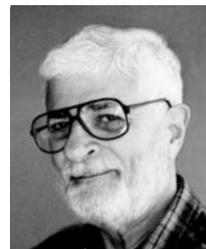




The Psychology of Politics



EMERITUS PROFESSOR
VAMIK VOLKAN
was nominated four times for the Nobel Peace Prize.

A pioneer in the field of the psychology of politics, he is an emeritus professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, a senior scholar at the Erikson Institute for Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Centre in Massachusetts, and was founder and director of the Centre for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction. He spoke to JANSET BERZEG.

PHOTO: JASON HYUNG-GU KANG

When and how did you develop an interest in political psychology?

VV: In 1979 the then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat went to Israel. When he addressed the Israeli Knesset he spoke about the existence of a psychological wall between Arabs and Israelis and stated that psychological barriers constitute 70 per cent of all problems between these two people.

With the blessings of the Egyptian, Israeli and American governments, the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on Psychiatry and Foreign Affairs followed up on Sadat's statements and brought together influential Israelis, Egyptians and later Palestinians for a series of unofficial negotiations that took place between 1979 and 1986.

While I was part of this committee I initiated a number of studies on large-group psychology, enemy relationships and the interactions between political leaders and their followers. That is when I began contemplating developing strategies to tame aggression between enemy groups.

What did the Centre for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction (CSMHI) do?

VV: CSMHI applied theory and knowledge to explain how issues such as ethnic tension, racism, national identity, terrorism, societal trauma, leader-follower relationships, and other key aspects can trigger national and international conflicts.

Because no single discipline can fully illuminate such deep-seated and complex issues, CSMHI's faculty and board included a wide range of experts in different fields such as psychoanalysis, psychiatry, diplomacy, history, political science, and environmental policy. Their combined perspectives and their experience provided the centre with in-depth analysis of political, historical, and social issues that contribute to political conflicts as well as the psychological processes that invariably exist beneath the surface of such conflicts.

How did you get involved with processes of negotiating for peace and Track II diplomacy?

VV: When the Egyptian-Israeli unofficial dialogue series ended in 1987, I opened the CSMHI at the University of Virginia's School of Medicine. The CSMHI's interdisciplinary team (made up of psychoanalysts, former diplomats, political scientists and historians) became involved in bringing together influential

Americans and Soviets for a series of dialogues at the time when the Cold War was ending. Later, we worked in the Baltic Republics, especially in Estonia, facilitating talks between influential leaders from the Russian Federation, particularly the Baltic Republics and Russian-speaking people living in Estonia.

These were dialogues outside official diplomatic talks intended to help Estonia emerge as a healthy democracy. A faculty member of the CSMHI and former American diplomat, Joseph Montville called our activities Track II diplomacy.

Later my CSMHI friends and I were involved in peaceful activities in other locations, including the Republic of Georgia.

Apart from bringing opposing political representatives together for psycho-political dialogues at different locations, we also evaluated the psycho-political environments in societies that had experienced massive traumas. For example, we studied Albania after the death of dictator Enver Hoxha and Kuwait after Saddam Hussein's forces were removed from that country.

I also participated in the former US President Jimmy Carter's International Negotiation Network (INN) activities in the 1980s and 1990s. This helped me to meet many political leaders in various countries and investigate political leader-followers psychology.

After CSMHI was closed down in 2004 the Erikson Institute of Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Centre has been the administrative home of my psycho-political activities. A small group of experts and scholars from diverse disciplines and countries have gathered for a series of meetings to discuss topics and examine processes related to international tensions, especially between the Islamic world and the West. We call ourselves the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI) group. The IDI is a sounding board and a support group for those members of the group currently engaged in consulting with governments and other social groups. IDI develops a common language between psychologically trained participants and diplomats, politicians and academics from other disciplines. This provides a model for transferring psychological insights in understandable ways to those who are actually responsible for diplomatic communications.

I was born to Turkish parents in the island of Cyprus. I guess that the large-group conflicts in Cyprus played a role in my leaving psychoanalytic practices behind to try to understand better the human behavior shared by thousands or millions of people.

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Why is political psychology becoming popular now?

VV: Political psychology is not new. Even the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, wrote about the psychology of wars and war-like conditions. What is new is the realization that we need to understand large-group psychology in its own right.

Previously, most psychoanalytic studies focused on what a large group meant for an individual and did not examine in detail the rituals between different large groups in times of peace and conflict.

