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## Working through the end of civilization<sup>1</sup>

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*This is an account of how a civilization works through the problems it faces when it is threatened with destruction. It focuses on the example of the Crow Nation, an Indian tribe of the northwest plains of North America, and their last great chief Plenty Coups. Psychoanalytic ideas play a crucial role in explaining how a creative response was possible. In particular, their collective use of dream-visions and dream-interpretation made possible the creation of a new ego ideal for the tribe. This allowed for the transformation of traditional allocations of shame and humiliation. It also allowed for the possibility of transformation of psychological structure. And it opened up new possibilities for what might count as flourishing as a Crow. Conversely, the threat of civilizational collapse allows us to see new possibilities for the conceptual development of psychoanalysis. In particular, psychoanalysis needs to recognize that destruction can occur at the level of the culture while the individuals are not physically harmed. The psychological states of these individuals can be various and complex and cannot be neatly summed up under the category of trauma. A culture can be devastated, while there is no one-to-one relation to the psychological states of the individuals who participate in that culture. It is also true that a collapse of a way of life makes a variety of psychological states impossible. Coming to understand these phenomena is essential to understanding how a culture works through threats to its very existence.*

**Keywords:** working through, loss of meaning, cultural trauma, anxiety, dream-interpretation

### Birth of a concept

The concept of working through (*Durcharbeitung*) came into the world via Freud's dawning recognition that simply speaking the truth to his patients was not sufficient for cure. Even in his earliest psychological work, *Studies in hysteria* (1893-5), Freud was aware not only that the patient must be able to experience the hitherto repressed memory with appropriate emotional intensity, but that it was a myth to think of there being a repressed memory: 'We must not expect to meet with a *single* traumatic memory and a *single* pathogenic idea as its nucleus; we must be prepared for *successions* of *partial* traumas and *concatenations* of pathogenic trains of thought.' And, even around the nucleus, 'we find what is often an incredibly profuse amount of other mnemonic material which has to be worked through in the analysis.' At the time he thought that the problem lay in trying to get the massive network of material through what he called the 'defile of consciousness': the fact that we have and speak our

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conscious thoughts one at a time. Once all the 'complicated and multi-dimensional organization' has come out, Freud says, 'we should rightly be asked how a camel like this got through the eye of the needle' (1893–5, pp. 287–8, 291).

One could, I think, tell the history of the development of psychoanalytic technique by giving an account of the development of the concept of working through. By the time Freud wrote his classic paper 'Remembering, repeating and working-through' (1914), 'working through' had become the name of the process by which the analysand becomes 'conversant' with his resistances as they manifest themselves in the transference, and ultimately overcomes them through the joint analytic work of analysand and analyst.

This working through of the resistances may in practice turn out to be an arduous task for the subject of the analysis and a trial of patience for the analyst. Nevertheless it is a part of the work which effects the greatest changes in the patient and which distinguishes analytic treatment from any kind of treatment by suggestion. (1914, pp. 155–6)

[In a significantly later work, *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*, Freud elaborated the idea of working through to include not only resistances of the ego, but 'resistance of the unconscious': 'the attraction exerted by the unconscious prototype upon the repressed instinctual process' (1926, pp. 159–60).]

It is not surprising that an analyst should concentrate on the arduous task of helping an analysand confront his or her resistances. But, in a more positive light, working through can also be seen as the process by which the analysand develops a remarkable practical capacity: the capacity to recognize the myriad manifestations of unconscious fantasies as they arise in the here-and-now and to find new and creative ways to live with them. The ancient Greek philosophers—notably Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—thought that certain practical capacities should be thought of as human excellences (*aretai*), or, as is often translated, virtues. These are the capacities of the psyche that enable one to live a happy life. On this criterion, the successful process of working through ought to be thought of as the development of a human excellence, a certain *poetic freedom* with respect to one's own mental life.

It is also, and equivalently, the development of the capacity to *speak one's mind*. It is not unusual for a person to enter analysis with a correct verbal account of one of the central conflicts of his life. And yet the words do not connect up to that very conflict as it continues to live in and through him. One wants to say that, like Oedipus, he both does and does not know the meaning of his words. Similarly, in a good-enough analysis, the analyst may on occasion speak somewhat prematurely: the interpretation is true and it does track the analysand's inner struggle, but it arrives ahead of the analysand's textured grasp of its meaning. In addition to repression and resistance, this is also due to the pervasive, tenacious, *fractal* quality of unconscious fantasy. A core fantasy will manifest itself not only in what a person recognizes as the central dilemma of his life, but also in the way he opens the door, signs a check, makes a cup of coffee, chooses a pair of shoes, rubs up against a neighbor's arm on a plane, makes a vinaigrette, invites a friend to watch the World Cup. Working through is the process through which the analysand acquires the ability to recognize that *all this* is what the

analyst's words mean.<sup>2</sup> As any analyst worth his salt knows, when it comes to human beings, there is speaking the truth, and then there is speaking the truth. I said at the beginning that the concept of working through was born out of a recognition that simply speaking the truth was not sufficient for cure; but now we are in a position to see that, properly understood, getting oneself into a position where one can speak the truth may *be* the cure. This irony lies at the heart of the psychoanalytic method and it is, I think, still not sufficiently well understood (see Lear, 2003, 2006a).

### A problem for cultural critique

Freud bequeathed psychoanalysis not only a technique for treating individuals, but a tradition of offering large-scale cultural interpretations; for example, of religious commitment and secularization, monotheism, anti-Semitism, and war. But if the phenomenon of working through shows us how much work needs to be done to bring crucial concepts to life, there would seem to be a question about the value of any psychoanalytically informed cultural critique. Given the difficulty of acquiring any genuine psychoanalytic insight, what good could large-scale cultural critique serve? How could one avoid having one's interpretation degenerate into a cliché that is traded about in empty ways? This, I believe, is what has happened to Freud's interpretation of religious belief as illusion (Lear, 2005, pp. 192–219).

