If It Is Not for All, It Is Not for Us: Reflections on Racism, Nationalism, and Populism in the United States

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Abstract

Contrasting the leadership styles of Donald Trump and Barack Obama, this essay discusses the complex roots that foster and feed racism, nationalism, and ethnic fears. The work of African American social critics and artists, sociologists, and Eric Berne's writings on group psychology and existential life positions are drawn on to illustrate the psychological and social depths that underpin and motivate racial, ethnic, and nationalistic bias and hatred. The author describes efforts to address and work through some of the social and economic consequences of racism through the efforts of his own community. The forces contained within the contemporary rise of nationalism and populism are complex. These can be—and must be—seen from multiple points of view.

Keywords

> What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it is necessary to have a "nigger" in the first place, because I am not a nigger, I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him. (Baldwin, 1963/2017, pp. 108–109)

Two hours ago Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the Untied States. This seemed to me to be the perfect time to sit at my desk and begin to struggle with my thoughts about the stunning evidence of the rise of nationalism and the forces of racism in the United States. I will be addressing these issues primarily through the lens of racism. Nationalism, populism, racism, misogyny, and class, ethnic, and religious biases all share a common ground.

Trump's inaugural speech was drenched in nationalism and populism, appealing to the fears and sense of disenfranchisement of those who voted for him:

> January 20th, 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer. . . . From this moment on, it's going to be America First. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength. I will fight for you with every breath in my body—and I will never, ever let you down. (Trump, 2017, para. 10, 24–26)

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Trump had barely finished his speech when Michael Paarlberg (2017), a columnist for *The Guardian,* linked Trump's words with those of other self-proclaimed populists. In Venezuela in 2011, Hugo Chavez promised, "Every day, the people will rule more," and this past year his successor, Nicolás Maduro, proclaimed, "The people will be the ones who decide" even as the nation collapsed into chaos and violence. In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan insisted, "There is no power higher than the power of the people" as he imposed a totalitarian regime (p. 3). History has shown how often what is proclaimed as populism collapses into authoritarianism. Similar sentiments have been sweeping across the United Kingdom and much of Europe, although perhaps not always spoken in such brazen and unvarnished language as that used by Trump.

It is all too easy and comforting to see the other person, the other group, as biased, as racist, but our social and psychological realities are more subtle and complex than that. I raised my family in a rural, all white area north of the city. Was that consciously racist? No, but it re-created the world in which I had grown up. The small, industrial town in which I spent my early years had not a single Jewish, black, or brown family. I grew up in a poor, uneducated, working-class family. My mother never finished school; she took in laundry and made dresses for women in the town to make extra money. My father finished school after the war; he repaired radios and televisions in the basement for extra money. I was a bright student and was accepted at an extraordinary college on full scholarship. Had I been a poor but bright black kid at that time in U.S. history, that would not have happened. Given my upbringing, I always identified with those at the lower end of the American social and economic spectrum, but I had never met a black person.

My young adult years were forged during the years of the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements. Like many, I was arrested. Like a few, I refused to go to war. I faced prison. I learned the necessity of activism to foster, to demand and force, change. But I still had no real, lived experiences with people of other races until well into my adult life. I moved to my current neighborhood intentionally but not comfortably. The neighborhood was dangerous, rife with gangs, drugs, and prostitution. I knew the neighborhood was committed to revitalizing itself, which is what drew me here. The African American women have been welcoming. The African American men not so much. They had no reason to be. Although I felt a reasonable comfort with young black guys, in the company of black men of my generation, I was incredibly uncomfortable—I did not know the social rules, and I knew they were looking at me skeptically. I deserved their skeptical gaze—what was this white guy up to? It has taken years to begin to establish credibility with one another.

I chose the title of this article from the slogan for a movement in my neighborhood demanding parity in housing among the poor and working class, black and white: If it is not for all of us, it is not for us. For the past 12 years I have lived in a neighborhood that has historically been poor or working class and is now predominantly African American. I have been deeply involved in community-based efforts to stabilize and revitalize our neighborhood. I will return to a discussion of the work in my community later in this article.

