RAGE
A Psychoanalytical Interpretation

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Most likely as a consequence of my fields of ethnographic experience (Jerusalem and the Occupied West Bank from 1983, [now Former] Yugoslavia from 1991), I've found a recurrence of two theoretical concerns in my work; one is with the way what I've called "antagonism" shapes social and political engagement, while the other is with how alterity is incorporated into the practices of everyday life. The first concern engages with "rage" as a deep-seated response to a perceived antagonism insofar as, in the words of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "in the case of antagonism ... the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 125). Here the antagonist blocks the subject's self-realisation, and, whether the antagonist is a national enemy whose presence consolidates nationalist solidarity to exterminate its malign form or, as in Kimberly Lau's essay in this volume, a missing measuring cup blocking one from realising a project in which one is invested, the presence of that "thing" can provoke a psychological response we term "rage." I draw, in this short comment, on Freudian and Lacanian analytic concepts as I believe that there are certain proclivities towards rage, developed in early childhood, that are drawn on in later life and expressed in culturally specific idioms learned as those individuals subsequently engage with surrounding social networks.[1] These proclivities provide the responses individuals call on, to greater or lesser extents, when – and if – they "lose it" in short-term tantrums. In some, however, this repository of rage is insufficiently drained in brief outbursts and remains available to be worked on by political and religious ideologists and demagogues that enrol them in such structured violences as the genocidal wars in Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda (to mention only recent cases) as well as the impelled viciousness currently being enacted by the so-called Islamic State. The fact that different individuals respond to, or refuse, calls to rage driven violence indicates differences in their psychological make-up that, I would argue, reflect differences in their early encounters with, and responses to, perceived antagonisms. There are, of course, many ways in which the potential, or short-term eruption, of rage is channelled or sublimated so as to, as Handke says, "bring forth good stuff" and the essays in this volume illustrate a number of these more positive "uses." I will therefore conclude, after discussing some of the ways rage generates "bad stuff," by engaging with my second concern and looking at ways of encountering alterity without finding it antagonistic – ways which may be, in the context of contemporary European and American cultures with their dedication to personal satisfaction, being etiolated.

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Rage, be it an expression of personality or a socially promoted state of mind, draws on a Manichaen dualism between the good self and the evil other. This oppositional structure has its roots in the earliest experiences of infancy and is "worked" in various ways through the child's developmental progress to

produce well acculturated as well as rage prone individuals.

The infant's entry into the symbolic order, initiated when the child learns that it must call to another for what it desires, is simultaneously an expulsion from a world in which it subsequently "remembers" it had had everything it wanted. Freud, in the opening section of *Civilization and its Discontents*, posits that "the infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him" and that this experience may give rise to inchoate memories of "an oceanic feeling" like a "limitless narcissism" (Freud 1963: 3–4, 9). In this pre-linguistic state the child has no conceptual apparatus with which to distinguish "inside" from "outside," and thus perceives itself as locus and source of sensation and what gives rise to sensation. The child's entry into language is integrally linked with its growing awareness that the breast (or bottle) – its source of nutrition, stimulus and pleasure – is sporadically withdrawn from it; in encountering that absence the child learns to name, and demand, that which is lacking. Thus being separated from the carer – even if only sporadically – the child is forced from the narcissistic omnipotence of sensing that the world and itself are coterminous to knowing not only that it is only part of a world but furthermore that it is a small and relatively helpless part which must call upon others who have the power to give it – and deprive it of – what it wants.

After the moment in which the world is taken up by language,[2] primal "enjoyment" (which Lacan terms *jouissance*) remains only as the trace of an absence. As David Eng succinctly phrases this loss in *The Feeling of Kinship*,

the subject's primary displacement comes not through the loss of the mother but through the fall into language. When we enter language, we lose the fullness of our being. Language alienates us from our plenitude. The displacement of the subject into language, into the symbolic world of meaning, demands the sacrifice of being, the forfeiture of presence, the loss of the "here-and-now." Forever idealized and sought after, the here-

and-now is retroactively erected as the origin of our desires, the impossible what-has-been that we can never recapture or recuperate. (Eng 2010: 87)

That absence or lack serves as a screen onto which we project fantasies of fulfilment – of full enjoyment – in the form of objects or scenarios of desire. These "part objects," which fetishistically stand in for the *jouissance* which has been irrecuperably lost,[3] seem to promise access to the fulfilment from which language has banished us. As such, they cover the abyss of that primal lack and enable us to fantasize that "if we had this thing we would have our happiness (*jouissance*)." Thus, although that lack can never be anything more this side of language than the wound of an amputation, it nonetheless remains the field on which we inscribe the desires that drive our self-motivated activities.

