

Barbarians at the Gate ¹

Racism in the shadow of tolerance in the neoliberal cultural complex

In the neoliberal ideology prevalent in the today's Western societies that see themselves as free, democratic and tolerant, racism is considered a thing of the past – a product of outgrown, primitive beliefs and attitudes on their way out from civilized societies. On the helm of the evolving civilization, the Western liberal leads the way to an ever more progressive society, gaining ever greater moral high ground at every step. A question is, where did the emotions that fueled his past attitudes to the Other go? In my paper I briefly re-visit some of the now seen as obsolete views on race in the liberal Western societies and trace them forward to the present time where they continue to serve the same psychological and socio-political purposes as they have always done.

Key words: race, racism, neoliberal ideology, cultural complex.

The recent terrorist attacks in Paris once again exposed the vulnerability of the Western liberal democracies seemingly on an unstoppable march towards total economic, political and cultural domination of the planet. Despite our leaders' reassuring proclamations of their ability to deal with this "threat to our way of life" there was a sense that the world may be descending into an irreversible chaos and that our leaders need to look more carefully into what feels like rising anger towards both their international and internal political actions. The hierarchical division into "us" and "them", a prominent feature of neoliberal capitalism may no longer be defensible by military might and cultural and media advertising alone.

¹ This paper was presented in Rome at the 2015 II Conference on Analysis and Activism,

Culture has the capacity to link and create a sense of global community through its shared aspects and may provide a way towards healing the dangerous socio-economic and racial splits but it can also further the splitting through the unconscious effects of what Singer and Kimbles (2004) termed, cultural complexes.

A display of selective sympathy for the victims of the equally outrageous terrorist attacks that took place in Paris as well as in Beirut and Eastern Kenya (where 142 university students were murdered) was discussed across the global social media as an example of racism in the West. When I mentioned the marked difference in the tone and attention that the massacres received from the Western mainstream media to three friends of different ethnicities, my English friend was adamant that the Paris attack was received with much more outrage only because of the geographical closeness of Paris and London, while my Chinese and Irish friends agreed that it was about race too. The discussion became emotionally charged - the English and the immigrant cultural complexes in action - and we changed the subject.

Cultural complexes, like individual complexes, "tend to be repetitive, autonomous, resist consciousness and collect experiences that confirm their historical point of view." (Singer and Kimbles 2004, p. 186).

In one of the many recent media analyses of the radicalization of the British born Muslims of Asian descent, the radio presenter wondered how could those who went to the same schools as other British children arrive at such a different understanding of history. My question would be: can a group that shares the colonial cultural complex grasp the experience of the colonized, when both carry different phantom narratives, "generated by narrative structure images, behavior and ritual" and are transmitted trans-

generationally” (Kimbles 2014). This is from Kimbles’ book, *Phantom Narratives*, where he further says that if we could become conscious of our attunement to the self-perpetuating past which is carried by the phantom narratives into the present, “we would be able to see cultural tradition as a potential space, a political arena that may become transitional to transformation” (p. 11) and a vehicle for the activation of a collective transcendent function.

I want to look at different forms of racism as one of the features of the neoliberal cultural complex, which disguised behind the words such as “freedom” and “democracy” blocks the possibility of a real transformation into a truly progressive socio-political system. In his presentation at the first Analysis and Activism Conference held in London in 2014, Lawrence Alschuler saw the possibility for a non-violent political transformation through the advanced stage of the development of political consciousness that he called, liberated political consciousness. This stage is achieved when by holding the tension of opposites, the groups in conflict manage to overcome one-sidedness and become capable of recognizing each other’s humanity. ²

I was born in Yugoslavia but have been a citizen of London for a lot longer than I had been of Belgrade and I often experience the tension of being “us” and “them” at the same time. This paper is an attempt to offer a view on racism in the shadow of tolerance in the neoliberal cultural complex from the position of that tension.

The 60’s evolution in the collective consciousness in Europe and the civil rights movement in the USA, brought about gay rights, *some* women’s rights

² See (2016) *Analysis & Activism, Social and political Contributions of Jungian Psychology*. Eds. Kiehl, E., Saban, M., Samuels, A. London: Routledge.

(to this day women in the West continue to be paid less than men for doing the same jobs) and to an extent changed the social attitude to skin color. These social changes are yet to be truly integrated into the progressive liberal culture. Racism cannot be eradicated by an effort of will, driven as it is, as the group analyst, Farhad Dalal writes, “by economic and political factors behind the urge to power and privilege some groups of people over others” (Dalal, 1988/2002).

The encounter with difference produces an unsettling array of projections and emotional and instinctual responses: curiosity, fear, attraction, repulsion. What is this? How come it 's not like me? What does it have that I don't have? Do I want that? Shall I make it my own or destroy it? If the rising tension within this admixture of conscious and unconscious responses does not lead to the activation of the transcendent function, the threatening discomfort of the unfamiliar will be managed by the ego's ability to quickly place it into a prearranged system of categories, where it will no longer be different but evaluated as good or bad, ending in the attitude of superiority or inferiority, admiration or contempt. And a possibility for a dialogue with the difference is gone.