Racism in the United States: The Experience of Being Black

The United States is a profoundly racist nation. That may sound like a bizarre statement about a country that elected a black president, but as President Obama (2017) said in his final farewell speech,

There's a second threat to our democracy—one as old as our nation itself. After my

election, there was talk of a post-racial America. Such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. For race remains a potent and divisive force in our society. . . . If every economic issue is framed as a struggle between a hard-working white middle class and the undeserving minorities, then workers of all shades will be left fighting for scraps while the wealthy withdraw further into their private enclaves. (para. 25–26)

The racism here in the United States—as well as the racism we are witnessing spreading across the United Kingdom and Europe—is not limited to those whose skin is black but is evidenced in the anti-immigrant and Islamophobic movements as well. It has fueled the right-wing, nationalistic Tea Party "revolution" here in the States, the intransigence of the Republican party against the success of Obama, and the insidious messages of the Trump campaign and presidency.

Much of what I have learned about racism over this past decade I have learned from experiences in my own community. As always, I also turned to books to challenge and broaden my thinking. Writing more than 5 decades ago, Frantz Fanon (1963/2004), a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, wrote of the chronic impact of European colonization on nonwhite populations in Africa:

The colonized sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The colonized sector is a sector that crouches and cowers, a sector on its knees, a sector that is prostrate. It's a sector of niggers, a sector of towelheads. (pp. 4–5)

Although Fanon was writing about the plight of black citizens of African nations and colonies in the 1950s, we still see the structures of institutional racism dividing our cities—even after the civil rights movement in the United States and the election of our first African American president. Now the colonized sectors of American cities are more likely to explode than cower.

In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon (1952/2008) argued that the usual assumptions underlying psychoanalytic understandings of psychopathology do not adequately address the psychological and social dilemmas faced by those with black skins:

In Europe and in every so-called civilized or civilizing country the family represents a piece of the nation. The child leaving the family environment finds the same laws, the same principles, and the same values. A normal child brought up in a normal family will become a normal adult. . . . However—and this is a most important point—we observe the opposite in the black man. A normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world. (pp. 121–122)

Whether we work as psychotherapists, counselors, educators, or consultants, we cannot escape the often unspoken fantasies and implications of what constitutes "normal." These socially constructed definitions of normality are fundamental to institutional racism; they constitute the unacknowledged and unconscious ways in which racial (and/or gender) biases are built into what is normal, and, therefore, acceptable. Does the fact that a certain way of being, a certain way of living, a certain economic status, a certain cultural structure is seen as normal equate with being healthy and therefore left unexamined? What happens to one's sense of normality when one is forced to leave one's own community and social structure to live within (or outside of) an unfamiliar (and perhaps unwelcoming) one? Does what had been always known as normal suddenly become cast as abnormal and/or unhealthy? Do the likely

reactions of disorientation, anxiety, and alienation constitute evidence of psychopathology? These are essential questions that must frame our thinking when we are working with clients from racial, class, ethnic, or national backgrounds different from our own.

In coming to a deeper understanding of racism, two books have been particularly important for me. Although they are written about the United States, they carry fundamental resonances and the realities of racism, nationalism, and ethnic fears and projections that we are witnessing throughout Europe as well as the United States. The first is *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* by Eddie Glaude (2016), a professor of religion and African American studies at Princeton University. He wrote this:

> Racial habits are a particular kind of social habit. We hold them because we grew up in a country that values white people more than others. We learn this not by way of overt racism but through the details of everyday life, like when we experience differences in the quality of schools we attend, the different nature of our interactions with the police, the different ways we navigate work, our different neighborhoods, the daily barrage of signals and cues about race that all Americans get through television and in the news reports. (p. 56)

Glaude's words echo my own experience and that of others I hear described over and over again as I work with my neighbors. Glaude (2016) further observed,

> This climate of fear forces black parents to impart particular lessons to their children. We fear our children's lives every time they leave the relative safety of our homes, and depending on where you live, that fear varies in intensity. (p. 200)

He went on to describe "the talk" that black parents give to their children on how to avoid the attention of the police and other provocations on the street. Of course, these kids grow up often isolated from white communities and inevitably acquire their own version of racially based bias and grievances. So many American children—white and black—grow up in neighborhoods and go to schools where their paths rarely cross, thus creating the breeding grounds for fear based in ignorance.

