

# Foundations of Psycho-Social Analysis: Origins of a Paradigm Shift

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It was the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July and the year was 1975. Dr Pierre Turquet, the Director of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations had invited me to meet him in his office. (Or had I been summoned? I had no idea why I was there). Eventually he came to the point: 'We would like you to lead a research project into the psycho-analysis of Schonian networks'. Donald Schon had recently written 'Beyond the Stable State' (Schon, 1973) and the new research initiative represented a major innovation for the 'Tavi', breaking out beyond the usual structured frame of hierarchical systems into the realm of interconnected cellular networks. It opened up exploration of the psychodynamics of systems that eventually evolved into 'Chaos Theory', 'Complexity Science', social networks and beyond. It was to lay the foundations of 'Psycho-Social Analysis'.

To support the project Pierre assembled and introduced a team of four. He would himself be joined by Gordon Lawrence and Drs. Daniels and Gosling. It was an awesome foursome and my appointment left me puzzled and bewildered. Only with over four decades of hindsight am I able to make sense of the selection of a partially dyslexic polymath, a conceptualizer of multi-dimensional patterns in highly complex contexts, with a tendency to 'think outside the box' and challenge the constraints and boundaries of any paradigm no matter how deeply embedded in institutional dynamics and defences it might be. At the time, however, I was naively unaware of the fraught dynamics at the very heart of the Tavistock Institute, or of the fact that the splits and opposition to Pierre's innovative thinking and creative leadership were focussed right at the core of the new research project he had conceived. I never saw him again.

Five months later Pierre Turquet was dead. He died with his partner in a high-speed impact with the support structures of a bridge in his beloved France. Road conditions were good and no other vehicle was involved. Rumours of suicide circulated. The research group never reconvened.

In 'Exploring Individual and Organizational Boundaries', a book edited by Gordon Lawrence, published in 1979, and dedicated to the memory of Dr. Turquet, Lawrence wrote:

'In the last two months or so of his life he was full of sadness at the human condition. He felt passionately that the Tavistock Clinic, with which he had been associated for just under half his life, had failed to move psycho-analysis from its essentially dyadic preoccupations to become a cultural tool, which he, along with others, had tried to do within the frame of group relations training. And he, at times would despair at the inability of men and women in contemporary society to question the authority structures and organisations of their institutions; to get behind the easily understood and taken-for-granted assumptions of group and institutional living.' (Lawrence, 1979, p.xvi)

A little later in 1979 I wrote: ‘At and after the time of his death I was forced to the conclusion that Pierre Turquet’s last act was his most potent consultative word, an interpretative happening in partnership with Jean Wagstaff, his co-consultant, which acted out the despair, the constraint, and the regression which he experienced in his abortive attempt to break out of the controlling matrix of the Tavistock Model.’ (Wasdell, 1979b) Pierre had hired his apprentice but had neither the cognitive paradigm nor the institutional support to sustain the research agenda. In the aftermath of his sudden and violent demise I inherited a legacy that laid the foundations for a lifetime of consultancy research.

Our immediate objective was to explore the dynamics, processes, defences and paradigm at the heart of the Tavistock Institute which had so effectively contained and neutered the initiative of its Director. Our initial conclusions were encapsulated in two papers delivered in dynamic seminar during the Consultancy Training Group of the Tavistock Leicester Conference in March 1979. First came the seminal presentation of ‘Towards a Unified Field Theory of Human Behaviour.’ (Wasdell, 1979a) It combined the prenatal world of foetal formation with the post-natal field of infant development, joined by the caesura of the trauma of birth. The primitive psychotic defences identified by Melanie Klein as ‘innate/instinctive’ (Klein, 1952), grounded in Freud’s delineation of the conflict between the life instinct and the death instinct and developed by Bion in his ‘Experiences in Groups’ (Bion, 1961) lay unchallenged at the core of the Tavistock paradigm. (Wasdell, 1997) The repeated assertion that ‘life begins at birth’ was clearly a myth whose function was to annihilate all trace of previous trans-marginal impingement. It established the whirling sword that rendered taboo any connection with time past. Once the continuum of experience across the boundary of parturition had been established, it became clear that while the primitive defences were indeed ‘innate’ they were not instinctive. They were learned on the journey between the worlds.