Eduardo Galeano in his book *Children of the Day, A Calendar of Human History* has this entry:

The Martians are Coming

“In 1938 spaceships landed on the coasts of the United States
And the Martians launched their attacks. They had ferocious tentacles,
enormous black eyes that shot fiery rays, and foaming, V-shaped mouths.

Many horrified citizens took to the streets wrapped in wet Towels to protect themselves from the poison gas that the Martians Emitted, and many more chose to shut themselves in behind locks and more locks, armed to the teeth, awaiting the final battle.

Orson Wells invented that extraterrestrial invasion and broadcast it over the radio.

The invasion was a lie but the fear was real.

And the fear continued: the Martians turned into Russians, Koreans, Vietnamese, Cubans, Nicaraguans, Afghanis, Iraqis, Iranians...”

In the BBC radio³ program entitled, “Will they always hate us?”⁴ a group of social psychologists described an experiment they carried out with a group of Israelis and Palestinians to explore the emotions that drive group conflicts, and possible ways towards diminishing group hatreds. They found that what divides groups in conflict is “a monolithic block” which consists of an entrenched belief that the other group has a single value system and a single political objective, which threatens their own. They gave each group a fake newspaper from the other side with articles where each group criticized certain aspects of their own society. The results showed that these self-critical articles opened ways of communication between the Palestinian and Israeli groups not only about the different social matters within their communities but even for discussions about possible solutions for their political conflict.

³ BBC Radio 4 Monday 9 Nov 2015: 20:30

Recognising their own group's failures and vulnerabilities helped them acknowledge each other's sense of group identity, their sacred values, victimhood on both sides, and created a sense of connection beyond their respective cultural complexes:

Cultural complexes operate through the group's expectations, its definition of itself, its destiny and its sense of uniqueness. They operate through the group's fears, its enemies and its attitudes toward other groups (Kimble 2014, p. 5).

The cultural complex can have a blinding power that mesmerizes people into believing propaganda, no matter how absurd it may be or generate masses into wars. "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities" wrote Voltaire (1765).

I borrowed my title from the poem by Constantine Cavafy "Waiting for the Barbarians". The following excerpt depicts the unsettling reality outside the limited scope of the view of the world of "us" and "them" from within a cultural complex.

"Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?

(How serious people's faces have become.)

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.

And some who have just returned from the border say

there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution."

Or in the words of John Updike's famous character, Rabbit Angstrom:

"If the cold war is over, what's the point in being an American!?"

Responding to the attacks in Paris the Western leaders proclaimed in unison that "we have the right to defend our way of life everywhere in the world". In other words, the barbarians are at *our* gates even in *their* own countries. We also have the moral right to instigate regime changes wherever "our way of life" is not prevalent. The fact that this applies to the countries whose natural resources or strategically important geopolitical positions our governments want to take over and control, seems quite obvious and yet so many among the educated progressive liberal groups and individuals believe in its moral justification. This might be due to the power of what Kimbles calls the "Eurocentric phantasy: absorbing minorities into a system of values that are considered superior or better" (2014, p. 98).

The ambition to steamroll over cultural and political differences and create a homogenous world in our own image has brought the liberal West face to face with the most explicitly brutal expression of the same ambition: the proponents of the so-called Islamic State also believe in the superiority of their cause and want to create the world in their image. Weapons of mass destruction and propaganda as means of terrorizing and manipulating population i.e. breaking the spirits and "winning hearts and minds" of those who do not see us the way we see ourselves have been used in political conflicts throughout human history and continue on all sides today – no evolution or progress there.

The self- righteous and one- sidedness of the group cultural complex creates a fantasy of a “norm” which is shared by those in its grip. This “norm” further creates its own value system and, as the American linguist and cultural theorist, Richard Gray (2004) points out, it finds expression in racism.

...The manner of thought which takes the norms of its own cultural attitudes and applies them to others in order to demonstrate their inferiority is characteristic of racism in all its manifestations (Gray p. 129).

This quotation is from Gray’s book *About Face: German physiognomic thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*. The author discusses the analysis of race by the XIX century German physician, psychologist and artist, Carl Gustav Carus, who brought a symbolic dimension into racist thought. Carus believed that all nations have a natural position in relation to the Divine purpose of the cultural evolution of mankind. The gist of his symbolic hierarchy of peoples is:

- The Day People - White Europeans who exhibit a natural intellectual superiority over other peoples and races. They are the pinnacle of humanity.
- The Eastern Twilight People – East Asians, Hindus, Turks, Mongols and Slavs.
- The Western Twilight People – the Native Americans.
- The Night People – black Africans and Australians (Banton 1987, p. 20 quoted in Dalal, p. 17)

Gray further quotes Carus who explains that: "The race of daylight people have (sic.) the right to view itself as the true pinnacle of humanity and this in turn lays upon it the duty to be not only a guiding light for those peoples who are in many respects weaker and less favored but also to stand by them and lend them assistance whenever necessary" (Carus quoted in Gray p. 130). "Such arguments (Gray writes) have the function to simultaneously disguise and justify the economic and political mastery the European colonial powers exercise over those peoples they economically exploit" (Ibid.) This attitude legitimates the colonial empowerment of the Europeans over other nations and, "it transforms the vice of economic exploitation into the virtue of developmental assistance".

