Uprooted Minds
Surviving the Politics of Terror in the Americas

psychoanalysis
history
memoir

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Nancy Caro Hollander
Uprooted Minds

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Scared stiff
Social trauma and the post–9/11 political culture

May you live in interesting times.
—Chinese proverb

Vengeance is a lazy form of grief.
—Silvia Broome
*The Interpreter* (Pollack, 2005)

“I left Vienna on March 15, 1938, the very day Hitler himself entered the city as part of the official Anschluss. I remember that it was a beautiful, sunny, cool day, and a spontaneous popular celebration of the Führer’s arrival had erupted. The streets were packed with wildly cheering crowds waving Nazi flags. I knew I would be arrested and wouldn’t survive because I had published many anti-Nazi articles in magazines that had circulated in Paris and Amsterdam. Besides, because of what I had learned growing up in my highly politicized family and from my training at the University of Vienna, I was really clear about the horrors that lay in store for everyone under Nazi rule.” So begins Hedda Bolgar’s response to my question about how her experiences as a young woman living in Europe as it succumbed to fascism have influenced her reactions to the increasing threats to our democracy by the Bush administration’s “war on terror.”

It is a sunny day in July 2006, and Hedda, now 97 years old, is a psychoanalyst and social activist who still has a full-time practice. She is a training and supervising analyst at the Los Angeles Institute and Society for Psychoanalytic Studies, which she cofounded in the 1980s. Hedda’s comfortably elegant Brentwood home serves as a hospitable hub for many of the institute’s functions, and she hosts a salon on the first Wednesday of the month for colleagues to discuss a variety of topics ranging from clinical and theoretical psychoanalytic issues to the psychological implication of social problems. She and I are sitting in her earth-toned, informal living room, walls covered with original paintings and framed posters, many of which are visual representations of Hedda’s commitment to the significant
political struggles of the last half century. Her gracious charm is reflected in the sumptuous gardens that surround the entranceway and the enticing fruits and pastries spread before us to energize our discussion. She periodically utters playful side comments to her beloved cats as they wander in and out, lazily curious about what their doting owner is up to now. In this same room, along with eight other psychoanalytic colleagues, Hedda and I have met on a monthly basis over the past three years, organizing a series of conferences for mental health professionals and the community at large that feature psychoanalytic perspectives on the crucial social issues of our times. On this day, as I listen to Hedda recount the details of her life, I am reminded once again about her finely tuned memory, which is the envy of her “younger” colleagues in our 50s and 60s. Each of us has had the experience during one meeting or another of struggling to remember a specific name or date and invariably turning to Hedda, who always amazes us with her reliable instant recall of all kinds of details. We are accustomed to chuckling every once in a while when, as we settle into our evening’s agenda and heave exhausted sighs after attending to patients all day, Hedda’s alert attentiveness is blunted as she mentions that she is a bit tired, having had a full schedule of patients on the heels of a rigorous, weekend, out-of-town conference. When we demand to know what accounts for her boundless energy at the age of 97, her answer is always the same: “Diet,” she responds. “I’ve been a vegetarian for 85 years.” And then she adds with a twinkle in her eye but quite seriously, “Oh, yes, and being engaged in the world, always fighting for the truth.”

Now the two of us are involved in the specific project of this book. Like my Latin American psychoanalytic colleagues whose personal testimonies illuminate my analysis of their countries’ traumatogenic political and economic crises, Hedda has agreed to share aspects of her history and self-reflections that help to contextualize my interpretation of the subjective experience of the drift toward authoritarianism and economic catastrophe in the United States since 9/11. Her lifelong social concerns mirror the commitments of much of the political activism that has emerged among psychoanalysts in the post–9/11 environment. I am intrigued by Hedda’s narrative in that much of it parallels Marie Langer’s experience of growing up in the cultural ferment of the interwar years in Europe. Both were forced to flee their homeland and, as immigrants in new countries, to integrate their progressive political views with their psychoanalytic theory and practice—Marie Langer in the context of the turbulent conditions of third-world Latin America, and Hedda in the less extreme circumstances of the U.S. superpower.

“I had been studying for my Ph.D. at the University of Vienna,” Hedda continues, now focusing on what life had been like before the Nazis extended their power into Austria. “I majored in psychology, and although the department was not psychoanalytic, nor were we involved in Freud’s
free clinics,¹ some faculty had connections to Freud’s Institute. It was the 1930s, during the time that Vienna was exploding with all kinds of wonderful social and cultural programs supported by the progressive Social Democratic municipal government, including much of the mental health enterprise, some of it related to the work at the university’s psychology department. Many of the faculty were Marxists, members of the Socialist Party and the youth movement, and they were very much committed to social issues. The work was very intense. We studied child development, the importance of the mother–child relationship, and even the social effects of unemployment on communities. The orientation was one of understanding the individual in the context of family and community, and this reinforced in me a sensitivity to the internal and external—or the psychic and social—continuum in human experience. The department also had connections to American universities, and because I was interested in clinical training, which was not offered there, colleagues suggested I apply for a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Chicago. My successful application turned out to be a life saver, because I was accepted just as Social Democracy was being vanquished by the Austro-fascist movement that later merged with the even more repressive Nazi Party. Many of the psychology faculty were arrested in the process.

I ask Hedda what it was like living in the transition to fascism. “During the time the political situation worsened,” she says, “I noticed that as a manic defense people often joked about the really terrible events occurring all around us. We lived in an increasingly schizophrenic Vienna, with rising unemployment, poverty, and even homelessness for the first time. People were really suffering, but the opera and symphony and galleries were still operating, as was some semblance of informative news reportage for the middle and upper-middle classes. The privileged could often easily deny the frightening signs of terrible social dislocation and the looming political threat. For me, it was the writing on the wall, and I knew we had to leave. My fiancé, Herbert Bekker, was resistant to leaving. Like many others I argued with, he thought that since he was not publicly political, he would encounter little trouble with the Nazis and would therefore have plenty of time to take care of his family before departing. So he would emigrate later, and I would have to flee alone. I packed a small suitcase and set out to negotiate the labyrinthine Nazi-dominated border crossings and train routes that would take me to the coast of France, where I would set sail for New York.”

As Hedda describes in a matter-of-fact manner the often terrifying details of her flight, the images in my mind are like a cinematic thriller. I interrupt her to ask how she was able to tolerate what I imagine must have been intense anxiety given the personally threatening situations she frequently found herself in during her journey. How had she not been unbearably frightened? “No, I wasn’t scared,” she responds. “I wasn’t supposed to be

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scared of anything. I was raised not to be frightened.” She recalls how as a child just after World War I, her Marxist parents had been deeply involved in the short-lived leftist revolution that had brought socialism to Hungary for some brief months. “That was a very exciting period for me, even when as a nine-year-old my first real party was cancelled because my parents had to make the revolution. When I told my father that he had ruined my party, he said to me with a straight face, ‘I’m so sorry; I wish you’d have told me, and we would have postponed the revolution!’ But even with that major upset, I also remember it being glorious. My parents weren’t scared; they were remaking the world, and their attitude was, ‘If there’s a problem, you solve it; a need, you meet it.’” But there were also the more difficult aspects of experience during these tumultuous times, and Hedda’s early life was characterized by overstimulation, loss, and even depression. She has described the multiple losses she suffered brought on by war, her parents’ divorce, her frequent family moves from one country to another, and the loss of her first nanny. Although the political and social environment was exciting, Hedda (2001) has written that “…life during those years now feels like a manic defense against the chronic mourning everybody in the family was constantly feeling…today I know that what I knew not consciously then was that very little was experienced deeply” (p. 41).

I wonder aloud if the combination of political consciousness and manic defense learned early in life permitted her to endure with such equanimity the frightening conditions under which she fled fascist Austria. “Yes,” Hedda says, pondering the question. “The fear was probably there, but the terror and helplessness were really repressed. That was certainly the case for me as a child when the reactionary forces overturned the brief Hungarian socialist government and enacted a brutal backlash. Years later, when I flaunted my own safety to do some of the things I needed to do as I fled the Nazis, I didn’t permit myself to feel the fear either. On my way to France from Austria, for example, I took some risks going to Switzerland and Czechoslovakia and back into Germany to collect some of my father’s important papers and money from bank accounts that I knew would be needed later. In several potentially compromising situations when I was confronted by Nazi authorities, I remembered the lessons my father taught me about the importance of assuming a cool, disdainful demeanor with those in power, and I managed to save myself. On the other hand, I had a choice: I could have joined the resistance and stayed, but it never occurred to me. I don’t know why. I did not feel guilty about leaving because I had the conviction that after I left, I would be able to help more people than if I had stayed. It was true as it turned out, because I was able to bring a lot of people out and save their lives.”