## **The Matrix of Defences against Anxiety**

While personal, object and part-object relations may be learned in the domain of the developing infant, environmental-relations evolve in the watery cosmos of foetal experience. Connectivity to this living world requires no work. Nutrients and energy sustain exponential growth. Waste-products are removed from the system and absorbed elsewhere. Awareness of mother as protective container precedes the experience of mother as nurse.

Existentially, as full-term approaches, the holding environment shrinks. Overcrowding becomes the order of the day. Pollution embitters the amnion. Resource availability is diminished. Growth falters. The hormonal cocktail reflects rising anxiety in symbiotic resonance between mother and child. Environmental relations mutate imperceptibly from good to bad. Future sustainability is called in question. Survival demands transition.

Birth-time is an evolutionary compromise between enlarged cranial diameter and diminished pelvic elasticity, between the requirements of an expanding brain and the consequences of an upright posture. Species-specific prematurity optimises the chance of survival for both mother and child, but at a cost.

In ‘The Secret Life of the Unborn Child’, Thomas Verny, (the founder and initial president of the Pre and Perinatal Psychology Association of North America) wrote: ‘Even in the best of circumstances, birth reverberates through the child’s body like a seismic shock of earthquake

proportions'. (Verny, 1982, p.86) Almost identical words were used to me in New York about the experience of 9/11, where 'anxiety went off the Richter scale' and Rich Piccotto, the 'Last Man Down', described his experience of being caught in the crushing collapse of the North Tower as 'being born again'. (Piccotto, 2002, p.91)

From the nuance of ambivalence to full-blown splitting, the tree-form of the placenta morphs from the tree of life to the carrier of the knowledge of good and evil, and its snake-like companion shifts symbolic association from cornucopia to harbinger of eviction. Waves of muscular contraction become more frequent and intense. The cushioning sack of amniotic fluid ruptures leaving the neonatal head to act as a gynaecological instrument. Hypoxia builds. Anxiety climaxes into terror and pain. Endorphins peak but cannot sedate foetal distress (mother can have some pain-relief but little of it will reach her child). As the remains of the known world implode from behind, the head is crushed, moulded and forced through an opening that is too small. Rage collapses into impotence and hope of deliverance dies in despair facing the threat of annihilation. Passivity and violent retaliation, self-destruction, guilt and the search for salvation, all have their origins in this matrix. The past may have had its problems, but in contrast to this hell it beckons in reversed time to a veritable heaven. Eventually, with one last push the trauma is over. This is an encounter with climate change in the context of world-loss. All connection with the past is severed, and knotted at the belly. Never again will oxygen and nutrients flow from the placenta. Gaseous exchange and oral resources will be the means of survival. Comfort is provided. The moment is treated as the beginning of life. It is as if nothing traumatic has happened. Birth-days are celebrated lest resonant memories come flooding back into the conscious mind.

For significant numbers, the transition will not have been so benign. Hyper-stress may have occurred much earlier in the journey. Some will have survived near-miscarriage or attempted abortion. Stressors and crises in the maternal world are transmitted across the uterine container. Prematurity, pre-eclampsia, anoxia, cord-strangulation, in-utero surgery, blockage of the birth canal with associated ventuse, forceps or rescue caesarean section, can all play their part in exacerbating primal trauma. Then for some males among us, many Americans and nearly all Jews, just as recovery is under way, there is the secondary impingement of post-natal male genital mutilation or circumcision. Perhaps it should not be so surprising that castration-anxiety played such a dominant part in Freudian psycho-analytic formulation.

Another sub-group are delivered by a different doorway. Pre-labour, elective caesarean section may avoid the trauma of vaginal delivery, but lays down an imprint of unanticipated traumatic shock, blurred by the numbness of anaesthesia. The resultant anxieties, defences, body-language, dynamics and life-script are different but profound.