My neighborhood, long troubled by terrible relations between the police and black residents, provides a vivid example of what Glaude described. In spite of the high crime levels and the frequent shootings in the street, residents rarely called the police, who have been seen much more as enemies than allies. One of the essential aspects of the work of our community group has been to work closely with the police. We now have a police commander (white) who is gaining the respect and trust of the African American community. While still president, Barack Obama funded an experimental program to foster *procedural justice* in five cities. Ours was one of those selected. The fundamental premise of this policing model is that the police must establish their legitimacy in the community within which they work by the ways they work and relate, not through the power that they hold. All police in my community are now trained in procedural justice methods in which a sense of justice and respect are communicated from the very beginning in how police approach possible suspects and others in trouble. This is not accomplished by words; it is accomplished by consistent demonstrations of respect and persistent availability to residents. Several of the officers in our neighborhood now have no law enforcement responsibilities; they are community liaisons who are a constant presence at community events.

One especially compelling example of how this approach is working in our community is that the police ask the schools to identify the students who are the most hostile

toward the police. They then invite themselves to one of the student's homes, meet with a small group of the kids, provide dinner, and listen. These kids often tell the cops in as many ways as possible to "go fuck yourselves," and the police listen. The police do not defend themselves or turn on the kids. Gradually, real conversation emerges. When the police commander met recently with our community board, a minister from one of the neighborhood's largest black churches asked what the police learn from these conversations. Here is the reply, summarized from my notes: "They learn that many of these kids have no fathers, come home to empty houses at the end of the school day, see no prospects for the kind of futures available to the white kids. Often have their only meal of the day at school. The police get a different perspective on why these kids are so angry. And the kids find out that the cops are real people, that they themselves are often scared on the street, and that many have had difficult histories of their own, and that's why they become cops."

In *Racist States of Mind: Understanding the Perversion of Curiosity and Concern,* psychoanalyst Narendra Keval (2016) provided a frame and a challenge to all of us who work as human relations professionals. The subtitle of Keval's book provides a stunning frame within which to examine racism: the perversion of curiosity and concern. How do we establish an environment that fosters the capacity for curiosity and concern in the face of racist, ethnic, and/or class prejudices and projections? He argued:

One of the most difficult tasks for the therapist is how to help the patient take ownership of their racist projections. . . . This involves understanding grievances from past and present relationships in the patient's life that are displaced onto ethnic others. . . . Working through these difficulties involves the arduous task of giving up grievances and taking responsibility for destructiveness to others and to self, and confronting the painful feelings of shame and guilt that this can bring about. . . . This is a difficult undertaking given that these states of mind contain a strong presence of thuggery and violence which are used to resist psychic pain. (pp. 24–25)

Keval is a dark-skinned man working in London, so I imagine that the recognition and interpretation of racist projections are almost inevitable aspect of his therapeutic work. How does a white psychotherapist—such as myself with my predominantly white clients—address racism (or nationalism or misogyny) in the psychotherapy and counseling context? We are accustomed to recognizing the typically unconscious defenses of splitting within our internal object relations as essential in an ongoing psychotherapy of any depth. However, even though similar defensive splitting occurs in our social relations and political positions, these are often cast outside the "proper" field of therapeutic inquiry and attention. My community work is publicly visible, so many of my clients have an impression of my political orientation. I do not avoid political discussions with my clients, but I do not hold such discussions at only a political level. The fundamental nature of the therapeutic work and contract is that of personal scrutiny, so political discussions open doors—often painful and conflicted—to the familial, social, economic, and sometimes traumatic histories that underlie and fuel our personal politics. Following the election of Trump, and with many of his actions since being in office, it has become impossible during sessions not to have discussions that include politics.

I would also take Keval's words out beyond the therapy office because I see the task of taking ownership of racist projections and fears as fundamental at the social and community levels. Racism, nationalism, misogyny, and populism are mutually destructive forces with deep historical, economic, and political roots.

Maurice Apprey (1999) addressed the impact of transgenerational hatred in the African American community and the ways in which the violence of oppressors

becomes detached from historical realities so that "victims may come to house so much bitterness that they may uncannily carry out their own extinction without knowing it and without the assistance of their historical enemy" (p. 140). He saw the necessity of understanding and working at historical/social levels, as well as those of the individual:

In working with the aggrieved communities and pooled communal memories that continue to have destructive impact on the present, a description must include: a) *the fact of historical injury;* b) the *potential for transformation* of that history; and c) a constant reminder that each person, family, or ethnic group must know *the motivation behind the historical injury* caused by the transgressor. (p. 135)

Apprey argued for "three types of community intervention: (1) psychopolitical dialogues between community factions in order to reduce tensions or to solve a particular problem; (2) secondary prevention to treat ailments in the community; and (3) primary prevention" (pp. 140–141).