This discussion stimulates associations for both of us to our present political environment in the United States and the omnipresent sense of threat that pervades the culture. We share the conviction that the Bush
administration is eroding democracy by compromising civil liberties and the right to dissent, all the while legitimizing practices, such as torture and extraordinary renditions, that violate international and national law. His preemptive war policy depends on a military budget that is compromising our welfare at home and making the United States a rogue state internationally. We are worried about how the neoconservative discourse continues to dominate the media, disenfranchising critical voices as antipatriotic threats to national security. Hedda says she is reminded of the question that plagued so many in Europe as the Nazis eviscerated democracy from one country to another: When do you pack your bags and flee? It brings back painful memories for me, as well, memories of Latin American friends and colleagues who were forced to decide when the pivotal moment had arrived to make the life-altering decision to save themselves and their families by fleeing their countries’ state terrorist regimes. We ruefully agree that perhaps the scariest thing for us at this historical moment is that, in spite of so many citizens’ fantasies of moving to another country, in this globalized world, there is actually no place to escape to.

“After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon,” Hedda is saying, “it was the first time in my life that I really allowed myself to be afraid. I've lived through all kinds of situations that were dangerous, and I always felt I had to—and could—do something. But after 9/11, I was suddenly scared to death. I couldn’t understand why, because Ground Zero was more than 3,000 miles away, and there was no real indication that something similar was about to happen here in Los Angeles. But I had the grim feeling, which I couldn’t put into words, that this was the beginning of something really bad. I just felt that Bush was going to use this tragedy in a very destructive way. It was nothing I could really consciously explain; it was just a general political mistrust. I was more afraid of the reaction to the terrorists than of the terrorists themselves, and that’s where I still am. What kind of a question is, ‘Why do they hate us?’ We know that for years the aim of this country’s foreign policy has been to control others’ resources and governments. And there is this split: The United States keeps doing what it’s been doing, and meanwhile we are caught up in this horrible trauma of 9/11 that is indelibly impressed on our psyches: the people who were in the towers burning to death, the dreadful images of those who leapt to their death, those who disappeared in the ashes that covered the city... and then the wonderful first responders. There is this constant battle: on the one hand, this terrible thing that has happened; and on the other, the retaliatory revenge strategy that was developed almost immediately, which I could not bear. I remembered how the Social Democrats caved in to the fascists in Vienna. Now I have this intense sense of complete helplessness in the face of something similar occurring among our elected representatives, Democrats and Republicans alike, in this government. We have to
scramble even to get reliable information, and there is the feeling that we have lost whatever real democracy there was in the United States. Right after 9/11 I had the sensation that with the right wing in the White House, we were going to lose all the gains, like Social Security and other benefits of progressive state policies, that still existed. I had no idea then how bad it would actually get.”

These thoughts spark recollections of our work together that began in 2003, two years after the terrorist attacks. In response to 9/11 and Hedda’s urgent concerns about the problematic political realities she thought many citizens in this country were denying, including her psychoanalytic colleagues, she proposed organizing a conference on the reciprocal impact of psychic and social reality. She wanted to demonstrate that psychoanalysts have something to contribute to our understanding of how psychological experience is affected by and affects an increasingly dangerous world. When Hedda invited me to be a member of the committee that would organize the conference, I was delighted because it represented in Los Angeles a bridge to the work I had been doing with my psychoanalytic social activist colleagues in Latin America. All the committee members wished to do something practical that would provide people with the opportunity to use their minds to think about the growing dangers of our new political reality that were emanating as much from domestic as they were from foreign influences. We wanted the conference to focus on how current social realities affect our individual psyches and how our psychic realities impact on and reorganize the larger social world. An additional goal was to help psychoanalysts and other mental health professionals think about external reality and social events as sources of their patients’ and their own profound anxieties rather than interpret them as if they were only symbolic of unconscious anxieties provoked by unresolved childhood conflict and trauma. After one year of intense planning, the three-day conference, “The Uprooted Mind: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Living in an Unsafe World,” took place the last weekend of October 2004, on the eve of the highly contested 2004 national election. Keynote speakers included Robert Jay Lifton, who analyzed the U.S. experience of unprecedented vulnerability and its compensatory bellicose reaction to 9/11 as delineated in his book Superpower Syndrome: America’s apocalyptic confrontation with the world (Lifton 2003); Maureen Katz, who explored the multiple and paradoxical psychological meanings to U.S. citizens of the spectacle of Abu Ghraib (see Katz, 2006); Andrew Samuels, who conveyed aspects of his pioneering ideas about political subjectivity detailed in his Politics on the Couch (2007); and myself, with a presentation elaborating on my work on trauma, ideology, and psychic defenses, originally developed in the context of state terror in Latin America and now conceptualized in terms of the traumatogenic political culture of post–9/11 United States (see Hollander, 2006; Hollander & Gutwill, 2006).
I was in part concerned with the difficulty citizens in this country were having in recognizing the crisis of our democracy and the tendency to disavow reality because of the long-held ideological assumption that although authoritarian rule can occur anywhere else in the world, “it can’t happen here.” This attitude was an eerie reminder of what my friend and colleague Uruguayan psychoanalyst Marcelo Viñar had once poignantly told me about how it felt to be living in his country in 1971 during the several years before its century-long democratic rule was forcibly ended by a military coup. With painful irony, Marcelo had commented:

The process of political change and the capacity to subjectively absorb and understand this change operate at distinctly different rates...It’s as if I continued to believe in democracy when I was living in a country that was already totalitarian. I believe that it is characteristic of the period of transition between democracy and dictatorship that people function by denying reality.

I proposed that Marcelo’s observation of the tendency to deny a threatening reality could serve as a warning to us in this country as we, too, succumb to the wish to disavow the signs of our own transition toward an unprecedented centralization of political power and disenfranchisement of citizens. “The uprooted mind” was the metaphor for the painful and even traumatic impact of living in the post–9/11 environment permeated with dangers that were intensifying at a pace that felt overwhelming. The psychic residue of these social terrors, I argued, was apparent in our consultation rooms as patients experienced how the political is personal, the other side of the coin of the revolutionary idea proclaimed by feminists of the 1960s that “the personal is political.”

Since the “Uprooted Mind” conference, I have continued to extend my work on trauma, ideology, and psychic defenses as a construct to explain the subjective meanings of the political and economic crises that have become more profound and complex since 9/11. Like Hedda, I have been arguing that if we ever had any doubts, under the extreme social conditions in which we now live, it is no longer possible to speak of psychic and social reality as if they were two exclusively separate registers. Indeed, from my perspective, subjectivity is fashioned out of the intimate interplay between the imaginary dimensions of the unconscious, which is characterized by representations, drives, defenses, and affects, and a relational matrix that reaches out beyond the family to include the sociosymbolic order, composed of asymmetrical relations of power and force.

**THE SOCIAL MATRIX OF PSYCHIC EXPERIENCE**

Psychoanalysts have been dealing for years from different theoretical perspectives with the concept of psychic reality and what role social reality plays
in unconscious life. In the early 1990s, the International Psychoanalytic
Association held its biannual congress in San Francisco, the theme of which
was psychic reality. The invited presenters concurred that Freud’s concept
of psychic reality, together with the theory of infantile sexuality, the uncon-
scious, repetition, and transference, constituted the foundations of psycho-
analysis. There was agreement that external reality had to be taken into
account in any conceptualization of psychic reality, but external reality
for most of the presenters meant essentially the intersubjective encoun-
ter between the analyst’s and the patient’s unconscious minds. For some,
the mechanism of projective identification was the essential link between
the subject and the external world. But others, most notably a group of
Argentine psychoanalysts, argued that the components of the unconscious
are not only fantasy and object relations but internalized attributes of
the sociocultural environment as well. They emphasized the importance
of accounting for how the subject is constituted within specific historical
moments and cultures and is likely to bear the signs of intergenerational
transmissions of socially constructed trauma (Etchegoyen, 1996).

This view seems to me to take into account the insertion of the individual
in the social order out of which the complex interplay between unconscious
dynamics and social forces render human experience inevitably destabiliz-
ing. It is situated within an important trend stemming from Freud himself.
Freud’s revolutionary discovery was the decentered subject: Enlightenment
man, rational, in charge of nature and the social order, was displaced by the
psychoanalytic self, dominated by unconscious forces whose presence he
did not control, like that of a foreign body—an internalized trace of paren-
tal others—that could never be completely assimilated. The disconcerting
implications of this notion were softened by Freud’s belief that psychoana-
lytic therapy could help human beings reassume some degree of reason over
disorderly passions through making the unconscious conscious. As Stephen
Frosh (1987) points out, this tradition within psychoanalysis promised
mastery and a fantasy of completeness and integrated selfhood, for ana-
lysts and patients alike. However, perhaps in response to the relativism,
narcissism, and nihilism associated with postmodern culture and global
capitalism, many psychoanalytic theorists have returned to an interest in
the social and psychological meanings of the Freudian decentered subject.
Considerations of how social reality forms part of the psyche lead toward a
focus on how the Other (from parent to the larger social order) governs our
existence to impose an essential alienness or alterity of human subjectivity.
My own understanding is that external reality is, indeed, a foundational
aspect of the constitution of the self.