Implicit in the belief that the world needs our guidance into the superior realm we naturally inhabit is the Social Darwinist distinction about weak and poor, based on economic success or failure. According to Tom Singer (2016),

Those Social Darwinists who make the distinction between strong and weak on the basis of race, ethnicity, or gender will work covertly or overtly to ensure that the identified weaker group remains weak or gets even weaker—whether the group is Black, Jewish, Palestinian, female, gay, White, Islamic, Christian or whomever has been identified as weak" (p. 153).

With my own combined Slavic and Germanic ethnic background in Carus' classification I would not be as white as my English, German or Scandinavian friends but of mixed race. In Hitler's Germany, I might have been given the opportunity to join the percentage of Slavs who were planned for Germanization. Other Slavs were to be turned into slaves or exterminated and their cultures were to be eradicated.

A form of social engineering applied in Australia features in the film “Rabbit Proof Fence” based on the true story about three young girls, half Aborigine half white, who were taken away from their families and placed in a settlement for children from mixed race relationships, where they were to be educated as white, placed in service with white families and married to white men. The idea was that that way, the half-caste blood would eventually be bred out of existence. The film follows the girls walking for nine weeks along the two and half thousand kilometers of rabbit-proof-fence to return to their community. The official “Protector of Western Aborigines”, one Auber Neville, a deep believer in the righteousness of this cause both for the mixed race Aborigines and for humanity as a whole, is genuinely dismayed that the girls never gave up trying to escape each time they were caught and dragged back to his re-education center. How can they choose the impoverished, primitive, life in the bush over the obviously superior life he wanted for them!?

My own racism of the kind I am exploring here came to the fore when I responded with Nevill-like dismay to a news item that a growing number of British women were converting to Islam. Some kind of trauma must be in the background of this, I thought. But in a TV interview with a group of these women, we heard that they came from perfectly normal British lives but which for them were lacking in spiritual values and true warmth of family and community – this they found in Islam.

Conclusion

How and whether as a civilization we might truly outgrow racism and confine it to the earlier stages of the development of consciousness, is not

known. But we all have the experience of the psyche's capacity to transcend the divisions into "us" and "them" and to connect to humanity as a whole, share its joys and feel its pains.

On the night of the first US attack on Iraq in 1991, I was in Washington DC and I had a dream: I was flying on a magic carpet through the late night streets of Bagdad. I meandered among the houses; some citizens asleep, their windows dark, some windows bathed in glowing, golden light - behind them people reading, listening to music, pottering about, having dinner, talking to each other. I can still recall the warmth and the immense joy I felt at witnessing this magical night in the beautiful city. And then I heard a voice say: " Bagdad no longer looks like this. It was bombed last night." I woke up with a sense of terrible loss and despair.

In my welcome address at the first Analysis and Activism conference held in London in 2014, the XII century Persian philosophical poem, *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid al-din Attar, lent image to my words and feelings. In closing, I turn to the same poet again, quoted in Galeano's *Calendar of Human History*.

The Encounter

"The door was closed:

"Who is it?"

"It's me"

"I don't know you."

And the door remained closed.

The following day:

"Who is it?"

"It's me"
"I don't know who you are."
And the door remained closed
Then the following day:
"Who is it?"
"It's you."
And the door opened."

References:

- Attar, Farid al-din. *The Conference of the Birds*.
- Cavafy, C. P. (1975/1990) *Collected Poems*. London: Chatto & Windus Ltd.
- Dalal, F. (2002) *Race, Color and the Process or Racialization: New Perspectives from Group Analysis, Psychoanalysis and Sociology*: Hove & New York: Brunner Routledge.
- Galeano, E. (2013) *Children of the Days: A Calendar of Human History*. London: Penguin Group. Allen Lane.
- Gray, R. (2004) *About Face: German physiognomic thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Kimbles, S. (2014) *Phantom Narratives*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Singer, T. and Kimbles, S. (2004) "Emerging Theory of Cultural Complexes" in *Analytical Psychology Contemporary Perspectives in Jungian Analysis*. Eds. Cambray, J. and Carter, L. Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Singer, T. (2016) *Analysis & Activism, Social and political Contributions of Jungian Psychology*. Eds. Kiehl, E., Saban, M., Samuels, A. London: Routledge.
- Rabbit-Proof Fence (2002) Australian film directed by Phillip Noyce based on the book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington Garimara.

Image: Other Cultures are not failed attempts at being you – Source: Pinterest.com