Freud did not explicitly formulate this problem, but his writings contain two answers to it. First, he thought that history could itself be understood as the working through of some fundamental myths—notably the primordial conflicts that gave us monotheism, Judaism, Christianity, and now the birth of a secular world—and his essays could serve as an interpretation that would help us understand, and perhaps on occasion facilitate, these processes as they were unfolding (1927, pp. 54–5, 1939, pp. 127–37). Second, even when history was on an unalterably awful course—notably in his lifetime with the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria—a psychoanalytic understanding would help a few readers understand and face the reality they could not avoid (1933, pp. 199–215).

It seems to me that Freud's first answer is no longer an option for us: with hindsight it looks like a progressivist fantasy of historical development. His second response still has valence, but, given that we are living through such troubling times, one would hope that there might be more to be said for psychoanalytically informed cultural interpretation than that it helps a few individuals to face a large-scale reality they cannot alter.

### Civilizational anxiety

We can perhaps agree that we live in a time that is marked by disagreement. It is a time of division, polarization, distrust, and hatred. There are deep divisions between

<sup>2</sup>Note the uncanny and non-accidental similarity to a child's concept acquisition: a child can say 'horse' and even point to a horse, without yet having the capacity to pick out other horses or distinguish horses from other large animals. And yet uttering 'horse' and pointing to a horse is part of the developmental process by which the child acquires the capacity to apply this universal to the many particular horses.

Europe and America, between secular and religious peoples, between and within religious groups. There are, of course, many reasons for this—and I do not here want to diminish any of the conscious claims of injustice, or provide a reductive explanation. But I suspect that the more powerful forms of intolerance are fed by widespread anxiety that civilization *as each group knows it* is vulnerable. There is anxiety about globalization overwhelming traditional cultures, about secularization undermining religious values, about Islam overrunning Europe, about Western culture overrunning Islam; the list goes on.

But, when we talk of the vulnerability of a culture, what do we mean? It is constitutive of anxiety that there is a certain unclarity as to what it is about (Freud 1926, pp. 164–6; Heidegger 1962, pp. 228–35, 2001, pp. 184–91; Kierkegaard, 1980). We are, in this case, anxious about civilization's vulnerability, but we are largely ignorant of what this vulnerability consists in. In such a condition, phrases like the 'end of civilization', 'clash of civilizations', and 'the end of history' are traded as though we knew what we are talking about. There thus seems to be at least a possibility for cultural interpretation to spring us out of clichés rather than simply plunge us back into them. I think psychoanalytic ideas can help us better understand the vulnerability we inherit in so far as we are, by nature, cultural animals. And, in so far as anxiety thrives due to essential vagueness in what it is about, as we come to better understand the anxiety we inevitably transform it into something else. Moreover, I think we can use psychoanalytic ideas to help us see certain large-scale analogues of working through as it occurs at the level of a culture's attempt to grasp and endure challenges to its existence.

It has been difficult to see what is at stake, in part because the demise of a civilization is typically entangled in war, brutality, attempted genocide or environmental catastrophe. Thus, we have naturally concentrated on those catastrophes and the trauma and psychological devastation they engender. However important this is, it can also obscure the specific liability involved in losing a culture. If we were only to be threatened by the loss of our culture, what would we lose?

As a way of remembering—and in the hope of avoiding a repetition—I want to go back to the challenges the Crow Indians faced with the onslaught of Western civilization in the century 1850–1950. The Crow were a nomadic tribe that flourished on the northwest plains of what is now the United States from the 17th through the 19th centuries. In the spring of 1884, they moved on to the reservation and abandoned their traditional nomadic way of life (Hoxie, 1989, 1997; Lowie, 1983; Medicine Crow, 2000; White, 1978, pp. 319–21). Within the context of our current concerns, there are three reasons for considering the challenges they had to face. First, while their traditional culture was devastated in this period, there was no attack upon them, no defeat in war, or any attempted genocide. As we shall see, they early on chose to ally themselves with the US and fight their traditional enemies, notably the Sioux, on the side of the US Cavalry. Thus, although they did have to suffer the white man's diseases and the terrible destruction of the buffalo, when they moved on to the reservation they did so willingly and under the general aura of friendship with the US. Thus, this seems to be a case in which what they lost was primarily their traditional culture. Second, there are certain aspects of what happened to them, and

how they coped, that we need psychoanalytic concepts to understand. Third, there are other aspects that, I think, can help psychoanalysis itself to develop.

### The end of the end

A crucial task of any robust culture is to provide its inhabitants with a *telos* or end—a sense of why life is valuable, what it is to flourish as a human being, the central concepts with which members of the culture can understand what is good and bad, true and false, valuable and useless about the world. (This holds true even of modern liberal culture, though at a higher level of generality. Though it does not want to prescribe one overarching picture of the good life, it does promote the idea that the good life consists in having the freedom to set one's own ends.) The Crow had a conception of the good life: unfettered hunting in a nomadic life that God gave them as a chosen people; participating in sacred rituals of thanks, pleas, and preparation; opportunities for behaving bravely and supporting the tribe. War was not itself good, but it was inevitable: and thus behaving bravely in that context was a culturally established way of flourishing. All this became impossible, more or less in a moment, when they moved on to the reservation. Intertribal warfare was forbidden; hunting off the reservation became impossible. Not only were there no more buffalo left to hunt, nomadic hunting parties straying off the reservation were prohibited. There was no longer a way to live according to the traditional understanding of the good life.