Disenfranchisement and the Deep Story: White Despair

Profound disenfranchisement is not limited to any single race (Isenberg, 2016). Undeniably, here in the United States it is people of color who have endured greater deprivations of economic and social opportunity and dignity. However, in contemporary America, large numbers of working-class whites are now feeling a severe loss of social status and economic security, which is fostering an atmosphere of white rage (Anderson, 2016):

The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal partnership. (p. 3)

These are often the people who have gathered around Trump's populism, as he proclaimed it in his inaugural address. These are many of the individuals in the United Kingdom and across Europe who are consumed with fear and loathing for immigrants and Muslims. When these "grievances from past and present relationships," as Keval (2016) said, are left unacknowledged, hateful and violent defenses thrive unchecked.
British sociologist David Gadd (2010) offered an examination, both blunt and compassionate, into the roots and motivations of racial hatred among economically disadvantaged whites in the United Kingdom, linking them to chronic losses endured in silence—"hidden" class injuries (p. 3)—unrecognized and unmourned at either personal or societal levels. Undertaking research in Stoke-on-Trent, once a prosperous industrial city that never recovered from the recession of 1974, Gadd's research involved focus group discussions with residents of the city from all walks of life and intensive interviews with 15 men and women who had been convicted of acts of racial harassment. Gadd presented two case studies of Nigel and Stan, graphically capturing the pervasive losses of status, security, pride, and class history. Both men were "consumed by losses they could not come to terms with" (p. 10), with one man consumed with thoughts of suicide and the other with murderous ones. Whereas Glaude and Apprey wrote of the entrapment of African American communities in racist, social, and economic marginalization and disempowerment, Gadd conveyed a near mirror-image account of a white community on the other side of shame and hatred:

Losses of love and feelings of insecurity can be compounded by the violence of adults, who are also losing it mentally; tendencies that are liable to become all the

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more common in contexts where the certainties of respect, stable employment and community-spiritedness are being destroyed by industrial decline. In combination these painful losses "eat" so many people up inside, rendering them hateful. (p. 10)

Gadd's (2010) conclusion further mirrors Keval's description of the near-impossible psychological and community work of overcoming racial and ethnic hatred:

In these contexts, loss can, unfortunately, furnish a nostalgic sense of political community obsessed with the protection of exclusively white working class communities unfettered by multiculturalism, immigration and Islam. Persuading men like Nigel and Stan to relinquish their investments in racialized fantasies like these is never going to be easy because these fantasies do emotional work for those locked in melancholic reactions to the unbearable losses of their pasts. (pp. 10–11)

American sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016) left the comfort of her like-minded social and academic community of Berkeley, California, to immerse herself in the arch-conservative, economically and environmentally distressed world of Louisiana bayou lands. In her book recounting her experiences, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right,* she brought her voice, compassionate and critical, to vividly conveying the lives, losses, and conflicts of that white community. It is a community that voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump. This is a complex, moving, unsettling book that I cannot recommend highly enough to anyone wanting to truly grasp the meanings of the white, working-class right wing. As I wrote earlier about my own upbringing, my good fortune led me into a different life from that which would have been a more likely destiny. As I read Hochschild's book, I was overwhelmed with thoughts and memories of my siblings, who have led very different lives from mine. While both lived lives that were decent and hard working, they were, at the same time, profoundly racist.

Perhaps most relevant to this article is Hochschild's (2016) articulation of the *deep story,* which she defined as "a feels-as-if story—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel" (p. 135). Speaking in the voice of the many men and women with whom she spent hours in their homes and places of gathering and working, she tells a version of the deep story she heard over and over again:

You are patiently standing in a long line leading up a hill, as in a pilgrimage. You are situated in the middle of this line, along with others who are also white, older, Christian, and predominantly male, some with college degrees, some not.
Just over the brow of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone in line.
. . . You've suffered long hours, layoffs, and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work, and received reduced pensions. You have shown moral character through trial by fire, and the American Dream of prosperity and security is a reward for all of this, showing who you have been and are—a badge of honor.
. . . The sun is hot and the line unmoving. In fact, is it moving backward?
. . . Look! You see people *cutting in the line ahead of you!* You're following the rules. They aren't.
. . . And President Obama: how did *he* rise so high? The biracial son of a low-income single mother becomes president of the most powerful country in the world; you didn't see that coming. And if he's there, what kind of a slouch does his rise make you feel like, you who were supposed to be so much more privileged? Or did Obama get there *fairly?* (pp. 136–137)

