

## Society Today

# A plea for moderation and open debate

Leila Dubois-Barnes

**S**peaking about race, gender, religion and sexual orientation can be challenging. But lately it has come to require some courage. I would like to raise my concern about the excesses of a culture – or a binary ideology – sometimes described as “woke” that is beginning to stifle individual voices and to erode our (learning) institutions. According to *The Economist*, this ideology “is not yet dominant, but it is dynamic and spreading” (*The Economist*, 2020). It is the anxieties of the students, trainees or supervisees I work with in my consulting room that have prompted me to write about this new phenomenon. The plural identities of these individuals reflect an ordinary multicultural, non-heteronormative and ethnically diverse London practice. Yet irrespective of their ethnicity or gender, some of these individuals have feared they risk being labelled as prejudiced or racist, or even of being chucked out of their course.

**“the excesses of a culture – or a binary ideology – sometimes described as “woke” that is beginning to stifle individual voices”**

Woke is often associated with cancel culture. Other terms linked to it that are much in the news at present include white privilege, cultural appropriation, identity politics and trans. Originally “woke” was a call that questioned the dominant (white) paradigm. It was a way to say “conscious” – having an awareness of injustice endured by ethnic, sexual and/or religious minorities in the US. It gained more widespread use as part of the BLM and #MeToo movements. The premise underpinning an ideology that calls for social and racial equality is formidable and justified. But what about when “it defines everyone by their race, and every action as racist and anti-racist” (*The Economist*, 2020), when the ambient undertone becomes one of you’re either with us or against us?

Perhaps this is one aspect of ‘culture wars’ – a term that has increasingly featured in the media lately. Scholars in America and in Europe are now exposing a culture that

is out of control. For example, a Letter “On Justice and Open Debate” signed by prominent figures representing a panel of diverse voices was published in *Harper’s Magazine*. These included professors fearing for their jobs, journalists fearing running controversial pieces or writers fearing book withdrawals. The signatories denounced an intolerance of opposing views and a vogue for public shaming in favour of ideological conformity.

Is intolerance of this kind creeping into our own field – particularly our training organizations? In a recent paper, Chan (2020) described her personal journey through psychoanalytic training amidst a heightened cultural polarization of race and ethnicity in America. She writes about aggressive initiatives intended to increase inclusiveness which not only paradoxically reaffirm a racist narrative, but that also contribute to the perpetuation of the diminished educational status of minority students. “Any diversity of viewpoint,” she observes, “against the progressive ideology was seen as evidence of racism if you were white or internalized racism if the person identified as a person of colour”. With only one version of reality permitted, students have no choice but to submit to compulsory or mandatory values training.

In France, theories of race, gender and post-colonialism are threatening the French ideal of an indivisible secular nation. Its universalist model assumes that all citizens, not groups, have equal rights. In fact, France intentionally avoids implementing “race conscious policies” – hence there is no data on racial, ethnic, or religious origins. In France, one’s identity is primarily one’s citizenship. It is my experience that working within an Anglo-Saxon paradigm on diversity may not necessarily sit well with a French (black) client for whom secularism may be an accepted *modus vivendi*. Thus, it is important to keep an open mind about the person we have in front of us in our consulting room, without presuppositions of any kind. If I am curious about the possible unconscious fantasies of a (prospective) patient, I do not make assumptions based on difference, i.e., that the person feels stigmatised because of his/her BAME background or non-binary sexual orientation. Instead, I am interested in what brings us together.

Is it significant that I might be an “ethno-culturally different” therapist or that English is a second language to both of us? Similarly, is it pertinent (or

not) that we speaking the same language (French)? Who am I in relation to my client, the host country, (non-) British people and vice versa? This is particularly interesting since my first name and both my surnames can be confusing in terms of my country/ies of origin. Which different parts of the therapist the analysand is and is not relating to offer multiple concrete and symbolic meanings within the transference. It may also potentially reverse a patient’s (or supervisee’s) perspective and/or generate a realization. For example, one of my supervisee’s clients, recognizing himself in the LGBTQ community, had been “othering” someone from the BAME community. My supervisee said about his client: “He is we-ing us [implicitly for having the same ethnicity]”. My supervisee wanted to say to his client: “You can’t say that!”. My understanding of this interaction was a deep wish on the part of my supervisee’s client, who had a history of feeling excluded, to “pair” with his therapist\*. Sometimes “othering” reveals a longing for “pairing”. I also believe that the analytic pair may connect through reciprocated (broken or complex) identities even if they don’t share the same culture or ethnicity.

We should not underestimate the power and the pervasiveness of this culture. If institutionalised racism exists, there is now a real danger of increasingly institutionalising censorship/wokeness, of fetishizing differences and self-worship. I also fear this ideology will generate splits between and within communities giving rise to communitarianism and identity drifts. Green (2005) pertinently pointed out that a psychoanalyst’s role is not to act as a representative of social conformism

and that psychoanalysts should not seek to adapt the patient to society. Some cultures, scholars (and therapists?) may have a different approach. Diversity should also tolerate divergent (or cross) models of thinking and working deemed countercultural. Isn’t the life blood of our work to value non-binary over binary? The formation of new perspectives over ideological conformity? Just as trainees need to develop their own style within our analytic paradigms, we need to allow multi-perspectival views in our psychoanalytic institutions – whether we are working within or beyond an ethnic based approach or whether we would rather adopt, despite its shortcomings, a more universalist philosophy.

\*I am grateful to the supervisee for this material and for having given me his consent for publication.

*Leila Dubois-Barnes is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and supervisor in private practice in West London and online. She trained at WPF Therapy and holds an MA in Psychoanalytic Studies from the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust. Leila is a registered member of BPC and is BACP accredited. Address for correspondence: leilabarnes37@gmail.com*

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