Most psychoanalytic research demonstrates that the social matrix either
facilitates or impedes psychic development and integration. Libidinal
and aggressive impulses are fated to be constructively or destructively
expressed, depending on the existence and nature of container/contained
relationships, not only in the intimacy of the family but in the culture at large. How can psychoanalysis help us understand the nature of human destructiveness, which is a major theme of this book? Two trends generally characterize psychoanalytic thinking, the first that sides with Freud’s conviction of an innate destructive drive or instinct that is inevitably mobilized against the self or outward against others; and the second that conceptualizes aggression as a response to deprivations and frustrations in the environment, impingements that originate in the catastrophes of childhood trauma and are reproduced throughout the life span. My view as it is elaborated in my analysis of the violence of terror in the Americas parallels Stephen Mitchell’s perspective in which aggression, like sexuality, does not represent a “a push from within,” but a response to others, biologically mediated and prewired, within a relational context (Mitchell, 1998, p. 25).

Hegemonic institutions and ideologies either exacerbate primitive anxieties and their manifestation in envy, greed, and hate or promote the capacities that form the basis of reparative guilt and love, concern, and responsibility for others (see Rustin, 1991; Peltz, 2005). Psychoanalytic theories have also elaborated how interpersonal experience is realized through the medium and psychological use of social symbols. D. W. Winnicott, for example, thought of symbolization as a constructive, expansive, intrapsychic capacity as well as a relational process in which one uses a transitional me/not me space to negotiate a balance between acceptance of authentic internal wishes and needs and responsiveness to external reality’s expectations and demands. When the transitional space fails, it exacerbates what Melanie Klein called paranoid/schizoid states of mind, characterized by primitive defenses such as splitting, projection, idealization, and projective identification that protect the subject from being overwhelmed by annihilation anxiety stimulated by external as well as internal forces. But Winnicott, Klein, and other object relations theorists did not take into account how external reality contains the hegemonic cultural symbols of the social order’s asymmetrical forces of privilege and power, which are internalized to form an alienating aspect of identity. Several psychoanalytic traditions elaborate the relationship between the psyche and the larger social order, one represented by the group theorists associated with the work of S. H. Foulkes and Wilford Bion and the other by Jacques Lacan and Jean LaPlanche. Both approaches are useful in our analysis of the individual and group response in this country to 9/11.

Psychoanalysts in the group psychotherapy tradition account for a socially constructed subjectivity through the concept of the social unconscious, by which they mean the coconstructed and shared unconscious of members of particular social systems such as community, society, nation, or culture. The social unconscious includes shared anxieties, fantasies, defenses, myths, and memories, and its building blocks are made of chosen traumas and chosen glories (Weinberg, 2007). For some theorists in this tradition,
the social unconscious represents the installation of social power relations within the core of psychic structure and functions as a bridge between the individual and the group that shapes drives, affects, and defenses. The I of the individual is constructed inevitably out of the preexisting we, which in turn exists in relation to a designated not we, always characterized by power hierarchies. Thus the psychology of individuals is constituted within the vicissitudes of the power-relational field they inhabit to shape how they feel about themselves and behave toward others (Dalal, 2001). In the British psychosocial studies tradition that examines subjectivity through a psychoanalytically informed lens, Wendy Hollway defines the concept psycho-social in this way:

We are psycho-social because we are products of a unique life history of anxiety- and desire-provoking life events and the manner in which they have been transformed in internal reality. We are psycho-social because such defensive activities affect and are affected by material conditions and discourses (systems of meaning which pre-exist any given individual), because unconscious defenses are intersubjective processes…and because of the real events in the external, social world which are discursively, desirously and defensively appropriated. (Hook, 2008, p. 351)

In the language of Lacan and LaPlanché, the intersubjective unconscious is constituted by an alterity created by the “the Other,” by which they mean that the subject is created by the intersubjective relationships that contextualize it, predate it, and extend beyond it. To put this in developmental terms, the infant is born without a sense of stable bodily or psychic integrity. The emergence of the self develops over time in the relationship with the primary adult(s), whose conscious and unconscious identity, saturated with constituents of the social order, is internalized by the infant as an aspect of its own psychic structure. At the same time, the child is shaped by larger external forces (unconscious expectations of others, language, patriarchy, and so on), and this otherness is also internalized to become part of the self. In this way, the individual’s original state of diffuseness or decenteredness is partially transcended through the encounter with a consolingly coherent image of him- or herself mediated through the dominant ideological discourse that assigns a place in the social order based on attributes associated with class, race, and gender. But while the specific place of each subject in what Lacan calls the symbolic order renders an apparent integrative identity, it enforces a recognition of difference and prohibitions, both of which unavoidably entail loss and rupture. Lacan’s perspective emphasizes the inevitability of divisions within the self and among subjects even as desire for unification persists (Elliot, 1939; see also Soler, 2006).
LaPlanche has stressed that the alien within the subject begins with mother and the enigmatic message the infant receives based on mother’s unconscious conflicted sexuality and aggression. The child translates what it can into representations or fantasies, leaving the remainder that cannot be interpreted to become the foundation of the unconscious. LaPlanche’s view that the child actively negotiates the parental enigmatic signifier through fantasy and unconscious defenses can be extended to show that these processes enjoy a recapitulation across the life span as the subject struggles with the enigmatic messages of authority figures in the social order that, even while they often refuse to yield coherent and consistent meanings, are compellingly seductive (Caruth, 2001; LaPlanche, 1999).

While the Symbolic Order, to use Lacan’s term, provides the decentered subject with an apparently coherent identity and thus the possibility of covering over internal discontinuities, it simultaneously functions to sustain the repressive and constraining asymmetrical relations of authority and power. Many theorists have studied how the ruling classes of any given society are able to exercise their control through the dominant ideology, or system of ideas, which functions to justify their power and is internalized by the subjugated classes who come to identify with a world view that is not in their objective interests. This contradictory condition by which the oppressed identify with the dominant ideology has been referred to as false consciousness by many radical theorists (McCarney, 2003; see also Eagleton, 1994). However, political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971) argued that the ruling classes govern by securing consent from those they subjugate, not only in the realm of shared ideas but through a complex habitual social practice lived out through the unconscious and inarticulate dimensions of social experience. Gramsci postulated that the dominant social symbols of the culture—the whole range of values, attitudes, beliefs, cultural norms, legal precepts, and so on that infuse civil society—are transmitted through the vast range of institutions, including the family, religious groups, the legal apparatus, civic organizations, the media, and so forth, all of which generate a belief in a particular system. Together they constitute what Gramsci called hegemony, which is so powerful because it is experienced as the common sense of an entire social order. Hegemony lends a secure and enduring quality to power not achievable through the use of coercive institutions such as the military and the police, thus giving it a kind of psychological validity. Hegemony is not static; it has to be renewed, recreated, and defended. Multiple creeds, doctrines, and modes of perception may jostle for authority; but despite their differences, together they generate and reinforce citizens’ belief in the existing system. By way of illustration, neoconservative and liberal perspectives represent different ideological trends, but they share unquestioned hegemonic assumptions about U.S. superpower strivings and the sacrosanct principles of individualism and private property (Boggs, 1984).
Elaborating upon Gramsci, French Lacanian Marxist Louis Althusser analyzed what he called *state ideological apparatuses*—social institutions that in his words interpellate or “hail” us to our place in the social order so that we unconsciously assume our position within it in a way that maintains the hidden relations of power. Althusser (1984) explored in more detail the important unconscious function of the dominant ideology. From his Lacanian perspective, the subject engages in an imaginary search for unity and coherence to escape the fractured and decentered nature of human experience. The individual locates him- or herself through ideology, which is a thought–practice—in other words, both an unquestioned set of ideas and engrained customs located in concrete behaviors of everyday life. Since hegemonic values are taken as natural, our conscious awareness about them is preempted and we are habituated to them. In Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s words, “They do not know it, but they are doing it” (Myers, 2003, p. 63). Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman stresses this invisible quality and shared experience of existing power relations: “Power,” he argues,

is not an object stocked in governmental safes that can be acquired by revolutionaries storming and occupying the Winter Palace; it cannot be “taken over” by assaulting and removing its present holders “on high.” It is present in every tissue and cell of society—and it is also constantly reproduced and replenished by daily routine conduct. (Haugaard, 2008, p. 112)

This discussion raises the important question of how we can account for the capacity of citizens to disengage from hegemony to develop a critical ideological position about their lived experience that counters the “official story” of those who rule. We will explore how this capacity has been exercised in the context of political struggles against authoritarian government in Latin America and in this country. But first I want to show how the social psychoanalytic orientation I have presented helps us understand the consensual support that the Bush administration secured for its domestic and foreign policies in the early years following 9/11. How, in other words, did the specificities of U.S. history and culture—what Gramsci calls hegemony and what I will refer to as hegemonic ideology—affect the U.S. experience and response to the traumatic trigger of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?

We might say that in the wake of the terrorist attacks on 9/11, ideology came to our rescue. Bush’s aggressive policies were justified by a discourse that split the world into a struggle between U.S. democracy and totalitarian fundamentalism. Most citizens could uncritically identify with the ideological assumptions underlying Bush’s crusade. That is, citizens were unconsciously identified with the hegemonic ideological justifications of the
policies instituted by the powerful who rule this nation. Ideology rational-
ized a government strategy aimed at ensuring U.S. hegemony, all the while
it functioned to cover over the psychological experience of individual and
group decentering, vulnerability, and discontinuity provoked by 9/11. An
aggressive foreign policy justified as self-defense protected us against
the narcissistic injury of impotence and helplessness triggered by the terror-
ist attacks, and in so doing, ideology worked. Indeed, military expansion-
ism as a response to the terrorist attacks was experienced by many people
as a familiar solution to feelings of insecurity and impotence on the one
hand and rage and aggression on the other. These conditions created a
sociosymbolic order characterized by what Thomas Ogden calls the pathol-
ogy of the potential space. There was little negotiation between self and
Other; the symbol and the symbolized were collapsed. For example, in the
initial stages of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, ideological depictions of us/
America as all good and they/Iraq as all bad inhibited our capacity to see
the world in the more complex terms that would encompass the idea that
we as well as they are good and bad. It was assumed that if the Iraqis hated
Saddam's dictatorship, then they would want a U.S. military occupation,
a perspective still maintained in this country despite much evidence to the
contrary. The ideology of the “war on terror” required psychological-split-
ting mechanisms that inhibited citizens’ abilities to tolerate the ambiguity
and ambivalence characteristics of reality, resulting in the paradox that if
we are all good, then we are endlessly threatened by the all bad Other, who
will attack us and thus whom we are inevitably driven to keep attacking in
“self-defense.”

We all recall the initial mandate from the government: We were urged to
resume life as usual and to go shopping to support the American economy.
As citizens we were encouraged to buy things, thereby associating feeling
good and safe through consumption and the private relationship with com-
modities, rather than through engagement with others in communities of
shared critical thinking and informed civic participation. Surely no other
message could have captured the essence of the ideological underpinnings
of an individualistic consumer society. Because so many of us were frightened,
the lure of acting as if life could, indeed, go on as usual was compelling.
While we were shopping, our emboldened leaders promised to take care of
us, literally with a vengeance. But denial of danger was perforated with the
terrors of the immediate post–9/11 environment. Those who were closest
to Ground Zero, whose lives were directly affected, were most apt to suffer
deleterious effects to their core self, and capacities for agency, continuity,
cohesiveness, and affect were often compromised by dissociative defenses.4
The rest of the country’s citizens were subjected to an ongoing onslaught of
the terrifying scenes of the planes flying into the Twin Towers that repeat-
edly intruded into our lives via all the mass media. People spoke of little
else, and many obsessively worried, both alone and with one another, as

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they navigated an environment saturated with warnings of potential future suicide bombings and biochemical, nuclear, or anthrax attacks. Feelings of helplessness were exacerbated in the immediate aftermath by disclosures that the government was unprepared to protect us and an economic dislocation that threatened people’s jobs, investments, and savings. America was scared stiff, and patriotism, in the form of a law that bore its name—the Patriot Act—was the prescription offered by the Bush administration and Congress to keep us safe.

Robert Jay Lifton (2003) speaks of this dilemma in contemporary America in a slightly different way when he analyzes the pathology of the “superpower syndrome,” which he believes contains a basic contradiction stemming from the need to eliminate the experience of vulnerability. This need puts the superpower on what Lifton describes as a psychological treadmill. He writes, “The idea of vulnerability is intolerable, the fact of it irrefutable. One solution is to maintain an illusion of invulnerability. But the superpower then runs the danger of taking increasingly draconian actions to sustain that illusion. For to do otherwise would be to surrender the cherished status of superpower” (p. 129). Lifton’s view suggests a pathological transitional space in which primitive defenses prop up a leadership unable to tolerate the narcissistic blow to their omnipotent control over material and symbolic supplies of every kind throughout the world. These defenses impede those in power from being able to move beyond their grandiosity to learn from experience; for example, that people inevitably resist foreign occupations and can now do so with weapons of mass destruction; that political and economic policies focused on control over the world’s natural resources are based on short-sighted greed and unconscious denial of the immanent disappearance of oil and natural gas and the urgency with which we need to invest in research and development of alternative sustainable energy supplies; that the proliferation of nuclear weapons has a chance of being contained only if the world’s superpower ceases to threaten other countries and models the way to contain proliferation through a dismantling of its arsenal. For those in this country who do not exercise power, the sense of vulnerability produces a frightened, angry, and aggressive population that seeks relief through various defenses, including an identification with “the aggressor” leadership.

In Lacanian terms, the overwhelming nature of events such as 9/11 punctures through the socially constructed world’s capacity to protect us from terror, leaving us in states of defenselessness as we encounter the Real, that which we cannot ever quite get hold of or register symbolically, that which stays beyond the mind’s grasp and cannot be communicated between us. Its ominous and mystifying grip is manifested in the human capacity for destructiveness and violence. In Welcome to the Desert of the Real (Zizek, 2002), Zizek writes of the significance of the attack on the World Trade Center, “…on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable
to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition...the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre” (p. 19). Thus, for a time, consensual support of arbitrary government policies was secured because under dangerous social conditions that break through the barrier of threats that can be tolerated, the arousal of fear and insecurity adversely affects peoples’ capacity for critical thought, thereby diminishing what Peter Fonagy (2002) calls mentalization and promoting the reliance on an ideologized mode of thinking. The mobilization of omnipotent defenses against feelings of vulnerability is typical of traumatized states, and in the wake of 9/11, this defensive posture characterized not only individual citizens but the large group response of a superpower nation. The government’s bellicose policies in reaction to an unprecedented vulnerability reflected the need to reaffirm the hegemonic position of the United States in the world, all the while fulfilling citizens’ fantasies of being rescued by a strong leader who would enact wishes for revenge.

An important component of the traumatic significance of 9/11 was our experience of ourselves as targets of an arbitrary and unfathomably aggressive act. Why did we become the innocent victims of such a monstrous assault? As an ostensibly puzzled President Bush put it, “But why do they hate us? We are so good.” This stance represents what Christopher Bollas (1992) posits as “violent or radical innocence,” a psychic defense by which the denial of one’s own aggression is projected onto the other, who is then experienced as the source of one’s innocent victimhood. This defense simplifies consciousness and inhibits the capacity for symbolization, promoting paranoid schizoid splitting and projective mechanisms that characterized the states of mind of both leaders and citizens in this country. Shortly after 9/11, Hedda had an experience that illustrates this phenomenon. She called together a group of her colleagues to discuss their responses to the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. “Of course, early on, the question of ‘why do they hate us’ came up,” she told me, with more than a little irritation, “and I thought, okay, I know a little about this, so I tried to explain something about this country’s role in the world. I got resistance to this line of thinking, so I tried suggesting that we think together about how people are looking to Bush as a father figure who in fantasy we need to rely on to keep us safe. But that kind of minimal psychoanalytic thinking was not what they were interested in. They wanted to talk about revenge, how we could get even with the terrorists. They were afraid it might happen again, and no one but me was afraid of what we might do, what Bush might carry out in a kind of self-righteous vindication that would wind up being even more destructive. I felt isolated in my concerns, which were much more about our government than about the terrorists.”