### **Anxiety-Defences and their Role in Social Dynamics**

My second contribution to the Consultancy Training Group in 1979 was entitled 'The Boundaries of Group Dynamics'. (Wasdell, 1979b) It was a devastating analytic critique in response to 'Exploring Individual and Organizational Boundaries' (Lawrence, 1979), published earlier that year and edited by Gordon Lawrence. It exposed the unexaminable defences embedded at the heart of the Tavistock paradigm and constituting the core of the Tavistock Model used as the framework of its training conferences. The subsequent psychodrama ruptured the dynamics of the consultancy training group and had implications for other sectors of the conference. As I was about to leave, one of the staff, who was

professionally dependent on Melanie Klein's delineation of the primitive paranoid-schizoid defences, refused to treat my contribution as a working initiative. It was interpreted in Freudian terms as an attack on leadership, a working-out of the myth of the attempted murder of the father of the primal horde, an example of paranoid phantasy associated with castration anxiety. It was made abundantly clear that my continued work under the aegis of the Tavistock Institute was no longer welcome.

I was evicted, excommunicated, cast into outer darkness, where for a time there was a very real experience of 'weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth'! Part of the role of anxiety defences in social and organisational dynamics is to protect the dominant paradigm from examination and potentially disruptive intervention. It was obvious that Turquet's research initiative could not be contained within the old wineskins of his institutional home. If his self-immolation closed the boundary at one end, then my eviction sealed it at the other. A few years later, Eric Miller, Turquet's successor as Director of the Tavistock Institute, confided that he agreed with my analysis, but could not see how to apply it!

In retrospect, exclusion from the Tavi was a passport to creative freedom. Within two years we had established the 'Unit for Research into Changing Institutions' as a registered educational research Trust. We published 'Foundations of Psycho-Social Analysis' (Wasdell, 1983; 1985) and a whole series of papers, presentations and studies which would make a book in their own right. By 1987 I had been invited to the USSR to give the opening and closing plenaries to the inaugural global conference of 'The Manhattan Project of Behavioural Science', and was subsequently appointed its director, renaming it 'The Meridian Programme'. Over 50 behavioural research workshops were conducted around the world. 1,000s of hours of analytic research were conducted with individuals, groups, organisations and wider social institutions. Just nine months after the destruction of the twin towers I delivered the prize-winning two-part treatment of 'The Psychodynamics of War and Religion' (Wasdell, 2003a) in downtown Manhattan. In September 2003 we pulled together the emerging theoretical construct in the presentation: 'Roots of the Common Unconscious: Towards a New Paradigm of Psycho-Social Analysis' (Wasdell, 2003b) given to the 14<sup>th</sup> Scientific Meeting of the A.K. Rice Institute in M.I.T.

The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century threw into sharp relief the dysfunctional effect of social defences against anxiety in the dynamics of global behaviour. It is perhaps worth quoting a few points from the text of the 'Open Letter on World Dynamics' distributed to world leaders in December 2002. The comments apply even more powerfully today!

- That leadership emerges in large groups and social systems when there is a match between the unconscious dynamics and defences of the leader and the unconscious needs and wishes of the led. This relationship between pathology and politics exposes the system to significant risk in times of transition or crisis.
- That the global context of the human species within its holding environment is raising increasing social anxiety about future viability. The result is an increasing state of collective paranoia coupled with despair and impotence in the face of the enormity of scale and difficulties encountered in mobilising effective international action.
- That another response to the global situation is the social retreat into passivity, dissociation, collective trance and anxiolytic behaviour. Energy is invested in attempts to sedate the presenting symptoms of anxiety rather than focussed on the underlying problems which are causing it.

- That heightened social anxiety leads to the reinforcement of fundamentalist ideologies, whether philosophical, political, economic or religious. These constructs defend individuals and systems from anxiety while detaching them from reality. Extreme pressure for conformity and collusion are experienced within the groups concerned, while intense conflict is engendered at their boundaries.

My concluding paragraph is worth reproducing in full:

- Under certain conditions normal defences, used to contain the experience in unconscious repression, are weakened, precipitating an acting-out of birth trauma in collective behaviour. Current global conditions constitute precisely such a context on a massive scale. Living space is constricted, resources are seen as inadequate to sustain current or future patterns of growth, the pace of change is accelerating, increased pressure is universally experienced and issues of environmental pollution are significant. Collective identification of the species as a mega-humanoid foetus within its global uterine space, leads to the perception of reaching critical mass within its holding environment. Under these conditions the collective foetal assumption is that the titanic struggle of birth is imminent. Realistic anxiety about the actual condition of the species is massively inflated by re-stimulated anxiety released from the collective unconscious, the threatened acting-out of which on a global scale probably constitutes the most severe crisis ever encountered by our human species. (Wasdell, 2002, pp.2-5)

## **Clarifying Climate Change**

In May 2005, the ‘severe crisis’ was spelled out in the virally circulated ‘Global Warning’. (Wasdell, 2005) It identified three issues: the collision between exponential consumerism and limited global resources; the environmental implosion threatened by accelerating global warming; and the predictable social disruption from the unleashed response of psychotic social defences against anxiety. Within just over a year I took up responsibility for ‘the Manhattan Project of Climate Science’, quickly re-named ‘The Apollo-Gaia Project’. The research agenda was concentrated on the most critically important ‘known unknown’, namely the amount by which the complex feedback dynamics of the global climate system would amplify the impact of the increasing concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide. The second, and ‘absolutely scary’, question concerned the boundary conditions of the potential condition of ‘runaway climate change’. Robust answers were essential if effective responses were to be mobilised and the dysfunctional defences and reality-denying dynamics were to be deconstructed at a scale and in a time-frame determined by the rate of change in our holding environment. (Wasdell, 2012)

The ensuing (and continuing) period has proved to be the most demanding, stressful and occasionally life-threatening few years I have ever known. It has pushed my boundaries psychologically, physically and intellectually. The story of the journey will have to be told elsewhere, but the multi-media output of the Apollo-Gaia Project together with its critical strategic implications for global problem-solving are widely accessible via the website, see for instance "Climate Dynamics: Facing the Harsh Realities of Now". (Wasdell, 2015)

## Defence Delineation

In the early days, exploration of the processes, behaviour and embedded paradigmatic dogma of religious, analytic and psycho-therapeutic organisations, together with the complex set of their inter-relationships, constituted the 'royal road' into the collective unconscious. Today, those dynamics are being acted out in public space for all to see, albeit with increasingly powerful repression of insight into their origins and functions.

Any reality-related context that raises anxiety becomes a canvass onto which the social defences against anxiety are projected. The task is to reduce (defend against) the anxiety. Tragically, one outcome of the process is to elide the anxiety-generating information. Reducing anxiety rather than realistic problem-solving, becomes the order of the day. Knowledge-generating activity ('scientia') has to be attacked, contradicted, discredited, defunded, institutionally closed down, refused publication, undermined and ignored in proportion to the intensity of anxiety generated by its implications. Potentially angst-generating conclusions can serve to repress research findings and distort methodology across the scientific community. This diversion of reality-related attention into the inner task of anxiety management lies at the very core of psychosis, whether individual or collective.

Anxiety enters the awareness of social systems from two discrete but linked sources. The first we can term reality-related anxiety. It stems from contextual information associated with real threats requiring appropriate response. That is a healthy survival-mechanism. The second (and under certain conditions far more powerful) source emerges into consciousness from deeply buried trauma normally held at bay by the ubiquitous defences against anxiety. This we can categorise as neurotic or even psychotic anxiety. It is activated by strong association, re-stimulation or triggering set off by current context. As defences weaken and previously unconscious content floods social awareness, process from the precipitating matrix comes to dominate collective dynamics. Grounding the imprint in its causal experience is a prerequisite for defence deconstruction and recovery of greater reality-orientation.

So against what are the 'primitive defences against anxiety' in place? Access, as in all effective post-traumatic-stress recovery, is gained at a point in time before trans-marginality is encountered. Attempts to access the material from a post-trauma perspective risk re-traumatisation as the system is flooded by response to peak impingement without any protective defences.