I would like to catalogue some losses the Crow thereby had to endure—losses with which we are largely unfamiliar, in part because, when faced with historical catastrophe, we have tended to concentrate on the psychological phenomenon of trauma. I think psychoanalysis will become richer if it takes these distinctive losses into its purview. First, they had to endure a *loss of concepts* (Diamond, 1988). By this, I mean that the central concepts with which they had hitherto understood their lives suddenly became unintelligible as ways of living. So, for instance, there was nothing that could count as *going on a hunt* any longer. A young man might grab a bow and arrows, take a horse and sneak off the reservation at night, but neither that nor anything else could be considered going on a hunt. The very idea of going on a hunt had its place within the context of a nomadic, unfettered life of hunting plentiful buffalo. When that life became impossible, the central concepts of that life ceased to make sense as ways of going forward. Similarly, nothing could any longer count as *going to war*. Angry young men might sneak over to the Sioux reservation and take some horses, but rather than a brave act of counting coup, it would now be regarded as theft, delinquency, trouble-making. It is a mistake to think that the issue here is merely a matter of who gets to tell the narrative, that one man's bravery is another man's trouble-making. The Crow suffered a real loss which needs to be acknowledged in any accurate narrative. If a young Crow man were today to steal a Sioux horse, the Crow themselves would not tell the same narrative as they would have 150 years ago (Linderman, 1974, pp. 8–9, 97; Medicine Crow, 2000, pp. 110–33; Snell, 2000; Voget, 1995).

Second, the Crow suffered a *loss of events*. If nothing could any longer count as going to war or going on a hunt, nothing could any longer count as *preparing to go*

to war or *preparing* to go on a hunt. But this encompassed all the rituals and virtually all the activities of traditional Crow life. So, for example, the Sun Dance was a ritual danced before a battle, seeking inspiration and pleading for God's favor. Obviously, it remains possible for people to move their arms and legs in the same motions and make the same sounds as when they danced the Sun Dance, but it is no longer possible to *do* the Sun Dance (Lear, 2006b; Rawls, 1967; White, 1991). In fact, the Crow ceased doing the Sun Dance and it fell out of existence for 60 years. When they wanted to revive it after World War II, no one could remember the steps. They had to import a Sun Dance from a neighboring, and former enemy, tribe the Shoshone (Voget, 1984; Yellowtail, 1991). This dance is now danced to pray, for example, for the successful outcome of surgery on a child. I know contemporary Crow who refuse to dance in this ritual because they do not consider it sufficiently Crow.

But now consider even as mundane an activity as cooking a meal. Imagine someone passing the teepee at a Crow encampment around 1850, seeing a Crow woman stirring a pot, and asking her 'What's up?' She responds, 'I'm getting my husband and children ready for tomorrow's hunt.' Or even more simply: 'We're going on a hunt.' Even as basic an activity as cooking a meal was not *just* that. But pass by a visually identical scene on the Crow reservation around 1920 and no equivalent answer would be possible. Cooking a meal was just that (Anscombe, 2000; Thompson [internet]).

Two Leggings, a lesser chief, says of going on to the reservation, 'Nothing happened after that. We just lived. There were no more war parties, no capturing of horses from the Piegan and the Sioux, no buffalo to hunt. There is nothing more to tell' (Nabokov, 1982, p. 197). And Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow tribe, said of this period, 'After this, nothing happened' (Linderman, 1962, pp. 308–9). It is tempting, especially as psychoanalysts, to think in terms of a psychological interpretation of these enigmatic words: perhaps they are depressed. This is a temptation which should be resisted—at least until we have canvassed another possibility: namely, that Two Leggings and Plenty Coups are standing witness to a real loss, the loss of anything that could count as a happening according to the traditional Crow understanding of events. We need to better understand the nature of this loss before we can inquire into the variety of psychological states one might experience in relation to this loss.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>There are other related losses which it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider, in particular a *loss of time* and a *loss of a world*. (1) As for time: if, following Aristotle and Heidegger, we assume that time is essentially datable—that every moment is a moment-when—then, for the Crow, every now was a now-when we are going into battle, now-when we are going on a hunt, now-when we are doing the Sun Dance, and so on. But if the traditional Crow understanding of events ceases to make sense, so does the traditional conception of time. (2) As for the loss of a world, this is a phrase which is often used in vague and ambiguous ways. But one way of making the loss precise is in terms of relevant instances of the law of excluded middle. Relevant instances of the law of excluded middle are constitutive of our reality-principle grasp that we live in a world that is not entirely under our omnipotent control. So, for the Crow, on the evening before a battle, they would implicitly know that tomorrow either they would succeed in battle or they would fail. They wouldn't know which because the world was independent of their wishes, but they would know it had to be one or the other. These were all the possibilities there are. But, as they moved on to the reservation, this entire field of possibilities breaks down. The traditional understandings of what it would be to go into battle, to succeed or fail—all of this ceases to make sense. But it is precisely these typical instances of the law of excluded middle that structured how the Crow understood the world to be.

Third, the Crow suffered a *loss of mental states*. Nothing could any longer count as *intending* to go on a hunt, *intending* to go into battle, *intending* to dance the Sun Dance. These mental states are ruled out as conceptually impossible. What is left is the bare possibility of wishing: one may still *wish* that one could go on hunt, for it is part of the concept of a wish that realistic considerations, even considerations of possibility, do not necessarily affect it. That there are logical constraints on the scope of desire is shown by the following example: someone might sincerely say, 'I want to go on a buffalo hunt, just as my ancestors did,' and it would be open to a third party to interpret him thus: he doesn't really *want* to go on such a buffalo hunt, he *wishes* he could do so. (Anyone who thinks that the difference between a want and a wish will one day be discovered in the neurophysiology of the individual ought to ponder this example; see Burge, 1979; Anscombe, 2000.)