Large tribal, ethnic, national, religious or political ideological groups do not have one brain to think or two eyes to cry. When thousands or millions of members of a large group share a psychological journey such as mourning, following a massive trauma at the hands of their enemies, we see particular societal, cultural and political processes.

Large-group psychology means we can explain the conscious and unconscious motivations of the shared psychological experiences within a large group that in turn initiate social, cultural, political, ideological processes. Such processes are specific for each large group and when manipulated they influence the large group's internal and external affairs.

There are various types of shared psychological phenomena that are present within a large group. For example, the shared mental image of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo only exists in the Serbian large group. It was reactivated by Slobodan Milosevic with tragic consequences.

What Greeks call the “Megali Idea” (The great idea to conquer and recover all lands that belong to the Greeks), what Turks call Pan-Turanism (to bring all Turkic persons together in the Middle East and in Central Asia to create a Turkish “empire” and togetherness), what extreme religious Islamists of today call ‘the return of an Islamic Empire’ and what people in the United States call “American exceptionalism”, are examples of political ideologies that are specific to large groups. Such ideologies may last for centuries and may disappear and reappear when historical circumstances change.

Of course war and war-like situations do not start due to psychology. But when conflict erupts, psychological processes are reactivated. “Entitlement Ideologies” tend to contaminate the legal, economic, military and political systems and they create obstacles for peaceful negotiations. When CSMHI brought political opponents together for dialogue we tried to find out the existing psychologically motivated social and political processes of each large group, and deal with them.

We should also remember that there is no single theoretical or practical point of view or application of political psychology. Since I am also a psychoanalyst, I tried to examine both conscious and unconscious motivations of how people with different large-group identities behave in peaceful or in stressful times. Other types of political psychologies depend more on the “logical” evaluations of conflicts and on “logical” solutions.

Can you tell us a bit about shared transgenerational transmission of trauma and how it affects international relations?

VV: When a massive disaster occurs, those who are affected may experience its psychological impact in several ways. Firstly, many individuals will suffer from various forms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Secondly, new social processes and shared behaviors may appear within the affected communities, which are initiated by changes in the shared psychological states of the affected persons. And, thirdly, traumatised persons may, mostly unconsciously, oblige their progeny to resolve the first generation's own unfinished psychological tasks related to the shared trauma, or the mourning of their losses.



A woman and her exhausted children at the Turkish border, Iraqi Kurdistan. PHOTO: CHRIS KUTSCHERA/1991

During recent decades, mental health professionals have learned much about the transgenerational transmission of shared trauma and its link to the mental health of future generations. This development owes a great deal to studies of the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors and others directly traumatised under the Third Reich.

I hope that this issue will continue to be considered by those official international organisations and NGOs that deal with the psychological wellbeing of refugees, internally displaced individuals, and societies who have experienced the horrors of war or war-like conditions. Here is a very simple example of transgenerational transmission: During our work in the Republic of Georgia following the fights between Abkhazians and Georgians I examined a Georgian woman from Abkhazia and her 16-year-old daughter who had been refugees for over four years. The two were living with other family members under miserable conditions in a refugee camp near Tbilisi.

Every night, the mother went to bed worrying about how to feed her three teenaged children the next day. She never spoke to her only daughter about her

concerns, but the girl sensed her mother's worry and unconsciously developed a behavior to respond to and to alleviate her mother's pain. The daughter refused to exercise, became somewhat obese and continuously wore a frozen smile on her face. As our team interviewed both of them, we learned that the daughter, through her bodily symptoms, was trying to send her mother this message: "Mother, don't worry about finding food for your children. See, I am already overfed and happy!"

There are many forms of transgenerational transmission. Apart from worrying, anxiety, depression or elation, there are various psychological tasks that one person may "assign" to another. It is this transgenerational conveyance of long-lasting "tasks" that perpetuates the cycle of societal trauma.

After a massive trauma at the hands of enemies or after a period of political oppression by a government, the people in the victimised group experience a shared sense of shame, humiliation, and even dehumanisation. They cannot be assertive, because expressing direct rage toward the oppressors would threaten their livelihoods and even their lives. Their helpless anger interferes with their mourning over losses that touch every aspect of

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their lives, ranging from their dignity to their property, relatives or friends. Shared unfinished psychological tasks are then passed on from generation to generation. So guilt experienced by people belonging to the victimising group may also be involved in transgenerational transmissions.

My colleagues and I have carried out clinical studies in detail to illustrate how transgenerational transmissions take place and how mothers, fathers, grandparents and other adults unconsciously give tasks such as "remove my shame, go through my mourning process or tame my guilt" to children in the next generation.