The idea of amputation – of something brutal that has been done to sever us from that part of ourselves which gave us our pleasure – brings up, of course, the question "who has done this thing to us?" In Lacanian terms this violator is that being which makes us know the foundations of language by introducing us as infants to presence and absence (self and not self) through what the child retrospectively comes to recognise as its demand that the carer leave the child and come to it. Although Freud calls this figure "the Father," it need neither be personified nor gendered – it is something/someone outside the union of infant's body with that which feeds, comforts and sustains it which the infant, reflecting on its initial incursion into signification,[4] recognises as breaking that union through the assertion of its presence – its "voice."

Once the child comes to recognise the necessity of operating within the symbolic order, it channels its desires into certain patterns of behaviour through learning that certain activities will provide fulfilment (and others punishment). Through its experience of parental reward and deprivation it comes to constitute for itself an image ("the ego ideal") of what it must be to earn the love of those it desires and the things with which those others can provide it. This image of the "good self" serves, through an

internalization of what the child perceives the parents desire it to be, to establish the child's identity within normative patterns of motivation and expectation. This process of enculturation functions, nonetheless, through a process of temporary displacement whereby the child imagines that it will still be able to fulfil all of its desires despite having to modify its tactics to accommodate the demands of its parents. The narcissistic will to power still underlies the child's relationship with the symbolic order.

It is only through negotiating the Oedipus Complex[5] that the child learns that there are limits to its desire which cannot be evaded. The Oedipus Complex is resolved when the child, which until that time continues to incestuously demand the body of the mother (the first fetish substitute for *jouissance*) as the object of its desire, is "convinced" that it must – in its own self-interest – abandon that demand. This realisation (usually occurring when the child is between four and five years of age) brings about a suppression of infantile sexuality through the child's fear that, if it continues to demand that which neither society nor the parental voice which "speaks" for society will allow it, it will be cut off from the possibility of pleasure through what Freud asserts the child recognises as "castration" (Mitchell 1974: 74–100). Here, in *normal* development,[6] the female child – which experiences a castration crisis when it comes to recognise that it does not have a penis – is impelled to identify with the mother and through that identification internalise the mother's strategies of possessing a penis through possessing the father. The incest taboo is not resolved in this manner, but the object of desire is transferred from the body of the mother to that of the father while desire itself is temporarily desexualised (when sexual drives are subsequently de-suppressed with the onset of puberty that desire is transferred to "father-like" figures). In the case of the boy child the incestuous desire for the mother is driven into abeyance (what psychoanalysts term "latency") by what is perceived as a more direct threat from the father figure that if the child continues to desire the mother it will suffer castration at the hands of its competitor, the father. Here – again in what Freud considers "normal" development – the boy unconsciously suppresses sexual desire and takes up the father as a figure of identification. In both cases the same sex parent becomes a model – an ego ideal – for the child's development causing it to channel its desires towards culturally appropriate foci and outlets that serve as substitutes for the proscribed objects of initial fantasy. In effect, "castration" forces the temporary dissolution of infantile sexuality – desexualising relations with objects of primary fantasy (the "mother" and, in the girl's case, the "father") – while forging the "superego," an internal voice which reminds the child, and the adult it becomes, that if it is to have pleasure at all those objects of desire must be abandoned and substituted for by objects society acknowledges as appropriate. By the time the child reemerges from latency with the onset of puberty she or he recognises that full satiation – the return to *jouissance* that the Oedipal fantasy evokes before the threat of castration drives it back into the unconscious – is rendered impossible by "reality" and that satisfaction must be found through the pursuit of what society provides as substitute objects and relations.