Finally, there is an at least *threatened loss of identity*. The Crow not only ran out of things to do, they ran out of things to *be*. For if we think of the traditional social roles in terms of which the Crow understood themselves, most notably *warrior* and *chief*, it is no longer clear what it would be to inhabit these roles. These are identities that were formed in a period of nomadic hunting and war, and on the reservation it becomes unclear how they can continue. There are other roles—such as *medicine man* and *wife*—which seem less threatened, for there remained a need for spiritual advice, medical care, tending to the family. Still, even these roles were formed in the context of a hunting-and-warrior culture. As the medicine woman Pretty-Shield put it, 'I am trying to live a life I do not understand' (Linderman, 1974, p. 8).

As psychoanalysts, we need to think more about the psychological effects of such losses. For example, what is it to mourn the loss of concepts? What would it be to fail to mourn? What would it be to work through such a loss? It is, I think, a mistake to try to reduce the wide variety of psychological phenomena that might arise around such a loss to the concept of trauma. *If* it makes sense to speak of trauma here at all, it is primarily a trauma *to the culture*, and there is no one-to-one mapping from that trauma on to the psychological states of its inhabitants. An outstanding task for psychoanalysis is to find out more about the variety of psychological effects on individuals of suffering such a cultural loss. One reason it has been natural to focus on psychological trauma is that psychologists and psychoanalysts have had to treat people who, at the same time as losing their culture, were also brutalized, raped, tortured or wounded. These are typically traumatizing events. But what happens when we try to focus on the psychological effects due to a loss of civilization? I do not think we yet know the answer to that question. And this reveals one reason why psychoanalytically informed cultural interpretation may be of value: as we investigate the myriad individual psychological responses to cultural threat, we need to understand the larger environment of meanings in which these responses are formed.

In this context, it is worth keeping in mind that the Crow had a vivid understanding of the possibility of genocide; but they had little idea of the losses they would endure as they peaceably moved on to the reservation. Throughout the 19th century, it was part of living memory that in the early 1820s 1,000 Sioux warriors launched a surprise attack on a Crow encampment; and, according to oral tradition, half of the population was killed. The Crow certainly grasped the possibility of

being slaughtered, with a few women and children forced into slavery. What they lacked was an understanding of what it would be to remain physically unharmed, but nevertheless to lose one's culture. I think this is something we still do not understand very well. And the Crow have much to teach us. It is also true, I think, that psychoanalytic concepts can give us unique insight into the extraordinary ways in which the Crow faced their radically new circumstances.

### The prophetic dream

Like psychoanalysts, the Crow believed that dreams were meaningful; sometimes revealing a structure of meaning that was hidden from ordinary waking consciousness. They differentiated four different types of dreams: so-called 'no account' dreams, in which one merely saw some incident; 'wish dreams', in which one saw a wished-for event coming true; 'property dreams', in which a person sees horses or blankets or other items he will acquire; and, what concerns us, 'medicine dreams' or dream-visions (Nabokov, 1982, p. 61; see also Irwin, 1994; Nabokov, 1999; Wallace, 1972). In the case of dream-vision in particular, the Crow believed that its true meaning was not given on its surface but needed to be interpreted by a special group of gifted, wise, experienced men and women.

Obviously, there are significant differences between Crow and psychoanalytic methods of dream-interpretation—the Crow do not work with conceptions of primary process or dreamwork—but, with hindsight, it also seems clear that Freud overemphasized certain differences between his method and all previous methods in order to accent the originality of his contribution. He divided all previous forms of dream-interpretation into two classes, symbolic dream interpreting and the decoding method (1900, pp. 96–100). The symbolic method treats the dream as a whole and seeks to replace its content with an analogous content that it portends. Freud complains that there is no way to teach a method of such interpretation. The decoding method, he says, is too atomistic: it tries to interpret each item in the dream piecemeal. In fact, even as he says this, he seems to give a counterexample: he mentions Artemidorus of Daldis who offers a method of interpretation that not only treats the dream as a whole, but also insists that one needs to locate the dream within the holistic context of the dreamer's life and circumstances. And yet it counts for Freud as an example of the decoding method. (A sign that Freud himself was troubled by this is that he added a footnote in 1914 in which he says that the real difference between his technique and that of Artemidorus is that psychoanalysis 'imposes the task of interpretation on the dreamer himself'. This is an admirable ideal for psychoanalytic technique, but it contradicts all the records we have of Freud's actual practice.) As I have studied Native American practices of dream-interpretation, it has seemed that they combine elements of both the symbolic and the decoding methods; they do not neatly fit into either category. Thus, Freud's division into these two classes seems artificial and, as a result, his criticisms of each do not directly hit the mark of real-life examples.

One salient difference between Crow and modern psychoanalytic practice is that, for the Crow, the interpretation of dream-visions was often a communal activity

aimed at benefiting the tribe as a whole, not just one individual. Another difference is that, in the Crow theory of dreams, they were vehicles for inspiration from the divine-spiritual world. One can accept this theory, be agnostic about it, or refuse to believe it and opt for a totally secular account. Freud, of course, would have done the latter. I am going to offer an account that is compatible with all three stances. The important general point is that the Crow regularly used their imagination—both its capacity for being receptive to the world and its capacity for creative response—as a means for facing the future. In so doing, I think they showed how imagination can be developed into a human excellence—a developed capacity of the psyche that promotes human flourishing. We need psychoanalysis to see why and how that is.

The tribe encouraged the younger members (typically boys) to go off into nature and seek a dream-vision. Young Plenty Coups was called to go off and dream when he was 9 years old. We cannot be certain of the year, but it was around 1855. It was a time when the tribe was still vibrant: it did face challenges from the Sioux, it did know of the 'white man', and of the challenges posed by the guns and knives he traded for furs, but the Crow still had relatively little contact with them; and they were still basically engaged in their traditional nomadic life. I cannot here discuss the dream in any detail. I shall only mention three moments in the manifest content that the Crow wise men thought were important. *First, through a hole in the ground all the buffalo disappeared. Out of that hole came strange spotted bulls and cows that gathered in small groups to eat the grass; they lay down in strange ways, not like buffalo. Second, Plenty Coups was told that the Four Winds were going to cause a terrible storm in the forest, and only one tree would be left standing, the tree of the Chickadee-person. He sees an image of an old man sitting under that lone tree and is told, in the dream, that that person is himself. Finally, he is told to follow the example of the chickadee:*

He is least in strength but strongest of mind among his kind. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee-person is a good listener. Nothing escapes his ears, which he has sharpened by constant use. Whenever others are talking together of their successes and failures, there you will find the Chickadee-person listening to their words. But in all his listening he tends to his own business. He never intrudes, never speaks in strange company, and yet never misses a chance to learn from others. He gains successes and avoids failure by learning how others succeeded or failed, and without great trouble to himself. (Linderman, 1962, pp. 65–7)

This dream was recounted to the wise men in a ritualized setting, and Yellow Bear 'the wisest man in the lodge' interpreted it to mean that in Plenty Coups's lifetime the buffalo would disappear and their traditional way of life would come to an end. The spotted buffalo were the white man's cows, and they would take over the plains. The role model for the Crow should be the chickadee, that remarkable bird who is able to learn from the wisdom of others. By following this model, the Crow will be able to survive the upcoming storm and keep their lands.

To understand how young Plenty Coups's dream and its interpretation could be so valuable to the tribe, I want to make a hypothesis that I think is plausible in itself but receives further justification from its explanatory fruitfulness: namely, that young Plenty Coups was somehow able to dream *on behalf of the tribe*. What this

means exactly remains to be determined, but as psychoanalysts I think we need to understand better the psychological processes by which an individual comes to take on responsibility for the culture that he or she inhabits.<sup>4</sup> I suspect that there was a shared anxiety in the tribe about the future that no one was in a position to name. Rather than think in terms of particular individuals, it seems to me to be more revealing to say that a traditional form of life was anxious about itself. As a sensitive and remarkably young person, Plenty Coups was able to pick up on this anxiety, though none of this happened at the level of conscious awareness and no one had yet formulated the thought. It was not yet a thought anyone could formulate. Out in nature on his dream-quest, he was able—perhaps as the Crow believe with help from the spiritual world, perhaps on his own—to metabolize the tribe's shared anxiety into a dream-narrative. That enabled the elders to continue the process of metabolization so that what had been anxiety could be turned into a conscious thought.

This hypothesis requires that we reject Freud's earliest theory of dreams, whereby they are to be understood exclusively as wish-fulfillments; but it is compatible with his later recognition that dreams could express and thereby help to metabolize anxiety (1920, pp. 32–3, 1923, pp. 109–21, 1925, pp. 127–30, 1926, pp. 87–174). Plenty Coups's dream is rich and deserves detailed study. But, as the topic of this paper is working through, I would like to concentrate on one particular aspect of the dream: the role of the Chickadee.

#### The chickadee as ego ideal

At the moment of Yellow Bear's interpretation, the tribe is in a position that is structurally analogous to an analysand who has just heard an interpretation that he is not yet in a position to grasp fully. The Crow in 1855 could not possibly have had a textured understanding of what it would mean for them to lose their traditional way of life; they cannot possibly have had textured understanding of what it would mean to learn from the wisdom of others; and they could not have had any real understanding of what it would mean for them to survive and hold on to their lands. So, if the dream and its interpretation is going to have a beneficial effect for the tribe, one ought to expect there to be something structurally analogous to the process of working through.

One remarkable insight of psychoanalysis is that dreams are valuable not just for their content, but for the way they can help to shape psychological structure (Hinshelwood, 1994; Lear 2002, 2005, pp. 165–90; Segal, 1964, 1991, pp. 11–23). I believe young Plenty Coups's dream and Yellow Bear's interpretation initiated a process by which the chickadee became installed as a new ego ideal for the tribe. The chickadee had long been admired by the tribe for its shrewdness—it was known to call out the different sizes of its prey and to be able to mark the seasons—but the dream and interpretation took this traditional icon, put it at the center of Crow ambitions and put it to a radically new use. The image of the

<sup>4</sup>A pioneering psychoanalytic work on this topic is Erikson (1993): Martin Luther is someone who assumed responsibility for the viability of Christian culture, and Erikson tries to provide a psychoanalytic account of such a person.

chickadee encourages a shrewd but optimistic openness towards a future that cannot be seen beyond the bare idea that the Crow will survive and they will hold on to their lands. Note that it remains enigmatic what it means to *survive* and what it means to 'keep our lands'. No one in 1855 could have dreamed, for example, that what it would mean to 'keep our lands' would be to hold on to 2 million acres, to have the Yellow River dammed and have some of their sacred burial and hunting grounds submerged under water. The chickadee as ego ideal gave the tribe the psychological resources it needed to face the changes that history would bring without falling into despair. It also encouraged a pragmatic and resourceful attitude toward making the best choices they could in the evolving circumstances.

In a regular process of working through in an individual analysis, the analysand both does and does not yet possess the concepts that will eventually become central to his self-understanding. He has to be able to tolerate a period in which he both does and does not yet understand who he is. Thus, the process of working through will typically generate its own anxiety, and the analysand will need the psychological resources to tolerate it. It is often the case—and it is one meaning of positive transference—that the figure of the analyst is turned into an ego ideal to help the analysand cope with the tribulations of working through. When this process is going well, the figure of the analyst does not stand for any particular outcome, for any particular value beyond the steadfast commitment of continuing to analyze in the face of present and future conflicts. There is implicit in this commitment hopefulness toward a future self and a future way of being that cannot yet be fully comprehended.