Of course, every child's personality is different, but when thousands or millions of children are given the same task, shared large-group attitudes and activities emerge. Depending on external conditions, shared but mostly unconscious tasks may change function from generation to generation. For example, in one generation the shared task is to mourn the previous generation's loss and to feel their victimisation. In the following generation, the shared task may be to express a sense of revenge for that loss and victimisation.

Do you believe that political psychology can change the world for the better?

VV: We are entering into a new type of civilisation due to an unbelievable advance in communication technologies, the evolution of a new type of globalisation, the massive voluntary and forced migrations, terrorism, and other events. Old diplomatic methods often may not be appropriate or applicable to many current international problems. Therefore, an understanding of the influence of the psychology of shared human behaviour has become a necessity.

After the European colonialists left Africa, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, with the independence of India, Georgia and the events in South America, Northern Ireland, Turkey, the Republic of Georgia and elsewhere, we see ethnic, national religious and ideological groups becoming preoccupied with one question: "Who are we now?"

In the attempts to stabilise, maintain or repair

large-group identities we see psychological obstacles getting in the way of a peaceful world.

It is difficult to define large-group identity — whether it refers to tribes, ethnicity, nationality, religious or political ideology as defined by those who say "We are Apache", "We are Ossetians", "We are Polish", "We are Muslims," or "We are Communists".

It refers to the subjective experience of thousands or millions of people who are linked to a large group by a persistent sense of sameness from childhood on, while also sharing some characteristics with others who belong to foreign groups. Members of a large group share what we call "cultural amplifiers", which are concrete or abstract symbols and signs, ranging from physical body characteristics, language, nursery rhymes, food, dances, flags to myths and images of historical events.

Very early in my career as a "political psychologist" I noted how one's large-group identity becomes the most important factor in individuals going through a large-group conflict. During the third year of the Israeli-Arab dialogues that I mentioned above, for the second time, four Palestinians joined us. We were meeting in a neutral country, Switzerland. By that time we had learned that by dividing the participants and facilitators into small groups, we could obtain better results. I was in charge of one small group. A young Palestinian physician from Gaza happened to sit next to retired Israeli major general Shlomo Gazit. General Gazit was an Israeli hero due to his participation in the Six-day War, and defence minister Moshe Dayan had given him the authority to run the political, security and economic affairs of the newly captured territories.

I noticed that the Palestinian physician was nervous. I could understand how difficult it was for him to sit next to a former Israeli general as an equal in a neutral country. He turned to General Gazit and said that he did not like living under Israeli occupation. He then explained that General Gazit, who was the first Israeli general assigned to run the Gaza strip, was a man with high integrity. Because of this the Palestinian physician respected Gazit. He continued by saying that after general Gazit all other Israeli generals who were assigned to Gaza

were “bad” administrators who had caused increased shame, humiliation and helplessness among Palestinians in Gaza.

As he was talking I noticed that the Palestinian physician had put his right hand into the right pocket of his trousers. I could see the frantic movements of his fingers under the cloth. I thought that sitting next to General Gazit had induced what psychoanalysts call “castration anxiety” in him and that he wanted to be sure that his manhood still existed. But then the Palestinian physician, almost screaming, declared: “As long as I have this, you cannot take my Palestinian identity from me.”

When I inquired what “this” was, I learned the following: He had a little stone in his pocket painted with Palestinian colors. We learned that Palestinians in Gaza at that time carried little stones such as this in their pockets. Whenever they saw Israeli soldiers or felt humiliated and threatened by Israelis, they would put their fingers in their pockets and touch the stones. This way they would know that their Palestinian large-group identity still existed.

In a large-group setting a “normal” degree of shared narcissism (loving oneself and one’s own group) attaches itself to large-group identity and creates a sense of uniqueness in cultural amplifiers and usually makes them a source of pride. When large-group identity and its amplifiers are threatened, the result is a shared narcissistic hurt associated with shame, humiliation, helplessness or feelings of revenge.

An exaggerated large-group narcissism is a process when people within a large group become preoccupied and obsessed with the superiority of almost anything connected to their large-group identity, even when such perceptions and beliefs are not realistic. A society’s assimilation of chronic victimhood, and the utilisation of a sense of suffering to secretly feel superior or at least entitled to attention, represent the existence of a masochistic large-group narcissism. Malignant large-group narcissism explains the initiation of a process in which members of that large group wish to oppress or kill “others” either within or outside their legal boundaries. This is a process motivated by a shared spoken or unspoken notion that contamination by the devalued “others” is threatening their superiority.