Nonetheless, traces of this difficult construction of individual identity remain inscribed in the unconscious. People will always encounter – dispersed through the wide field of their activities – frustrations of their strategies of fulfilment, and such moments frequently evoke the scenario wherein a generalised antagonist is set in opposition to a fantasy of pleasure and fulfilment. In such instances failure to achieve fulfilment are experienced as a consequence of the activities of the "demonic" antagonist the infant first encountered when its primal omnipotence was shattered by the "voice of the Father." When frustration of desire evokes the fantasy presence of this antagonist – perceived in infantile terms as a being which exists only to steal all it has from the child in order to pleasure itself – persons are likely to respond by directing primal rage and violence against what they perceive as the source of that frustration. In most instances, however, such eruptions of unconscious materials into conscious life are subsequently interpreted (by both the actor and the recipient of his or her violence) as irrational behaviour

(i.e., a "temper tantrum") and are forced back into quiescence by the individual's super ego.

However certain individuals, whose internalisation of the requirements of "reality" imposed by their negotiation of the castration complex is incomplete or tenuous, may be impelled at times to impose onto the full field of their relations with society the logic of a psychic structure polarised between desire and antagonism. They then interpret the world in terms of a dualism dividing all the elements of the social field into friend and foe (self and Other). Such tendencies may remain latent for years until an event, or series of events, constitute a crisis which calls them back into activity. In most instances such persons are perceived as paranoid and, if their violence proves endemically disruptive, are institutionalised. Certain discursive structures can, however, draw upon such proclivities to establish as real and normative a world polarized between obdurate enemies and a community threatened by them (Adorno & Horkheimer 1979: 187). Such structures, which draw that Manichaean opposition out of latency and make it appear real, inform various modes of political mobilisation ranging from the Hutu genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the Serbian and Croatian antagonisms between each other and against the Bosniacs in Former Yugoslavia to the contemporary *jihad* of IS or *Da'ish* against all that is not itself. The appeal of such discursive structures is far from universal, and those who engage in the violence they demand are a minority of those addressed by their call. Nonetheless, as the IS phenomenon shows, that appeal is not localised. The memory of amputation which gives rise to rage resides in all of us, and the question of why we do not universally embrace exterminative logics but, for the most part, simply occasionally kick and curse recalcitrant objects is perhaps the most socially important one posed by rage.

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Several strategies for disarming or dispersing rage have been discussed in this collection, but I would like to take up the issue through the idea of traffic discussed by Dan Podjed and Saša Babič in their study of rage in Ljubljana. Rather, however, than engaging directly with their ethnography I'd like to look at traffic in Michael Sorkin's *Giving Ground: the Politics of Propinquity* (1999). Sorkin discusses the modernist mode of traffic organisation with which most of us are familiar that channels persons and vehicles into non-intersecting pathways in order to give priority to unimpeded flow at the expense of relations between entities moving across the same terrain. Here no one gets in our way (unless there's an accident or a traffic jam[7]) and we're able to pursue our agendas with minimal interference. Counterposed to this Sorkin shows us a more "traditional" setting in which flow is impeded by repeated intersection and the necessary and mutually aware sharing of place:

> Modern city planning is structured around an armature of ... conflict avoidance. Elevated highways, pedestrian skyways, subway systems and other movement technologies clarify relations between classes of vehicles for the sake of efficient flow. ... The result is a city altogether different from the older Indian cities with their indigenous styles of motion. ... Typically Indian traffic is completely mixed up, a slow-moving mass of cows and pedicabs, motor-rickshaws, trucks and buses, camels and people on foot, the antithesis of "efficient" separation. Motion through this sluggish maelstrom does not proceed so much by absolute right as through a continuing process of local negotiation for the right of passage. (Sorkin 1999: 2)

Central to the latter case is what Sorkin calls "a primal rite of giving ground ... the deference to one's neighbour that [Indian] urban existence daily demands" (ibid.). "Giving ground" requires processes of sharing place with others and thus processes of mutual recognition and accommodation.[8]