In a similar fashion, the chickadee as ego ideal does not stand for any particular value—other than learning from the wisdom of others. But it leaves it completely open who the relevant others are and what their wisdom consists in. That is left for the Crow to decide. The only real commitment is to continue to remain open to the lessons the world has to teach. Thus, it is basically an ego ideal of wise but shrewd openness to the world. [It might be of interest to know that a young Crow friend of mine told me that his favorite newspaper is the *Financial Times* (of London). His reason is that he prefers the European perspective on events; and he thinks that the European approach to solving social problems is more communally oriented than the American individualistic approach, and thus may provide better models for his tribe.]

It is worth making a comparison to two other ideals famous in Western culture: Socrates and Odysseus. Socrates had his own little chickadee—known as his *daimon*. He experienced the *daimon* as a bare voice which did not give him any positive advice on what to do, but would tell him to stop when he was about to do something shameful. Thus the voice served a superego function, but it came with the authority of the spiritual world. And it enabled him to dedicate his life to learning from the wisdom of others (Plato, 1973, pp. 20–3). For with his *daimon* as part of his psychic-spiritual equipment, he had no fear that his openness to others would lead him into base actions. This would have been his only cause for fear. He learned, ironically, that no one actually possessed wisdom, but that in no way impugns the earnestness of his search: indeed, it confirms a *shrewd* openness reminiscent of the

chickadee. Odysseus is, of course, a fictional character; but as the hero of one of the truly foundational works of Western civilization he establishes an ideal for the culture of wily openness. He is the ideal incarnate of being *polytropos*—of having many tropes (Homer, 1976, I.1). Odysseus steadfastly lives with wily openness: it is in that stance that he expresses hope that he will one day return home.

The Crow had to endure their own odyssey, but one which had challenges beyond anything Odysseus could have imagined. The nature of these challenges we are only beginning to think about. Odysseus did not know all the twists and turns the future held in store, but he was never in any doubt about what it *would be* for him to return home. The Crow received prophecy that if they followed the example of the chickadee they would survive and hold on to their lands. Of course, it is typical of prophecies and oracles that the people who receive them do not really know what they mean. But the ignorance standardly flows from the agent's ignorance of how the concepts expressed in prophecy apply to the particular unfolding events. Oedipus is told he will kill his father and marry his mother—and he does that in ignorance of what he is doing. He is ignorant of who his parents are, but he is never in any doubt about what the concepts *mother* and *father* mean. The Crow, by contrast, had to live in a non-standard relation to their prophecy: they had to live through a period in which the very idea of what it would be to 'hold on to our lands', even to 'survive', would be in question. Similarly, Odysseus was never in any doubt what the good life for him would be; nor was he in doubt about what it would be for him to face the future courageously. For the Crow, their traditional idea of the good life—nomadic hunting of plentiful buffalo, glorious victory in battle against traditional enemies—became impossible to live. It was no longer clear what it would be for them to flourish. Indeed, it was no longer clear that anything ever again could count as flourishing. It is hard to see how any group could face this devastation without falling into despair. How could they face this challenge courageously—when their *very idea of courage* now seemed weirdly inappropriate, outdated. As a hunting-warrior culture, courage was understood to be bravery in battle and bravery on a hunt. It was what anthropologists and philosophers call a *thick* conception of courage (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3–30; Williams, 2004, pp. 144–55). What are the possibilities of courage when there is nothing left to hunt and no one left to fight?

Now if we think about the psychological conditions that make such a thick conception of courage possible, one would expect that there would be a cultural process by which the images of brave warriors of the past were instilled as ego ideals. The Crow were a story-loving people, and the stories they recounted to each other night after night were tales of bravery by their great leaders (Bauerle, 2003; McCleary, 1997; Medicine Crow, 2000). And this leads to a very special problem: at a time of cultural devastation are the most courageous people of that culture *least able* to face the future courageously? For Freud teaches us—and in their own ways Plato and Aristotle agree—that superego structure is laid down in childhood, and that character, once established, is difficult to alter. One would thus expect the bravest of the young men and women of the culture to be locked into an ego ideal of courage in relation to which they could only feel shame and humiliation in these radically new circumstances. What the culture needs is a means of *thinning out* the

traditional thick description of courage: for, even if fighting the Sioux has suddenly become irrelevant, there is all the more reason to figure out ways to live courageously through a time when the traditional images of courage have become unlivable. But, psychologically speaking, how could any such transition be possible? It is here, I think, that psychoanalysis can make an invaluable contribution by showing us what the Crow achievement consisted in.

The image of the chickadee drew on a traditional icon to offer the Crow a new ego ideal which, in effect, made possible a thinning out of the Crow conception of courage. For, in addition to the traditional images of the brave warrior, there is now, as it were, the new traditional image of the wily chickadee. And this can provide the psychological resources needed to tolerate hopefully a period in which they lacked the concepts to know what to hope for. In normal circumstances, one has some understanding of what it is to flourish, even if one needs life experience to come to a textured understanding of what that means. But, in these extraordinary conditions, the very idea of flourishing is itself in abeyance: there is as yet no *it* such that one can hope for it. The Crow must live through a period in which there is no end—no clear *telos*—of civilization. Note that the dream encourages steadfastness with respect to its own message. The dream predicts a terrible storm in which all the trees in the forest but one will be knocked down. Thus, when bad events occur, as they inevitably do, they can be seen as confirming, rather than undermining, the overall message of the dream. (In this way, the dream in effect inoculates its adherents from the despair that arises from the problem of evil: the question, how could God allow this to happen? On the Crow theory of dreams, the spiritual world is itself giving the Crow a message that, while there will be a terrible time, they will survive and eventually flourish again. Moreover, the dream explains that the terrible time is not God's direct will, but is rather the product of somewhat malevolent, powerful yet ultimately minor spiritual-natural forces, the Four Winds.<sup>3</sup>)