As Hedda feared, this theme of violent innocence was manifested in the Bush administration’s adoption of an attitude of righteous entitlement to
aggressive retaliatory tactics that risked an ever-expanding war whose product would be the manufacture of thousands of new terrorists who also experience violent innocence in their conviction that the United States is a mortal enemy they must destroy. The recourse to violent innocence as a strategy to deal with the destabilizing effects of the terrorist attacks was framed by aspects of hegemonic ideology that have informed this country’s relationship to the rest of the world for centuries. Most U.S. citizens understand foreign policy through the government’s ideological lens as it is monotonously transmitted and reiterated through the corporate-owned media and the host of other institutions through which circulate, as Gramsci showed, hegemonic notions and practices that are felt to be the shared common sense of the social order. Citizens were thus receptive to their government’s self-representation of violent innocence based on the denial of U.S. expansionist policies that long predated 9/11. While we were in fact victims of hateful violence, the immediate conclusion of our innocent victimization and the assumption that the terrorists were motivated by envy—of our goodness, our freedoms, our material achievements—inhibited citizens’ capacity to think about how U.S. policies in the Middle East and Asia may have been an important source of terrorist hatred, about which we might be able to do something constructive. In this regard, a poster carried by participants in antiwar marches ironically asked a significant question regarding a motive for the invasion of Iraq. It read: “How did our oil get under their sand?!” The grandiosity in the attitude satirized in the poster has a long tradition in this country’s estimation of its superior institutions and values that are the foundation of U.S. foreign policy. Many citizens endorsed, however unknowingly, the ideological assumptions underlying the war on terror and its aggressive foreign and domestic policies. They identified with and thus gave consensual support to hegemonic depictions of this country’s invasion and occupation of Iraq as a force for democracy, liberty, and justice. War was the culturally acceptable response to the terrorist attacks because the government could rely on a historical reservoir of racism and neocolonial sentiments that has driven U.S. foreign policy for centuries.

Indeed, from the early history of the American colonies through the era of nation building, the social imaginary has been infused with themes related to American Exceptionalism, the notion that from its inceptions, the many immigrant peoples who compose this country’s population share a common bond based on self-evident truths that include freedom, inalienable natural and human rights, democracy, the rule of law, civil liberties, fair play, civic virtue, private property, and constitutional government. The idealized version of American Exceptionalism is that the people of the United States have been on a slow but continuous journey toward a destiny to perfect governance and to implement the hopes and ideas of its founding fathers. American Exceptionalism is related to Manifest Destiny, the historical belief that this country was ordained and destined by the God
of Christianity to extend its civilization across the North American continent and beyond. The theme of American Exceptionalism, that is, the virtue of the American people and their institutions, was articulated by 19th and 20th century exponents of Manifest Destiny, who argued on behalf of the God-given mission of the United States to redeem and remake the rest of the world (Fresonke, 2003; see also Black, 1988). Manifest Destiny has rationalized the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, the theft of one-third of Mexico and its citizens, the abusive exclusionary laws and customs aimed at immigrant workers, and the exploitation of labor and resources throughout the Global South. It is especially when the subjugated resist being dominated that U.S. superiority and entitlement are expressed through coercive violence to assure the maintenance of U.S. hegemony throughout the world. This tradition was reaffirmed in the mid-1990s, when a group of neoconservatives, many of whom later became major figures in the Bush administration, formed the Project for a New American Century. The PNAC was conceived as a post–Cold War strategy designed to maintain this nation’s role as the world’s only superpower in the 21st century by imposing a *Pax Americana* through force of arms. Control over the earth’s strategic energy resources was essential to PNAC’s vision, and long before 9/11, the invasion of Iraq was thought to be a necessary step toward achieving this objective (PNAC, 2007). Appropriation of Iraqi oil would be central to an agenda to increase defense spending, assume control over an essential commodity sought after by competing economies, including Europe and China; serve as a warning to other Middle East governments of U.S. power; and award government contracts through noncompetitive bidding to corporations close to and partially owned by PNAC members, such as Halliburton, Bechtel, and Blackwater (Gutwill, 2009).

The expansionist PNAC agenda was actualized by the Bush administration’s “war on terror” and constructed around rhetorically simplistic equations that were reproduced endlessly by the corporate media, by that time so concentrated that only six corporate monoliths owned all but 10% of the country’s newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations, books, records, movies, videos, wire services, and photo agencies (Media Reform Information Center, 2004). Media discourse conflated a complex reality by first morphing Osama bin Laden into Saddam Hussein, who then was identified with 9/11, then with terrorism, then with Hitler, then with Iraq, and then with the Iraqis. The belligerent actions of government were inverted through language distortion, encouraging citizens to identify with familiar hegemonic signifiers of American democracy: “seeking peace” was the symbolic language used for waging war. Bombing civilians was referred to as “liberating” them. “Collateral damage” and “soft targets” were reported, rather than the number of mothers, fathers, and children being killed and maimed by U.S. bombs. “Unpatriotic” was a code used to
justify the government’s attack on anyone with a dissenting view from official policy. “Freedom is on the march” was a euphemism for the unilateral preemptive invasion and occupation of other countries.

The administration’s simplistic discourse, which bifurcated the world into good and bad—civilization versus barbarism, the Christian world versus Islam, democracy versus an “axis of evil”—enabled citizens to identify with an all-powerful goodness, while all that was bad was projected onto a demonized other. This powerful emotional response exacerbated the difficulty of tolerating ambiguity and complexity typical of what Melanie Klein (1935, 1937) called the depressive position, characterized by the capacity to tolerate acknowledging one’s own aggressive impulses, feeling guilt, and making reparation. As Hanna Segal has argued, groups tend to be narcissistic, self-idealizing, and paranoid in relation to other groups and to shield themselves from knowledge about the reality of their own aggression, which of necessity is projected into an enemy—real or imagined—so that it can be demeaned, held in contempt, and then attacked. Under the traumatogenic conditions provoked by the terrorist attacks and then by the aggressive U.S. response, the capacity for empathy for the suffering of others collapsed. Psychologist Sam Keen (1986) describes what happens to people who are vulnerable to unconscious splitting:

Start with an empty canvas...Dip into the unconscious well of your own disowned darkness with a wide brush and stain the strangers with the sinister hue of the shadow. Trace onto the face of the enemy the greed, hatred, carelessness you dare not claim as your own. Erase all hints of the myriad loves, hopes, fears that play through the kaleidoscope of every finite heart...when your icon of the enemy is complete you will be able to kill without guilt, slaughter without shame. (p. 9)

As psychic defenses and ideology converged, shock and awe attacked U.S. citizens’ minds as well as their purported enemy.

The defensive significance of the ideological response to 9/11 has to do with another theme related to the threat of species annihilation that people have lived with since the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In this regard, Hedda once told me about an experience she had when she was deeply committed to the antinuclear movement to which she gave as much time, energy, and money as she could. She found that the psychoanalytic community was loath to take up social issues and struggles, even this overridingly important one. “I gave a paper at a psychoanalytic meeting about the threat of nuclear arsenals and proliferation,” she recalled, “and before I spoke, a very prominent analyst confided that at the time of Hiroshima he had been on his way to Tokyo, and that if it hadn’t been for the bomb, he and his fellow soldiers would surely have been killed. At least, that’s what they were told. Therefore, he proclaimed, he
found it hard to feel too worried and critical about the bomb. So I talked
to him about denial. Following the presentation of my paper he wrote me
a note to tell me that after listening to me, he could recognize in himself
what I meant and that it was very hard to persist with his denial. That was
a minor victory! But it wasn’t often repeated.” This defensive denial has
worked even more effectively and therefore dangerously among the decision
argues that the leaders of the United States, as well as other countries with
nuclear capabilities, have disavowed their own aggressive motivations as
they developed weapons of mass destruction. For well over half a century,
the military-industrial-congressional complex has produced an increasingly
dangerous world, as U.S. arms manufacturers have engaged in annual sales
of armaments and components of weapons of mass destruction to coun-
tries all over the world, including the Middle East and Asia. Geopolitical
interests and access to strategic resources, such as oil and natural gas,
have guaranteed U.S. governmental support of arms sales to nations and
groups who have used them against one another and sometimes against the
United States itself. Furthermore, over time, the complex process involving
research, allocation of government contracts, and production and sales of
armaments of all kinds has facilitated a fragmentation of responsibility
and accountability, which has made it easy for those involved to hide from
themselves the dangerous implications of their decisions and actions. Their
denial has resulted in the gross absence of government involvement in con-
structing reasonable programs aimed at emergency preparedness that could
protect—minimally at least—the civilian population in this country from
anyone who might use a weapon of mass destruction against us. Denial has
taken the form of “it won’t happen” or “it won’t be that bad.” New York
Times investigative journalists examined the reasons why the U.S. gov-
ernment has not done more over the past several decades to protect civil-
ians in this country from the dangers of a chemical, biological, or nuclear
attack. They quoted one officer in the U.S. military, who told them why
the military had no real plans to defend this country against a germ threat:
“There’s an in-box, an out-box, and a too-hard-to-do box...We saw it as
a threat, but we didn’t want to deal with it, to put together a war plan. It
was too difficult” (Miller, Engelberg, & Broad, 2002, p. 91). In this regard,
9/11 permitted the projection of responsibility for the menace to humanity
posed by the arms race onto the immediate threat by terrorists who might
very well have managed to buy or steal the components of germ warfare
or radiation bombs from sources financed or supplied by the United States
itself. This country has reconstructed itself from being a major player in the
proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to that of a victim, whose cur-
rent military escalation is defined exclusively as justifiable self-defense.