The above definitions of large-group exaggerated, masochistic or malignant narcissism are only simple definitions. In reality they are usually mixed. A study of shared sentiments, how they originate and how they influence a large-group identity is a very complex process. However, I believe that understanding large-group processes from a psychodynamic angle is necessary. For example, we need to ask what is it to be



Prayers to Gaza. PHOTO: BURCU SÖNMEZ/2010

a Georgian or a South Ossetian or an Abkhazian. Why do people accept suffering or kill others in order to stabilise, maintain or repair their large-group identities? How can we accomplish turning narcissistic investment in large-group identity to “normal” and thus remove psychological obstacles to peaceful solutions?

Do you think globalisation has positive effects in the context of eradication of torture?

VV: During the last few decades globalisation has become the buzzword in political as well as in academic circles. It personifies a wish for prosperity and wellbeing of societies by standardizing economic and political elements and by bringing democratic freedom everywhere in the world. Globalisation as a humanistic concept for helping everyone around the globe is an idealised one and we should continue to support its aims. I hope that in the new civilisation we are entering into there will be no way to stop its good aspects such as bringing human rights to every corner of the globe and eradicating torture.

The new type of globalisation process however, at the present time, seems to threaten large-group identities globally. This has played a role in the development of preoccupations with the “Who are we now?” question. Sometimes such preoccupations and the wish to reverse humiliations associated with large-group identities allowed torture to take place. Even the United States, after September 11, 2001, conducted activities that could be described as torture and were sanctioned officially.

It is generally thought that global transformations take place along three major dimensions: economic, political, and social. As I mentioned before, such

transformations not only affect the adult populations, but also the children and youth and future generations.

When there are crises in these transformations, we usually look at a number of hard, macro-level and logical factors to explain the causes of social problems. For example, in an economic crisis what comes to our minds first are visible factors such as austere budget cuts, high interest rates, and strict monetarist policies. In my studies I have been trying to identify the softer, micro-level and illogical psychological processes hidden behind the hard, macro-level and logical considerations.

Psychologically speaking, a healthy society is one where the citizens trust one another while interacting among themselves under culturally accepted guidelines and democratic legal rules. Basic trust among citizens disappears when a society is not healthy. Basic trust is a concept that describes how children learn to feel comfortable putting their own safety in a caretaker’s hands; by developing basic trust, children discover, in turn, how to trust themselves. In a healthy society, adults also depend on trusting themselves and others to remain functioning citizens. As we enter into a new civilisation and accept globalisation we must pay the necessary attention to how to develop basic trust in large groups and in their relations with their neighbors.

Recently, 146 torture rehabilitation centers in 73 countries (organised by the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims and the Physicians for Human Rights groups) have called for Obama to hold Bush accountable for torture and to help the victims. What are your comments on this topic as a doyen on the psychology of politics?

VV: I am aware of this. My belief is that this wish will not be granted since such a process will destabilise the internal affairs of the USA and stain its large-group identity. What will be important is the United States’ re-declaration of respect for human rights, and showing its determination to protect and maintain it.

You have been invited to deliver a keynote address at the 9th International Capacity Building Workshops and Conference on Health and Human Rights in Tbilisi, Georgia, in October 2011. Can you tell us about your keynote address in Georgia?

VV: My CSMHI colleagues and I worked in the Republic of Georgia for six years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We tried to open a people-to-people relationship between Georgians and South Ossetians, especially between Georgian and South Ossetian psychologists, teachers, and university professors who worked with traumatised persons. We focused on changing the depressive atmosphere at a refugee camp at Tbilisi Sea near Tbilisi and also visited Tskinali. We also brought together Georgians, Armenians, Abkhazians, South Ossetians and Turks to examine the violence against women and what could be done about this serious problem.

It will be a great pleasure for me to return to Tbilisi, meet many friends and also deliver a keynote address. I will explain, with references to my work in that part of the world, and to the psychology of large-group identity and the role massive traumas have in shaping it.

I will also refer to the importance of psycho-politically informed dialogues between influential representatives of opposing groups that will help the participants to separate realities of existing situations from the psychic realities that are filled with prejudices and fantasies. I will stress that if such an unofficial dialogue can be established among influential

persons with different large-group identities in that part of the world there may be a better atmosphere for future official dialogues. However, I am aware that political tensions may not allow the development of such a project right away. **R**

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