#### Imagination as a human excellence

I do not think we can understand the remarkable achievement of the Crow without the use of psychoanalytic concepts—in particular, the psychoanalytic understanding of the ego ideal and of how dreams can contribute to psychological structure. In effect, Plenty Coups's dream cleared the ground for a new generation of Crow poets. Here I use 'poet' in the widest sense to refer to all those who create new meanings of what it is to be, and to flourish as, a Crow. (I might mention in passing: that the Crow

<sup>3</sup>It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the psychoanalytic understanding of totems, but I would like to indicate briefly how the chickadee does and does not fit into Freud's (1913) account (see also Paul, 1996). For Freud, the totem is a symbolic substitute for the murdered father. Freud thought, mistakenly I believe, that there had to have been an actual murder; others have argued more plausibly for a symbolic murder of a symbolic father. But what we see in the case of the chickadee is rather an actual attack on the symbols for the father. The US government did set out to destroy the traditional ways of life of Indian and Native American tribes; and, in being confined to a reservation, it was no longer clear what could any longer count as *being a chief* (Lear, 2006b; Medicine Crow, 2006). The icon of the chickadee provides the imaginative substance for the recreation of the role of chief. If the Crow are going to flourish, the next generation of Crow leaders will have to be wily chickadees.

Hip Hop group Rezawrektion has recently won first place at the Native American Music Festival; that at the recently established Little Big Horn College on the reservation the motto is Plenty Coups's words: 'Education is your most powerful weapon'; young Crow leaders tell me that they can remember their mothers and grandmothers admonishing them to follow the chickadee; and at the Plenty Coups Museum there is a section which honors the chickadee and a plaque which says that, in Plenty Coups's vision, 'the Chickadee's lodge represented the Crow tribe, which placed its lodge in the right place. Today we retain the heart of Crow country as our reservation.'

But it seems to me that the Crow can teach us something about our own concept of working through. In an ordinary analysis, the analysand already has the concept in the form of the analyst's interpretation and needs to work through a period in which he comes to acquire a textured sense of what it means for him. But in extraordinary times—indeed, part of what makes the times extraordinary—is that the very concepts that we would ordinarily work through themselves become vulnerable. The travails of modern times show us that we need to expand and deepen our own concept of working through to cover times in which fundamental concepts of identity and existence are being lost and reborn.

This is a moment of historical poignancy—indeed, a moment which reveals the vulnerability of history itself—and it takes psychoanalysis, I think, to see a similarity in this moment to that primordial experience that we all have to undergo: that of our entrance into the human world. Newborn infants do not yet have the concepts with which to understand their emerging experience. They have to tolerate a period before they are bequeathed the concepts of their inherited culture by parents and other adults and children. How do we respond to this utter dependency? When things are going well, with a wily openness to a world we cannot yet conceptualize. In his mature theory, Freud posited Eros as one of the two fundamental drives that mark us as human. But Eros—at least, according to the myth that is told in Plato's *Symposium* (Plato, 1976, pp. 203b–204c)—is itself the child of Poverty (*Penia*) and Resourcefulness (*Poros*). I take this to mean that, in our finite, limited, dependent condition, we reach out to the world in wily ways. This reaching out, even in its wiliness, reveals a—perhaps suspicious—trust that the world has something good in it, even if we do not yet have the resources to grasp what it is.

One of the great contributions of psychoanalysis to our understanding of the human condition is that it shows how imagination can be a human excellence. This has not been sufficiently appreciated because psychoanalysis naturally tends to concentrate on psychopathology: the various ways in which the human spirit is twisted into unhappiness. But, if we think about the concept of working through in its broadest context, it seems to me to be nothing other than the process in which the human psyche is reoriented towards, habituated into, happiness and freedom. By 'happiness', I do not mean any particular moment of joy, but the conditions in which a human can flourish. When in analysis we see an analysand locked in repetition, we thereby see an imagination trapped in unfreedom. Working through is precisely the process by which the analysand's imagination is opened up for new possibilities. This possibility for new possibilities is precisely what it is to face the future creatively.

This situation is of course radicalized when a culture as a whole is under attack. In such a case, the very idea of the culture having any future at all is in jeopardy. The Crow show us how a culture can use dreams and dream-interpretation to weather, and indeed to work through, such a period until the Crow can again come to speak for themselves about what it is to be a Crow.

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#### Translations of summary