Hochschild (2016) went on to describe the perceptions, the deep stories, of President Obama aligning himself with the line-cutters, feeling insulted as an ignorant redneck, feeling increasingly humiliated and furious: "Economically, culturally, demographically, politically, you are suddenly a stranger in your own land" (p. 222). She argued that Trump's campaign rhetoric was like a match to very dry kindling, waiting to burst into flame and fury. This is the story, the deep story, that Gadd also witnessed in Stoke-on-Trent.

Hochschild (2016) realized that "the people of the right I came to know spoke freely about Mexicans (4 percent of Louisianans were Hispanic in 2011) and Muslims (who accounted for 1 percent) but were generally silent about blacks, who, at 26 percent, were the state's largest minority" (p. 146). Racism there was not seen as racism. Hochschild defined racism as "the belief in a natural hierarchy that places blacks at the bottom," arguing that "by that definition, many Americans, north and south, are racist. And racism appears not simply in personal attacks but in structural arrangements" (p. 147). These are the structural arrangements that isolated and impoverished the neighborhood into which I moved in a northern U.S. city. Racism comes in many guises.

The work of Gadd and Hochschild reminds us that it is all too easy to condemn behavior from an us-versus-them perspective. The picture becomes much more complex and racist attitudes more comprehensible when we take the time and care to look at the lived realities—and devastated histories—of those we find comfort in turning away from.

Community Revitalization

Pittsburgh has always been known as the Steel City. It was founded by waves of immigrants from Europe and African Americans escaping the American South who came to work in the booming mining and steel manufacturing industries looking for dignity and better lives. Pittsburgh was a tough, polluted, working-class city of little pretense. Andrew Carnegie, the founder of the steel industry here and at one point the richest man in the world, believed that to die rich was to die disgraced—a sentiment profoundly different from that which drives Donald Trump. Carnegie gave away most of his wealth, founding a concert hall, a museum, and libraries throughout Pittsburgh (and other cities), all of which thrive to this day. In 1900 he founded the Carnegie Technical Schools for working-class men and women to provide free education in reading, trades, and crafts to enhance their lives and careers.

The core industries of my city collapsed, and during the 1980s many feared the city would become a ghost town like many other U.S. post-industrial cities. Many neighborhoods collapsed. Twenty years ago in my neighborhood 80% of the storefronts on the commercial street were boarded up, and 60% of the houses were tax delinquent or abandoned. For over 30 years there was no grocery store in this neighborhood because it was deemed, like many other African American communities, too poor to support one.

Then, gradually, Pittsburgh became a center for high-level universities and medical research, and the city's culture began to change. Carnegie Tech morphed into Carnegie Mellon University, a prominent center for the fine arts and high-tech computer sciences of international renown with tuition that no working-class family could ever afford. In the past 2 decades, Pittsburgh has seen a profound change, from a working-class, steel-making city to a high-tech center with Google, Uber, Apple, and many other corporations setting up major centers here. A Google headquarters has been built in what was once a Nabisco cookie bakery that had employed hundreds before being closed down. It is in a poor, black neighborhood, but the morphing of

Nabisco into Google has ensured in very short order that this was no longer to be their neighborhood. Our city has been more fortunate than many that have lost their industrial bases due to the shift of manufacturing to cheaper markets outside of the United States and as financial and banking corporations and high-tech companies began to transform the economic base of this area.

It is truly ironic that I began this essay on the day of Donald Trump's inauguration. Now, as I have been completing it, Trump announced his decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accords, saying that he was elected to represent the people of Pittsburgh, not Paris. The mayor of Pittsburgh, Bill Peduto, immediately responded with a tweet pointing out that 90% of Pittsburghers voted for Hillary Clinton and that the city remained committed to the Paris accords. The Internet went alive with stories of Pittsburgh's comeback from its post-industrial collapse, refuting Trump's grim presentation of the implications of the Paris agreements for the "rust belt" cities of the United States (Briem, 2017; Lyons, Badger, & Blinder, 2017). Although these stories vividly captured the revived and gentrified Pittsburgh, they did not address the realties of the African American communities still left too often marginalized and behind.

The arrival of the corporations just mentioned has brought a new wave of migrants, but these have been more like an alien invasion: now nearly universally white, educated, and middle class, with little to nothing in common with the history and roots of this city. The result has been a rapid process of gentrification in which poor neighborhoods are taken over by developers, and the poor (usually black) long-time residents are displaced (Florida, 2017; Moskowitz, 2017). This callous displacement of the poor and African Americans would not be possible but for the deeply embedded American racial and class biases. Gentrification brings new wealth and comfort to a neighborhood, but that wealth and comfort rarely includes the original, poor residents. They are pushed out. In the United States, gentrification is the color of white. In his extensive study of the deepening economic disparity and renewed segregation in American cities, Florida (2017) observed:

> Race plays an even larger and more problematic role in determining which neighborhoods are impervious to gentrification and stay chronically poor. . . . It is this racially concentrated urban poverty that constitutes the far bigger problem for cities. The overwhelming majority of neighborhoods that were poor in 1970 remained poor thirty years later. (pp. 76–77)

The community in which I live is fighting the resignation that is so often the result of chronic marginalization and poverty. For several years, I have been the president of the volunteer board of community residents, overseeing the work of a paid staff who seek the funding from governmental and private sources to carry out extensive programs in the neighborhood. We are fighting hard to preserve the dignity of our neighborhood as a place that provides homes for families of all races, ethnicities, and income levels. We are surrounded by two previously poor, distressed neighborhoods that have been gentrified since the arrival of Google and other high-tech businesses that demonstrate a breathtaking lack of social concern. The original residents of these neighborhoods can no longer afford to live there; the streets are filled with shops and restaurants that the original residents cannot afford. We are fighting to revitalize our neighborhood without giving in to the forces of gentrification. We are doing this by building subsidized, affordable housing; rehabilitating abandoned houses; working with the city to control outside developers; providing a free computer center for residents; offering extensive after-school educational programs for our children; and revitalizing the commercial district in ways that serve the needs of the existing community.

And even as we are doing all of this, we are confronting the many signs of racism

within the community, the board itself, and our staff. Our board is widely diverse in race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexual orientation, but that has not been true of the paid staff. The community group was originally founded by a Catholic priest, and until recently the staff has been entirely white and heterosexual. There has never been a person of color in a full-time, paid position. As the forces of gentrification have grown around us, it has forced us to examine the subtle but powerful racist beliefs and attitudes that influence our priorities in spite of our conscious devotion to doing "good." We are now in the midst of a substantial reorganization in which racial factors are playing a key role.

I have been working with the community activists in my neighborhood for more than 10 years now, and these experiences provide the foundation for my thoughts here.

Existential and Social Realities

Eric Berne (1947) wrote his first book, *The Mind in Action,* immediately after World War II. The first edition ended with a section on "Man as a Political Animal." Berne was searingly critical of demagogical leaders and the passivity of so many followers:

> Life is complicated, and the evil leader holds his followers by making it appear simple. . . . The evil leader does all he can to use his power to twist reality so as to make it appear like the images he gives people to go by. It is not for his followers to seek the dark causes of war and poverty, or the complicated reasons for their own unfortunate position. (pp. 297–298)

There was no transactional analysis in that book; it was about psychoanalysis.

In subsequent editions, in which Berne introduced transactional analysis, he deleted the section on politics. For reasons only now being fully understood, as Berne developed transactional analysis, he insisted that TA be apolitical (Cornell, 2016a, 2016b). Nevertheless, Berne's words, as they were originally written 70 years ago, are shockingly relevant today.

It was left to those who followed Berne to bring political perspectives to transactional analysis. Led by Claude Steiner (Steiner et al., 1975), authors such as Fanita English (1979, 1996), Pearl Drego (1996), Alan Jacobs (1987, 1991), and Keith Tudor (2017), among others, have raised social concerns and have brought their voices to transactional analysis in efforts to address the realities of oppression in personal, professional, cultural, and political spheres. Building on the accounting of Master-Slave symbioses by English (1979), Jacobs (1987, 1991) addressed the nature and means of autocratic power—the Master—in a way that is consistent with Berne's:

> A major factor in heightening people's fears is the identification of an enemy, either human or ideological, although not just anyone will do. A source of evil must be found which helps create and sustain the special feeling so necessary for the formation of a closed crowd of Followers. (Jacobs, 1987, p. 64)

Both Berne and Jacobs captured the relentless demagoguery of Donald Trump as candidate and president. Although he has no lived comprehension of the actual lives of those he incites (and no apparent intention of actually bettering their lives), he is a "Master" at locating evil in those who do not agree with him and intensifying the fears and losses of those who are following him.

These social and economic realities are not problems to be resolved with the saccharine application of the TA slogan of "I'm OK, You're OK." In his extensive theoretical discussion of Berne's life positions, which was to become a central tenet in

transactional analytic theory and practice, Jacobs (1997) challenged the oversimplification of Berne's conceptualization and its application as a moral position rather than the descriptive and diagnostic intent of Berne's actual writings. He argued that although Berne's clinical focus was that of description and diagnosis, many TA authors at the time applied the theory of life positions in prescriptive and/or proscriptive ways.

The existential life positions in Berne's (1972, pp. 91–95) own writings were not simple reassurances of goodness and acceptance but the delineation of psychological realities with lasting personal, interpersonal, and social consequences. For him, the existential life positions were acknowledgments of the profound and enduring depth of these fundamental beliefs:

> Positions are taken and become fixed surprisingly early . . . long before the individual is competent or experienced enough to make such a serious commitment. . . . Unless something or somebody intervenes, he spends the rest of his life stabilizing his position and dealing with situations that threaten it: by avoiding them, warding off certain elements or manipulating them provocatively so that they are transformed from threats into justifications. (Berne, 1964, p. 46)

> For example, many people are unable to understand how ardent Nazi policemen in East Germany could become equally ardent Communist policemen, since the two parties seem directly opposed. But all that is opposed are adjectives. The Nazi position was I + (Nazi), He - (Traitor), therefore, kill him. The Communist position is I + (Communist), He - (Traitor), therefore, kill him. In both cases, although the predicates are contrary, the position is the same: I +, He -, therefore, kill him. (Berne, 1972, p. 93)

The possible substitutions for Berne's example are endless and ongoing: Muslim-Jew, Sunni-Shia, black-white, British-immigrant, European-refugee, Christian-Islamic, Russian-Ukrainian, Republican-Democrat.

Conclusion: Getting Our Hands Dirty

We will not create change without getting our hands dirty, our pride bruised, our frames of reference shaken. This effort was implicit in Obama's (2017) final challenge to Americans to show up as citizens, that is, as societal participants who take action:

> If you're tired of arguing with strangers on the Internet, try to talk to one in real life. If something needs fixing, lace up your shoes and do some organizing. . . . Show up. Dive in. Persevere. Sometimes you'll win. Sometimes you'll lose. Presuming a reservoir of goodness in others can be a risk, and there will be times when the process disappoints you. (para. 49)

The world is witnessing a rise in identity politics unlike anything we have seen since World War II. The forces here are complex: war, the Internet and social media, mass dislocation and immigration, poverty, disenfranchisement. The forces of identity politics are compelling and falsely reassuring: the narcissistic comforts of liberalism, the paranoid righteousness of populism, the desperate security of ethnic and racial hatred. Berne's (1963) writings on group psychology have a great deal to offer for understanding the power and perversions of group dynamics. But for pained and complicated personal reasons, he removed the practice of transactional analysis from social and political realities (Cornell, 2016a, 2016b).

For real change to occur, we must acknowledge within ourselves the depth of our not-OK beliefs and attitudes toward those who are different from us, whom we see as threatening, dirty, malignant. For real change to occur, we must expose ourselves as individuals and within our familiar social groups to those who hold us in not-OK positions and whom we hold in not-OK positions. We must be willing to engage with our personal ignorance and bias. We must place ourselves in circumstances within which we are confronted by others about our own ugly biases and projections. More than anything else, real change comes through our active engagement in the real world doing things.

And what has been clear throughout the 20th and 21st centuries is that the progress we make in social order and taming our baser impulses and steadying our fears cannot be reversed very quickly. Social order begins to break down if people are under profound stress. . . . The default position for a lot of folks is to organize tightly in the tribe and to push back or strike out against those who are different. (Obama as cited in Goldberg, 2016, p. 85)

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