First indications that all is not well may emerge from encounter with limits to growth: overcrowding, pollution, constraints in nutrients and energy resources. Triggering in post trauma context drives the paranoid dynamics of capitalism, the obsessive dependence on exponential growth in energy and economics, and the commitment to 'sustainable development'. (Wasdell 1992) The defensive task is to internalise resources by all means available, whether the source be the physical/biological environment, the wealth of vulnerable others, the assets of less competitive companies, or the trading imbalance of the global economy. Foetal assumptions become fatal assumptions when extrapolated to the global environment. Enough is never enough to sedate the rising stress of the needy parasite as it encounters the constraints of a finite world. Interesting that the response of the UK government to the 1972 publication of the Club of Rome (Meadows et al, 1972) was to assemble a team of expert economists and computer modellers in an attempt to destroy its conclusions. They failed, but paid scant regard to the warning.

As the pre-natal journey moves forward in time, stressors mount beyond the bearable. The same context evolves from its historic form of good-enough holding environment to its current experience of crushing collapse and unbearable pain. Here, splitting or idealisation has its roots. In retrospect the schizoid process empties the past of all negativities, and cleanses the present from all vestiges of hope. The split between good and bad, us and them, in-group and out-group, friend and enemy, heaven and hell, originates here and is projected universally in the dynamics of the post-natal world.

As reactivity, rage, retaliation and revenge collapse in the overwhelming experience of terror, impotence and helplessness, so hope of deliverance yields to feelings of overwhelming despair. In our post-natal presentation we recognise the point of abdication. It is all too big to cope with, the best we can do is give up and die in paralysed passivity. Or perhaps we should wait for rescue from somewhere else (there is always hope of salvation) or just mobilise some acting out of anarchic rage in a frenetic orgy of violent destruction that only makes the situation immeasurably worse.

Time comes to a dead-end. There is no exit through this hell. The journey reverses and in phantasy is directed backwards into some idealised pre-trauma position. Post-trauma presentation is of regression to some utopian state held out seductively as promised future bliss. Religious myth and ritual, political ideology, the power-seeking manipulation of the electorate, and the irresistible attraction of winning the war are all manifestations of this defence.

Birth is the archetype of bereavement. The loss is of the original holding environment and its accompanying placental and umbilical companions, but seen through the rear-view mirror of idealisation. The regaining of paradise lost is a ubiquitous but futile cultural imperative. Grieving is cosmic, pitched past pitch of grief, but for ever unresolved. Repressed behind the imprint of trans-marginality, the only way out is marked 'NO EXIT'. It is as if the transition has not happened. If birth is existential death from which we live in regressed retreat, then the dominant myth of post-natal life is one of collective foetal phantasy perpetuated in frozen time. The terminal boundary of death is reframed as birth. The repetitive cycle leaves no room for tears.

Civilisation unconsciously reifies foetal assumptions in fractal patterns of uterine ecology. Against this backdrop of psycho-social defence, the intimation of climate change triggers the collective re-staging of the trauma of birth as threatened change with no survivable outcome. The projected spectre of future traumatic catastrophe, to be denied and avoided at all costs, sits as an impassable phantasy across the bows of reality-related collective action. Realistic hope lies in the recognition that the psychotic level of anxiety does not emanate from future environmental disruption (that is quite tough enough in own right!) but from the long past boundary between the dependent world of uterine regression and the new beginnings of post-natal work and responsibility.

Now is the time for us to deconstruct the primal defences, to recover from fractal foetal phantasy, to celebrate birth as survivable transition, to weep with burning tears as we grieve for the loss of the known world, and to engage the realistic task of sustainable survival on the surface of a changing planet.

At the heart of the new paradigm of psycho-social analysis is the recognition that effective navigation of reality depends on the deconstruction of collective defences against anxiety. Deeply buried unconscious trauma – the very origin of the collective defences – acts as the causal core of the dynamic topology of human behaviour. By implication, the recognition, resolution, release, and integration of that fundamental traumatic imprint opens the door to the re-conception of civilization. That is the phase-change that marks the portal of our planetary future.

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