

Book Review

The War Hotel: Psychological Dynamics in Violent Conflict.

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Paul Solomon

AUT UNIVERSITY, AUCKLAND

War frames our lives. We live, as Billy Bragg (1985) put it, “*Between the Wars*”; or we live during wars, or after wars; or we live in terror of the threat of war; or get passionately aroused into war. We may watch helplessly as TV news shows us events of horror and violence overseas; on 19th June this year New Zealanders watched video on TV3 News of Kiwi troops under fire in Afghanistan, recorded on a soldier’s helmet-cam. Recent events unfolded once more on TVNZ with gut-wrenching inevitability: I watched as two soldiers were killed, and four injured. The survivors probably will return home traumatised. My interest in reviewing *The War Hotel* was personal: my grandfather fought in the First World War, my father in the Second World War. I served in the Israeli Defense Force, 1965-1967, and soon felt appalled by Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. Some of my Jewish extended family perished in Poland during the Shoah. All humanity is touched by war, in varying degrees of separation.

In *The War Hotel* Arlene Audergon examines the psychological dynamics of how we are sucked into violence, and describes her work facilitating inter-group awareness and acceptance of differences, work that can engender peace and reconciliation between warring groups. She explains the methods of politicians and military leaders who understand how to use human psychology to manipulate us into war, or into passive acquiescence or tacit consent by calling on our highest ideals of group loyalty, idealism, and desire for justice. Audergon shows how, by increasing our awareness, we can step out of violent systems instead of repeating them. Using various theoretical perspectives including Arnold Mindell’s (1993) process work and her own involvement in theatre, Audergon describes her work with Lane Ariei and other colleagues in building a culture of peace in post-conflict situations, particularly in Croatia. She includes examples from other violent conflicts in Ruanda, Nazi Germany, Israel-Palestine, South Africa, in the breakdown of communism in Europe, and in the history of African Americans and Native Americans in the USA.

The book describes terror tactics that politicians and military leaders can use to mobilise our deep fears to create a climate of fear, where people who are different from us can be demonised so that human rights’ violations and ethnic cleansing become acceptable. Audergon describes the “bogyman” phenomenon as “part of our inner dreamscape, fairytales and mythology” (p. 84) where disowned parts of our self are projected into the targeted group: she mentions Jews, Blacks, Roma, homosexuals, the homeless, large corporations, Croats, Muslims, Serbs, Osama Bin Laden, President Saddam Hussein, and President (George) Bush. The problem, Audergon believes, lies in our adult conscious denial of what she refers to as the mythic dimension: a denial that it shapes our emotion and perception “while we replicate the myth in our relationships and

social and political interactions” (p. 85). The remedy Audergon prescribes is to become aware of our inner dreamscape.

The book is very wide-ranging; reading it I sometimes felt overwhelmed by a profusion of penetrating insights arranged in short sections; an engaged reader is taken on a powerful journey. For example, on the topic of accountability and justice Audergon says, "as long as ‘their’ story (whether African-American, Native American, Jewish, Palestinian, East Timorese, Central American, Afghani) is not considered ‘our’ story, our shared history cannot move forward." (p. 50) Loyalty to one’s own group prevents one from seeing and feeling the suffering of the “others”. Reading this I remembered that here in Aotearoa New Zealand “the culture, institutions and practices of New Zealand Europeans are routinely accepted as the natural, obvious way things are and should be and, consequently, they are not seen as cultural” (Nairn, 2013): for Pākehā and Māori New Zealanders a challenge implicit in this book might be to make the emotional and intellectual leap of accepting “their” story as “our” story. Audergon notes that privilege gives us a blinkered view that excludes the view of “the others” and reinforces our entitlement and feeling of rightness. This reminded me of my process of disillusionment with Israel in 1967, when my once-cherished cultural indoctrination into the idealised kibbutz mythos was stripped away as I came to the painful realisation that the state of Israel was built on stolen land; and the persecuted refugees from Europe had, shamefully, become persecutors of Palestinians.

Audergon offers a rich description of the unfolding of a group forum in Croatia. She makes links between her body feelings and the fear they uncover for her in her role as a conductor of the group, and the spoken or unspeakable experiences of group participants with their memories of past trauma, or un-remembered “ghosts” (p. 167) influencing present experiences. By bringing the “ghosts” into awareness, they can be processed in the group and lead to open dialogue. Audergon writes in accessible and transparent language. Group conductors using other theoretical frameworks might resonate easily with her descriptions, and address similar phenomena in different language; for example, Volkan (2004) wrote:

members of a massively traumatized group cannot successfully complete certain psychological tasks and they, then, transmit such tasks to the children of the next generation(s) along with the conscious and unconscious shared wish that the next generation(s) will resolve them. (p. 1)

I think Volkan’s “tasks” show themselves as something akin to Audergon’s “ghosts”.

Audergon works with Mindell's concept of archetypal group "roles", which, she suggests, are "like nodes in an underlying structure of a conflict" (p. 166). She describes bringing "roles" to consciousness and available for processing by inviting group members to move into a place in the room set up to contain roles such as the "insider and outsider, oppressor or oppressed" (p. 166), and observes that the roles remain the same, although the people filling these roles change through history. This recalls W.B. Yeats' (1913) insight:

Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!
A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.

Throughout history large group conflicts have been expressed in revolutions, and the persecuted and persecutors exchange roles, as described by Yeats. Peace treaties seldom resolve underlying tensions: for example the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 led in Germany to the rise of the Nazis and directly to World War II. Audergon's core message is that through awareness of psychological dynamics between groups, and also through skilled support for emotionally honest communication we can awake from the nightmare of wars, step out of the endless cycle of retaliation and revenge, and achieve real and lasting peace after conflict between warring groups.

References

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Paul Solomon is a lecturer in the Psychotherapy Department at AUT University and practices as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist.