

Racism and Covid-19: The Invisible is becoming visible

Allan Shafer

Presented at the Online Workshop: Are We All In This Together?
hosted by Group Relations Australia, 26 August 2020

Recently I worked on the consulting staff of an international group relations event sponsored by PCCA (Partners Confronting Collective Atrocities) which explored the Covid-19 pandemic as a global trauma with various accompanying atrocities. A key observation that emerged from this was that the pandemic had fractured our usual social defences against some of the painful realities of the world today. In other words, that which had been kept *invisible* – to which we turned a blind eye - was becoming *visible*.

The philosopher Walter Kaufman, echoing Bion, suggests:

Mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur:

“the world wants to be deceived. The truth is too complex and frightening; the taste for the truth is an acquired taste that few acquire....”

I am drawing extensively on the work of Lebanese writer and poet Omar Sakr, and some thoughts from psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas to illuminate my views.

Omar Sakr, powerfully articulates some of the ideas I advocate in his recent essay in the Guardian entitled “*Greed, Cruelty, Consumption: The world is changed yet its worst persists*”. (The Guardian, 16 Aug 2020).

He writes, beginning with a recent hospital stay:

“I watched as an old man had to be ushered into his nearby bed by a trio of nurses, and I listened as they pleaded for his cooperation at every meal time, for every test, pill or injection; I was awed over and over by their resolute care. This is the best of us, I thought, and felt such a stinging, familiar shame that we do not provide it for all – and worse, that we actively harm the disadvantaged and dispossessed. What could we become if we insisted on this reverence for life always, and were not partitioned by the politics of birth, of borders and class?”

“There is talk, all the time, of restrictions easing and not easing, of who deserves to die, of letting the old go, of the “economy” needing to start again, which is to say the rich need to get richer again (a phenomenon that actually never stopped), and a sense already of an acceptable level of sacrifice in order for this to occur. This is evil at its most banal, and it shows no sign of abatement. Let the nurses and doctors suffer, let the labourers build and break, let them all grind their bodies to the mill, for somewhere a bank balance must grow.

The world has changed, and yet its worst features persist. We are still being asked to acknowledge this is an extraordinary situation which requires a total change of our behaviours to accommodate it and our survival, *but only so long as we are able to change back, to a way of life that is not just riven with deep inequalities, but which experts have already determined is fatally flawed* for human society. What is the normal to which we are being pushed to return? *My normal is the precarious life of a working-class poet in a country that hates him, his culture, his communities. My normal is racist commentary on my work, death threats and hate trolls. ... My normal is life on stolen land, where self-determined outcomes by First Nations communities are ignored and their deaths in custody continue. ... My normal and your normal is a relentless march to a ruined climate, the dismissal and undermining of scientists these past few decades, the lack of leadership and vision that dares to imagine a sustainable way forward.*

The greed and cruelty, the endless consumption that marks the modern way of life threatens to overwhelm me constantly, but unlike the deep dark of anaesthesia, this is an unconvincing darkness, and we do not have to stay under it. I admit I have no great hope we will take hold of our destinies and use this chance to transform for the better; I think we'll stay mired in an unnerving mixture of complacency and crisis, ...*

Christopher Bollas, *2 in his recent presentation "Civilisation and the Discontented", observes how the process of making painful realities like inequality and racism *invisible* results from deficient engagement with overwhelming societal complexity. He says, "Left wing thinkers deal with this by atomising the complexity into small segments of smaller group interests: identity politics... But they do not face the task of making large group democracy functional... Right wing thinkers deal with this by creating negative and positive hallucinations. ***They do not see what they do not like seeing and they invent what does not exist.***"

We might all examine in ourselves, the propensity to *not see what we do not like seeing*.

Paul Hoggett (in 1992) *3 wrote: "the narcissism and individualism of the late 20th century establishment has, through its values of self, greed, consumerism, acquisition and exploitation, promoted the emergence of perversion through the process of *turning a blind eye*."

Maybe, suggest Gregg Hurwitz and Marshall Herskovitz in *The Bulwark**1 (2020), all the pain and division and loss and fear of these kidney-stone-excruciating years brought us [via Trump's presidency – and I would add the Covid-19 pandemic] an opportunity for insight and actual change. *Maybe we had to see all this barely-beneath-the-surface hideousness in such undeniable fashion to make sure none of us would be willing to go back to the way things were before.*

Says Bollas, "...In order to survive in the large group we have to *negatively hallucinate* many things... (for example) I don't look at the homeless anymore... I don't see them...I can see them if I look *but I don't see them*".

Perhaps the pandemic has made visible how white privilege of itself blinds many white people to our privilege & to our complicity in the plight of people of colour?

Bollas suggests that group relations can help free the group from psychotic and sociopathic processes of thought.

But I will end with *his* challenging question: **Can people sustain conscientious thinking in the large group of society?"**

*This essay will be part of the anthology **Fire, Flood and Plague**, edited by Sophie Cunningham and published by Penguin Random House in December

*1 *The Bulwark*, August 19, 2020 "What If Donald Trump Is What America Needed? The great revealer laid bare what was rotten. And now we have a chance to fix it." Gregg Hurwitz and Marshall Herskovitz.

*2. Christopher Bollas (2020) *Civilization and the Discontented: A Presentation*. Community West You-tube Channel.

*3 Hoggett, P. (1992) *Partisans in an Uncertain World: The Psychoanalysis of Engagement*, London: Free Association Books.



Fire, Flood and Plague - essays about 2020

Greed, cruelty, consumption: the world is changed yet its worst persists

I have no great hope we will use this chance to transform for the better - but this is an unconvincing darkness, and we do not have to stay in it

● This is part of [a series of essays](#) by Australian writers responding to the challenges of 2020

by [Omar Sakr](#)

06:00 Sunday, 16 August 2020