Sorkin's evocation of Indian traffic as "completely mixed up ... the antithesis of 'efficient separation'" calls attention to what, in our contemporary globalised world, tends not only to spark the horrific moments of psychotic rage manifest in shooting sprees in America, Norway and elsewhere but also

to give rise to political movements – nationalist, religious – which feed on fantasies of exterminating alterity. "Traffic organisation," manifest in contemporary Western society in everything from cosseted upbringings to various forms of "gated communities" serving to eliminate contact with class or cultural alterity, is meant to organise situations in which persons are unlikely to encounter the challenge of dealing with the desires of others, particularly others who are culturally distinct from one's own community. Such organisation is increasingly impractical when politics and economics are constantly throwing peoples of different backgrounds into interaction with each other, but more saliently it works against the processes of de-narcissisation central to bringing subjects into the social. Modernity generates the fantasy of a world that fulfils our desires while at the same time (rightly) refusing most if not all of us access to it. Those who accept its ideological promise as a *jouissance* of sorts – and that promise is offered in various guises to everyone from Somalian migrants and jihadists through to the rising bourgeoisie of Europe, the Americas and Asia – can be infantilised by that acceptance and driven into rage by the world's failure to deliver. Those who recognise the necessity of giving ground to others learn by so doing to move through the traffic of the contemporary world, sometimes reaching their goals and at other times being forced into unforeseen and interesting byways. Rage may, of course, erupt at certain moments of frustration, but it is recognised by its bearer and those surrounding as, in effect, inappropriate.

Notes

1 This argument expands upon a section of my 1994 essay, "Xenophobia, Fantasy and the Nation: The Logic of Ethnic Violence in Former Yugoslavia" (1994: 62–165).

2 Lévi-Strauss in his *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* comments that "language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually [but]... the entire universe all at once became *significant*" (Lévi-Strauss 1950: xlix, [1950]1987: 59–60). Although Lévi-Strauss here talks of the sudden appearance of language in human society, that eruption is repeated each time a person "falls" into signification, the process of which is saliently described in the opening pages of the first volume of Michel Leiris's autobiography (Leiris 1991: 3–6).

3 Lacan writes "we must insist that *jouissance* is forbidden to him who speaks as such" (Lacan 1977: 319).

4 It is important to recognise that Freud assumes the child, from the moment it falls into language, reflects upon, and strategises, its relation to the objects of its desire, what it needs to do to draw them to itself and what impedes its access to them.

5 There is little question that Freud's understanding of the structure of childhood experience is based on the Viennese bourgeoisie that he analysed. His recognition in that context that the nursemaid could stand in for the mother as primary nurturer allows the substitution, in other cultural contexts, of other figures for the primary figures in the constellation of child, mother and father. Thus, as Malinowski pointed out as early as 1927 in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927), the mother's brother can effectively substitute for the father in playing the role of the "castrating" discipliner. Kenelm Burridge in *Tangu Traditions* (1969) reinstated the father in the Oedipal relationship while recognising that the authoritative role of the mother's brother made the Viennese Oedipal triangle a quadrilateral. Melford Spiro, in *Oedipus in the Trobriands* (1982), revisits the debate, arguing using Malinowski's own ethnographic data that Trobriand males hold strong incestuous desires for the mother and consequently feel powerful Oedipal hostility and rivalry towards the father.

6 Freud's work was very much of its time, and differing modalities of identification afforded by early childhood and the negotiation of the Oedipal scenario tended to be treated in his work and that of his contemporaries as perversions to be "cured." As can be seen, however, in the paths of identification set out above there are alternative identifications available which lead to different structures of desire which, like those of "normal" heterosexuality, are tenable products of childhood experience.

7 See the 1993 film *Falling Down* (director Joel Schumacher) for a brilliant illustration of the way "bad traffic" gives rise to a psychotic rage which launches the protagonist (Michael Douglas) into a violent crusade against the world.

8 See my "Grounds for Sharing – Occasions for Conflict" for more extensive thoughts on giving ground (Bowman 2015).

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