In the policies they developed following 9/11, our political leaders
assumed a posture of self-vindication divorced from the reality of the
history of U.S. imperial reach and their own declared designs to guarantee its superpower position in the world. Denial among the decision makers came in the form of projecting responsibility and guilt for their aggressive policies, insisting, for example, that their preemptive invasion of a sovereign country was the result of wrongs inflicted on them, not by them. In their arrogance they denied the reality of their motives and actions, had little respect for truth, and thus avoided any experience of shame. Most citizens were vulnerable to the ideological representations that mystified government policies, which converged with the need to maintain a sense of sanity and safety, often through disavowal. So, for example, some of us knew—and then “forgot”—that our ports, public buildings, nuclear power plants, waste sites, weaponry storage centers, and chemical and biological research facilities were not safe because of lack of oversight and protective strategies. We knew—and then “forgot”—that the budgets necessary for such protection were not supported by the government even as it warned of imminent terrorist attacks. Instead, we were told that our leaders would protect us through making war on other countries and expanding exponentially the definition of a terrorist to include anyone who opposes the policies of this country. And while U.S. citizens were still reeling from the devastation of 9/11, the government implemented a broad range of political and economic policies that expanded the influence of the executive branch at the expense of our constitutional system of checks and balances and developed an economic and military policy that favored the interests of a narrow sector of the population over those of the majority.

These developments were facilitated by the convergence of ideology and psychological defenses, demonstrating Zizek’s notion of hegemony, that “they do not know it, but they are doing it.” Thus were stifled critical reflection, restraint, and dialogue in the early years of the U.S. response to 9/11. A more long-range, thoughtful response might have included, in addition to pursuing and containing terrorist networks, an internationally collaborative constructive policy along the lines of the Marshall Plan, which underwrote European reconstruction after World War II, that could have helped to alter the social conditions that stimulate resentment, hatred, and impotence, all-too-fertile ground for terrorist movements. Such a shift in orientation would mean that we had discovered a national capacity to understand our history and to learn from experience. Indeed, it would take into account a reality-based, complex appreciation of this dangerous world and the United States’s contribution to it, and thus represent the political equivalent of moving from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, from primitive splitting and projection to integrative and reparative capacities.

But there is yet another factor that enabled the administration to implement its domestic and foreign policies with so little opposition for a time. I believe that in a paradoxical way, in addition to its traumatic significance, the crisis of 9/11 also represented a shared group opportunity. An
aggressive foreign policy permitted Americans to experience a temporary, albeit illusory, reparation of the internally generated cumulative traumatic stressors due to the deep divisions in this country that predated 9/11. In this sense, the terrorist attacks symbolically constituted a defensive relief of persecutory anxiety experienced by citizens who had been living in a culture undergoing a deterioration from within. This phenomenon is related to Robert J. Lifton’s concept of death anxiety. From early on in life, argues Lifton, we struggle for vitality and ultimately for symbolic immortality. Early experiences with separation, loss, and fears of disintegration represent death equivalents. In this sense they are precursors of imagery, symbolization, and meaning connected to “a life-death model or paradigm” (Caruth, 1995, p. 130). Lifton’s concept of psychic numbing refers to the inability to work through trauma and deal with it symbolically. If the traumatized individual cannot reconstitute her former self as she metabolizes the traumatogenic experience, there is a perverse quest for meaning that includes the exploitation of other people psychologically. As Lifton puts it, in response to traumatic situations that are not integrated, “we reassert our own vitality and symbolic immortality by denying [others] their right to live and by identifying them with the death taint, by designating them as victims” (Caruth, 1995, p. 139). In other words, destructiveness entails the projection of death anxiety onto others, who become its container. Lifton adds that human beings cannot kill large numbers of people except by claiming a virtuous motive, “so that killing on a large scale is always an attempt at affirming the life power of one’s own group” (Caruth, 1995, p. 140).

I employ Lifton’s notion of death anxiety to suggest that 9/11 symbolically constituted a diminishing of persecutory anxiety that stemmed from living in a society that during prior decades had been imploding, the symptoms of which included the erosion of family and community, the corruption of government in league with the powerful, the abandonment of working people by profit-driven corporations going international, urban plight, a violence-addicted media (Hollander & Gutwill, 2002), a spiritually bereft culture held prisoner to the almighty consumer ethic, racial discrimination, misogyny, gay bashing, growing numbers of families joining the homeless, and environmental devastation. From my perspective, 9/11 permitted a respite among citizens from a general sense of internal decay by stimulating a renewed vitality via a reconfiguration of political and psychological forces: Profound tensions within this country yielded to a wave of nationalism in which a united people—Americans all—stood as one against external aggression. The generosity, solidarity, and self-sacrifice expressed by Americans toward one another immediately following 9/11 and the sacrifice of young Americans in Iraq during subsequent years served to reaffirm our sense of ourselves as capable of achieving the “positive” depressive position sentiments of love, empathy, and self-sacrifice for
the group. Fractured social relations were promised symbolic repair. The threat to our integrity as a nation could be displaced from the web of complex internal forces difficult to understand and change onto a simple and identifiable enemy from outside of us that could be used as a blank screen for our collective projections. This country’s response to 9/11 in part demonstrates how persecutory anxiety is more easily dealt with in individuals and in groups when it appears to be provoked from the outside rather than from internal sources.

My view is that our sense of American Exceptionalism, in this case, our exemption from living with economic deprivations and political polarizations that characterize life for other people in other countries, was already under attack several decades before 9/11. As I see it, many sectors of U.S. society were living in conditions of ongoing and repetitive stressors that constituted the social equivalent of strain or cumulative trauma (Khan, 1963). This was a time when the problems suffered beyond our borders became ours as well: In the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States announced a New World Order and a deregulated free-market version of corporate capitalism that would become a global system overseen by the only superpower in a newly unipolar world. Usually referred to as “globalization,” for many social theorists it is the context for our increasingly dangerous world: Patterns of international investment and trade have concentrated wealth in fewer and fewer hands and have impoverished more and more people around the world. It is a system that uproots peoples’ minds by diminishing their access to jobs, land, education, health care, resources, security, and predictability—the material foundation of psychological cohesion and stability.5 As Brazilian President Lula put it, the biggest weapon of mass destruction in the world is hunger.6 Although Lula was referring to the desperate condition of the poor throughout the world—the neocolonial peoples whom Franz Fanon called “the wretched of the earth”—many citizens in the United States have not been immune from the impact of corporate globalization.

By the early 21st century, citizens in the United States still benefited, as we had historically, from living in the richest county in the world—a country that represents 4.5 percent of the world’s population but consumes 25 percent of the world’s resources, including its energy. Although our general standard of living outdistanced every other country, in the past several decades class inequities dramatically increased. Disturbing patterns in the distribution of wealth not seen since the days immediately prior to the Great Depression had emerged by 2000: The top 1 percent of the population held almost 40 percent of the wealth in the United States. Downward trends in employment, wages, job security, and benefits for working people and increased bankruptcies for small businesses accompanied the shift from a manufacturing economy to a services-based economy, characterized by low wages and nonunionized jobs. As New Deal and Great Society
social programs unraveled, along with the percentage of the work force organized into unions, a shift in poverty from female-headed households to two-parent families emerged. In the wealthiest country in the world, one in five children was living in poverty. And the income gap based on race continued: The median family income for whites had come to be 11 times that of Latino families and 14 times that of Black families (Economic Policy Institute, 2003). These patterns, although experienced by many working people and minority groups, were not understood by citizens as a manifestation of foundational problems characteristic of the neoliberal free-market system and war economy. Moreover, a mass-mediated culture promulgated ubiquitous narratives and images of violence that mirrored and stimulated cycles of violence in homes, at the workplace, in schools, and on the streets (Hollander & Gutwill, 2006). As cultural critic Mark Dery suggests, in The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium (1999), the mass media landscape was collapsing the sublime and announcing the obscene, the horrific, and the hilarious, in which “thermonuclear weapons systems and soft drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudoevents, science and pornography” (p. 36). Mark Selzer describes the pathological public sphere as “shock and trauma; states of injury and victim status; the wound, the disease, the virus, and epidemics of violence; disaster, accident, catastrophe, and mass death; the abnormal normality of paranoia and psychosis; the pornography of mass-mediated desires and other forms of addiction and artificial life” (Dery, 1999, p. 36). The real and virtual environment of violence from the 1990s on has expanded the customary legitimate parameters for the aggressive expression of frustration and anxiety.

The deindustrialization of America had serious political and ideological consequences as well. The geographical area known as the rust belt—the South and the prairie and mountain states—was most deeply affected, precisely where the neoconservative movement took root.7 The neoconservatives won the hearts and minds of the underemployed, those without jobs, those who had lost their family farms, and still others whose small businesses had gone bankrupt. These people were vulnerable to the organizing efforts from the 1980s on by a right-wing movement whose neoconservative ideology replaced class as a category of social experience and political struggle with the “culture wars”: support for prayer in the schools, and publicly funded religious social services, chauvinistic patriotism, and opposition to reproductive and gay rights. Religious fundamentalism was the glue that held the neoconservative movement together. The Republican Party, historically the political representation of the wealthy, was refashioned ideologically into the standard-bearer of the oppressed. Class rage was displaced from the bosses and an exploitative economic system onto the liberal establishment, geographically identified with the coastal states and politically with the Democratic Party and moderate Republicans. Liberalism and its affinity for secularism,
acceptance of ethnic diversity, and support for female, gay, and workers’ rights became the symbol for the persecution of traditional, God-fearing Americans. These citizens shielded themselves from the social, economic, and cultural shifts in this country by joining the battle for a return to the reliable, clear, and firm boundaries of the traditional family, control over women’s reproductive rights, and religious fundamentalism (Frank, 2004; Bageant, 2007).

Thus ideology and manic defenses joined to ward off the vulnerability produced by complex social forces. This conservative populist movement was mobilized in part during the 2000 electoral campaign by the Republicans’ ideological manipulation of Clinton’s sexual dalliances as proof positive of liberalism’s violation of family values and Christian morality to become a pillar of support that brought George W. Bush and his neoconservative coalition into the White House. During the first Bush administration, the conservative movement, including fundamentalist Christian religious organizations and right-wing media broadcasters and Internet bloggers, successfully mobilized support for neoconservative domestic and foreign policies.

For a time, the government’s ideological use of 9/11 managed to succeed in suppressing critical voices, which were equated with anti-Americanism and antipatriotism in a time of national peril. This campaign was so effective that by the second Bush administration, the neoconservatives monopolized the political agenda, and it seemed as if no viable oppositional movement would arise to challenge its legitimacy.

This, then, was the social matrix of psychic experience that characterized the initial years of our post–9/11 era. As has occurred elsewhere under similar political conditions, the institutional and ideological hegemony of a powerful political group allied with core economic interests produced for a time a bystander population, by which I mean people who were either identified uncritically with the dominant ideology or became frightened, disinterested, cynical, or alienated by authoritarian control over the political process and discourse. Psychologist Ervin Staub (1989) has pointed out that bystander populations inadvertently, through low-level acceptance or active complicity, play a supportive role in their government’s perpetration of all kinds of immoral and illegal policies in their name, and in so doing, inhibit the healthy functioning of democracy.

SOCIAL TRAUMA AND THE PROBLEM OF THE BYSTANDER

One of the signs of the assault on the healthy functioning of our democracy has been the shocking evidence of the U.S. practice of torture of detainees from Iraq to Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay. How do citizens deal psychologically with the knowledge that they live in a country whose democracy
violates international human rights conventions in its treatment of prisoners and detainees? What is the impact of living in a society whose president has assumed executive privilege to declare any individual, including American citizens, to be an enemy combatant and thus suffer an indeterminate imprisonment without charges or access to due process? Just as in Argentina during the Dirty War, citizens in this country are obliged to psychologically manage the generalized threat when the law becomes an arbitrary tool, and no one can be certain if and when any specific individual might become a target of the random implementation of authoritarian power.

It is June 10, 2006, and these issues emerge as Hedda and I talk together during the lunch break at a one-day conference in the series that the Uprooted Mind Committee has organized over the several years since our initial three-day conference in October 2004. Today’s event is called “Psychoanalytic Ethics in a Time of War,” and our speaker is Nina Thomas, a New York–based psychologist/psychoanalyst who has specialized in trauma related to war, ethnic conflict, and state-sponsored repression.8 In her morning presentation, “Our Times Are Not Times for Silence,” Nina described the struggles that a group of psychoanalysts within the American Psychological Association have been engaged in to oppose the participation of psychologists in interrogations of enemy combatants, prisoners, and detainees.9 Hedda and I are sharing our impressions of the audience’s responses to Nina’s analysis of the conflicting reports of the use of torture by U.S. forces against the country’s declared enemies and the controversies surrounding the participation of psychologists in the teaching, training, and supervising of “enhanced interrogations methods” carried out by the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). We note the contradiction inherent in the fact that many of the audience members, most of whom are educated, middle-class professionals, acknowledged feeling shocked as they learned about the practices of their profession and their government, even while news reports related to Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and CIA extraordinary renditions have already filtered through the information barriers to create contentious debate in many corners of U.S. society. It seems to us to be a good example of how individuals employ disavowal in the face of a disconcerting, centering, or dangerous reality, which they can be aware of at one moment, only to “forget” about the next, with the result that it has no coherent psychic significance. This, Hedda and I agree, is a frequently encountered defense that in the context of the larger social world contributes to citizens’ becoming bystanders to their government’s problematic actions.

Hedda is telling me that she is profoundly bothered by how so many people in this country appear to be disinterested in the multiple dangers facing us, not the least of which are the policies of the Bush administration that represent more danger, violence, and death in the world. “I think about the difference between the repressive period of the 1950s and what’s
happening now. During the McCarthy period, I wasn’t nearly as worried as I am now. Maybe it was because I was busy building a career and working on my marriage, but it seemed less dangerous then. Although it was scary, I always thought the constitutional structures of this country would be able to sustain themselves in the face of that right-wing campaign, that the American people would go to the edge, then find their minds, retreat, and opt to salvage their democracy. I think that happened with McCarthy and even finally in response to the Vietnam War. I don’t see that now, and even though the polls show that 60 percent of the people are opposed to Bush’s policies, I’m convinced that he will take care of that through his discourse around terrorism—the “war on terror,” the terrorists, the “axis of evil.”

Ironically, in response to Bush’s foreign policy, there is increasing hatred against the United States, so it’s also likely there will be a retaliatory attack here. But I’m still more worried about the evidence of state terror in this country through all the attempts of the government to take away civil liberties, the abuse by the media, the fact that the president can do whatever he wants. We don’t know how many phones are tapped, how many personal records are being investigated, how many people are in jail, or what’s happening to them when they’re there. No Geneva Conventions apply here now. And what’s really disturbing is that with all of Bush’s rhetoric about homeland security, his administration’s done nothing to protect our nuclear reactors or ports. In the meantime, this abuse of power is very dangerous. It’s the lying to people, the distortion of facts, the inane discourse coming out of the White House that imperils us.”

I agree that the social environment we live in is indeed riddled with these frightening paradoxes, and I ask Hedda what her psychoanalytic perspective is regarding the difficulty people have in understanding how their anxieties, apprehensions, and depressive states may have something to do with the larger social world beyond their personal relationships and work situations. “It’s too overwhelming,” she muses, “…and defenses set in. Denial is the first defense, and then a kind of isolation from political concerns takes place. There’s a good deal of repression, and then there is the helplessness: ‘I can’t do anything about this overwhelming mess.’ And when you feel helpless, anyone who makes you feel that way becomes an object of hate and rage. Hate is an unpleasant feeling—it’s potentially dangerous because the people you hate can retaliate. And then there’s the complication for people who suffer superego conflicts, people whose ethics don’t permit them to act on rage; these people want to deny any relatedness to the grave political situation because the hatred they feel makes them feel helpless. The opposite happens for some of those who go to fight in Iraq because they want to act and help. Volunteering can help them feel there is something they can do. They feel they’ve made a choice without realizing that an external force is responsible for imposing it on them.”
Hedda is describing some aspects of the dynamic that produces bystander populations, which, as I indicated earlier, Ervin Staub argues inadvertently support their government’s perpetration of immoral and illegal policies in their name. Denial operates on many levels, both conscious and unconscious, and can be manifested in a lack of emotional responsiveness, a cognitive process that blocks factual information, an inability to assume a moral position of responsibility, and an incapacity to take action in light of knowledge. As Hedda indicates, we often try to protect ourselves from the annihilation anxiety stimulated by our threatening social reality by creating an illusion of safety. Denial helps to ward off feelings of intolerable vulnerability as we retreat into the narrow dimensions of personal concerns we want to believe are disconnected from social issues. There are additional psychological recourses we have at our disposal. We can assume an absolutist state of mind whose paranoid-schizoid defenses transform fear into hatred, which is typical of anti-immigrant vigilante organizations and fundamentalist religious movements. We can identify with aggressive political leaders and policies whose ideological discourse involves splitting—us versus them—that permits the projection of badness onto an enemy whose destruction is then experienced as a form of manic invulnerability. We also disavow the ubiquitous dangers we face, letting ourselves know about them at one moment and turning away from knowing the next in an effort to reestablish something akin to what D. W. Winnicott called a sense of going-on-being. Disavowal thus reinstates a temporary (and illusory) sense of psychic equilibrium. Many of us simply lose ourselves in the manic retreat offered by postmodern consumer culture or willfully refuse to read the papers and watch the news so as to push away the dread produced by our threatening social world.

