implies the actuality of a self that is separate from the symbolic order. If one were identified entirely with an idea or discourse (like the nationalist who identifies entirely with his country), there would be no one to psychoanalyse culture and society.

Psychoanalysis of culture and society begins at the moment one perceives that one is separate from the ideologies that constitute civilization. Academics resist or deny this perception of separateness, or they perpetuate attachment to the symbolic order by embracing the struggle against oppression or hegemony. The moment of separation occurs when we become aware that there is no escape from our frail, mortal bodies. At that moment, we can choose to abandon our identification with cultural bodies – and to soldier on as not-so-immortal human beings.

About the Author

Richard Koenigsberg is a Faculty Member at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis and is the author of *Hitler's Ideology: Embodied Metaphor, Fantasy and History*; *The Nation: A Study in Ideology and Fantasy*; and *The Fantasy of Oneness and the Struggle to Separate: Towards a Psychology of Culture* (Information Age Publishing). He is also Director of the Library of Social Science, a publishing and book-marketing company, and manages websites on 'The Psychoanalysis of Ideology, Culture and History' and 'Ideologies of War, Genocide and Terror'.

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