In addition to the need to protect ourselves from anxieties produced by a dangerous external world, an attitude of disinterest can be a defensive maneuver to avoid potential internally generated conflict: If we actually let ourselves know about what is real, in this case what lies behind the official story of an authoritarian regime, we run the risk of having to act and thereby threaten our sense of personal safety. To put it psychoanalytically, we face the peril of an intrapsychic dilemma: the price we pay if we do not satisfy superego or ego-ideal mandates for internal moral consistency between our convictions and our willingness to behave in concert with them. The bystander position thus not only protects us from the experience of external threats but from the internal danger of self-indictment. However, this safety is secured at the risk of perpetuating the conditions that provoke the need for the employment of the defenses of the bystander in the first place, thus maintaining us in a repetitive need to adapt to hegemonic structures and discourses that oppress us. All of these defenses employed in the bystander position are deeply permeated by the internalization of

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hegemonic ideology, which is defended because it is experienced as a core part of identity.

But we also have the capacity to assess the nature of the threats in the social world and to actively engage in myriad ways to reform the very conditions we find unacceptable. In so doing, we can make possible a sense of personal agency and connection to community that helps to contain fear, anxiety, and dread. The disengagement from hegemony represents new possibilities that are liberating but also experienced as potentially threatening: When one’s belief in and attachment to political authorities and hegemonic ideology is undermined, a potential psychological as well as political destabilization is often experienced. Just as in the therapeutic experience, in the political domain, disengaging from attachments to bad objects, individuating from destructive relationships, and acknowledging painful realities can lead to feelings of despair and dread. The capacity to mourn one’s losses, face uncertainty, and tolerate vulnerability can enable individuals to make new attachments that help them move from feelings of impotence toward a new sense of engagement and thus hopefulness.

How can we explain this capability of people to disengage from hegemony? In the Freudian account of the subject, our earliest experiences are rooted in dependence on parental authority, a dependence out of which the formation of the superego constitutes such a powerful identification with authority because it is saturated with the vicissitudes of sexuality and aggression. We can deduce that this conflictual relationship provides the foundation for a subjectivity that is constituted through identification with as well as resistance toward authority. This ambivalence is so deep-seated that it is destined to be repeated throughout life, not only within the family but in one’s relationship to the larger social group. Resistance to authority may be understood from a Kleinian perspective as the depressive position capacity that permits the subject to tolerate the uncertainty and complexity of psychic and external reality; to rely less on splitting, projection, and omnipotent control over others; to take responsibility and feel guilt for one’s own aggressive impulses; and to make creative reparation. This victory of love over hate can be realized through engagement in political movements that stress libidinal connections in the struggles for social structures of equity and justice. Gramsci emphasized that the consciousness of subordinated social groups is fissured and uneven, in part drawn from the “official story” of the ruling ideology, and in part from their own experience of social reality. The inchoate, ambiguous aspects of experience can at moments be raised to the status of a coherent critique and alternative world view that coalesce in oppositional movements. A Lacanian point of view suggests that hegemonic practices can never provide the suture that completely covers over or permanently repairs the original gap or wound that forms the basis of the subject’s alienation. As Zizek declares with respect to the interpellation
performed by hegemonic ideological apparatuses, “for psychoanalysis, the subject emerges when and in so far as interpellation...fails. Not only does the subject never fully recognize itself in the interpellative call: Its resistance to the symbolic identity provided by interpellation is the subject” (p. 121). For Zizek, our salvation lies in recognizing the importance of and engaging in the act that goes beyond the horizons of what appears to be possible and redefines the very contours of what is possible (Butler, Laclau, & Zizek, 2000).

Even before the United States attacked Iraq, the first signs of resistance to authority occurred in the historically unprecedented internationally coordinated antiwar demonstrations on March 20, 2003, in which millions of people all over the world and within the heart of the empire opposed a U.S. invasion of that sovereign country. Since then, initially on the margins in a variety of progressive organizations, and then in the political center of U.S. society, a vast and multifaceted oppositional movement grew to salvage our democracy and to fight for social justice. A transitional space emerged for citizens to think about alternatives and to question the neoconservatives’ agenda, a process that in the 2008 presidential election won a victory for progressive Democrat Barack Obama.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. It is time first to turn to the part of our story that has to do with the Latin American experience, which touches on another aspect of the problem of the bystander. Most U.S. citizens, if they think about U.S.–Latin American relations at all, have been uncritically identified with the tenets of Manifest Destiny and the assumption that U.S. policy toward Latin America represents a force for democracy, liberty, and modernization in a backward region of the world lucky to receive the beneficent interest of their wealthy neighbor to the north. Most people in this country have known little about their government’s long-term strategy to ensure U.S. hegemony in the region, which has included for well over a century political and military interference in the internal affairs of Latin American countries. U.S. citizens have had little real notion of how, in their name, their government’s policies pursue the interests of U.S. and Latin American political and economic elites to the detriment of the well-being and human rights of the majority of Latin American middle- and working-class families. Too few of us have been aware of our government’s ideological and material support for authoritarian regimes and repression of progressive movements and governments committed to social and economic reform. U.S. citizens have stood by, immobilized ideologically, as their government supplies weaponry and counterinsurgency training, including torture, to Latin American governments intent on preserving the neoliberal economic model whose devastating effects on working people have now directly affected us in the very heart of the empire.
During the era of state terror in Latin America from the 1960s through the 1990s, the U.S. National Security Doctrine functioned as the ideological frame for this country’s geopolitical interests that supported military dictatorships from Guatemala to Argentina. As Alfred McCoy (2006) has shown in his study of the CIA’s role in the dissemination of torture throughout the Americas, “…U.S. training programs provided sophisticated techniques, up-to-date equipment, and moral legitimacy for the practice [of torture], producing a clear correspondence between U.S. Cold War policy and the extreme state violence of the authoritarian age in Latin America” (p. 11). It is to this authoritarian era and its legacy in the cultures of impunity in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay that we now turn our attention. Our Latin American psychoanalytic colleagues’ experiences and their perspectives on living with terror and resisting it will help to illuminate the book’s final chapters when we return to an analysis of our own recent history of terror and the ongoing struggles against it.

ENDNOTES

1. Freud was the inspiration for the development of free and low-fee psychoanalytic treatment for working-class families in Berlin and Vienna. For a description of this socially responsible psychoanalytic project, see chapter 8.

2. This was the first time that all psychoanalytic institutes in Los Angeles cosponsored an event and the first time in the city’s history that psychoanalysts had organized a conference focused on thinking psychoanalytically about multiple threats in the social environment. The original committee was composed of two representatives from each of the seven psychoanalytic institutes and groups in Los Angeles. In addition to the principal speakers and the breakout sessions, the final day of the conference featured presentations on resilience and community activism by psychoanalysts engaged in specific projects in the Los Angeles area. Following the initial three-day conference, its success motivated some of the committee members—including Hedda Bolgar, Joy Schary, Carol Mayhew, Bonnie Engdahl, Barry Miller, Samoan Barish, and myself—to remain together for several additional years, during which we have organized a series of one-day conferences on specific topics that are described in chapter 7.

3. For a more detailed analysis, see Hollander and Gutwill (2006).

4. For an in-depth and integrative analysis of adult onset trauma and dissociative mechanisms, see Boulanger (2007).


7. For detailed accounts of this history and contemporary manifestations, see Frank (2004) and Sperling (2004).

8. Nina Thomas is a psychologist/psychoanalyst who has worked extensively in the area of trauma attendant to war, ethnic conflict, and state-sponsored repression. Among her activities, she volunteers with Doctors of the World conducting psychological evaluations of asylum seekers. See Thomas (2004, 2006).

9. This story of how Section 9 of the American Psychological Association’s Division of Psychoanalysis, Psychoanalysis for Social Responsibility, led the struggle within the organization against the participation of psychologists in interrogations of detainees held by the state, is recounted in detail in chapter 8.

10. For U.S. involvement in repression in Latin America, see also Harbury (2005) and Perkins (2005, 2007)