**Den Untergang einer Kultur durcharbeiten.** In diesem Beitrag wird beschrieben, wie eine Kultur die Probleme durcharbeitet, mit denen sie aufgrund ihrer drohenden Vernichtung konfrontiert ist. Der Autor konzentriert sich auf das Beispiel der Crow-Indianer, eines Stammes, der in der Prärie im Nordwesten Nordamerikas lebte, und auf ihren letzten bedeutenden Häuptling, Plenty Coups. Psychoanalytische Konzepte spielen eine entscheidende Rolle bei dem Versuch, die Möglichkeit einer kreativen Reaktion zu erklären. Vor allem die kollektive Benutzung der Traum-Visionen und der Traumdeutung ermöglichte es dem Stamm, ein neues Ich-Ideal zu entwickeln und herkömmliche Scham- und Demütigungszuweisungen auf diese Weise zu transformieren. Dies schuf zudem die Voraussetzung für eine Transformation der psychischen Struktur und eröffnete den Crow-Indianern neue Möglichkeiten, als Crow ein gutes Leben zu führen. Umgekehrt kann uns die Gefahr eines Zivilisationszusammenbruchs neue Möglichkeiten für die konzeptuelle Entwicklung der Psychoanalyse aufzeigen. Die Psychoanalyse muss insbesondere anerkennen, dass eine Destruktion auf der Ebene der Kultur erfolgen kann, ohne dass die Individuen körperlichen Schaden nehmen. Die psychischen Zustände der betroffenen Individuen sind unterschiedlich und komplex und können nicht säuberlich unter die Kategorie Trauma subsumiert werden. Eine Kultur kann vernichtet werden, ohne dass es eine Eins-zu-eins-Beziehung zu den psychischen Zuständen der Individuen gibt, die ihr angehören. Gleichzeitig werden zahlreiche psychische Zustände durch den Zusammenbruch einer Lebensweise unmöglich gemacht. Diese Phänomene verstehen zu lernen ist eine unverzichtbare Voraussetzung, wenn man begreifen möchte, wie eine Kultur die Gefährdung ihrer eigenen Existenz durcharbeitet.

**Elaborando el fin de la civilización.** Este trabajo trata sobre cómo una civilización elabora los problemas con los que se enfrenta cuando siente la amenaza de ser destruida. Analiza el ejemplo de los crow, una tribu india de las llanuras nordoccidentales de Norteamérica, y de su último gran jefe Plenty Coups. El abordaje psicoanalítico permite comprender cómo fue posible desarrollar una respuesta creativa a este tipo de amenaza. En particular el uso colectivo de los sueños y de su interpretación hicieron posible la creación de un nuevo yo ideal para la tribu. Esto permitió la transformación de las tradicionales atribuciones de vergüenza y humillación, como también la transformación de la estructura psicológica. Y abrió nuevas posibilidades para lo que podría considerarse la modalidad de desarrollo genuino de los crow. Por el contrario, la amenaza de un colapso de la civilización nos permite ver nuevas posibilidades de desarrollo conceptual del psicoanálisis. De manera especial, el psicoanálisis tiene que admitir que la destrucción puede acaecer a nivel cultural aunque las personas, singularmente, se mantengan físicamente indemnes. La situación psíquica de estos individuos puede ser muy diferente y compleja, y no cabe ser incluida en la categoría de traumática. Una cultura puede ser devastada, sin que se produzca un impacto directo en la situación psíquica de los individuos que forman parte de ella. Es cierto también por otra parte que la destrucción de un modo de vida imposibilita una variedad de estados psicológicos. La comprensión de estos fenómenos permite entender como una cultura consigue elaborar psicológicamente la amenaza a su propia existencia.

**Élaborer la fin de civilisation.** Cet article donne un point de vue sur la façon dont une civilisation élabore les problèmes auxquels elle est confrontée lorsqu'elle est menacée de destruction. Il est centré sur l'exemple de la Nation Crow, une tribu indienne des plaines nord-ouest de l'Amérique du Nord, et sur leur dernier grand chef Plenty Coups. La compréhension psychanalytique permet de rendre compte de la façon dont il a été possible de développer une réaction créative. C'est en particulier grâce à l'usage collectif des rêves et l'interprétation de ces rêves qu'a été rendue possible la création d'un nouvel idéal du moi pour la tribu. Ceci a permis la transformation des attributions traditionnelles de honte et

d'humiliation et a créé les conditions de changement de la structure psychologique, ouvrant ainsi de nouvelles possibilités concernant les caractéristiques nécessaires au développement en tant que Crow. Inversement, la menace d'effondrement de civilisation nous permet d'entrevoir de nouvelles pistes pour le développement conceptuel de la psychanalyse. En particulier, la psychanalyse doit admettre que la destruction peut survenir au niveau de la culture alors même que les individus ne sont pas touchés corporellement. Les états psychologiques de ces individus sont variés et complexes et ne peuvent se résumer à la catégorie du traumatisme. Une culture peut être dévastée sans qu'il y ait de lien avec les états psychologiques des individus qui partagent cette culture. Il est également vrai que l'effondrement d'un mode de vie rende impossible une variété d'états psychologiques. Approcher la compréhension de ces phénomènes permet d'appréhender comment une culture fait face aux menaces de son existence même.

**Elaborazione di una minaccia di estinzione.** L'articolo tratta del modo in cui una civiltà elabora i problemi causati dalla minaccia di distruzione. Si concentra sull'esempio dei Crow, una tribù indiana del nord America e del suo ultimo grande capo Plenty Coup. Le idee psicoanalitiche rivestono un ruolo cruciale nello spiegare la possibilità di una soluzione creativa alla minaccia in questione. In particolare, l'uso collettivo di visioni oniriche e della loro interpretazione ha reso possibile la creazione di un nuovo Io ideale per la tribù. Ciò ha consentito la trasformazione di attribuzioni tradizionali della vergogna e dell'umiliazione. Ha inoltre reso possibile una trasformazione della struttura psicologica, che ha gettato le basi per una nuova concezione positiva dell'essere Crow. Inversamente, la minaccia del collasso di una civiltà ci consente nuove possibilità per lo sviluppo concettuale della psicoanalisi. In particolare, la psicoanalisi deve riconoscere che la distruzione può accadere a livello della cultura anche se gli individui non vengono fisicamente lesi. Lo stato psicologico di questi individui può essere vario e complesso e non può essere ben racchiuso nella categoria del trauma. Una cultura può essere devastata senza che questo implichi una relazione biunivoca con lo stato psicologico degli individui che fanno parte di tale cultura. E' vero d'altra parte che il crollo di un certo modo di vivere rende impossibili diversi stati psicologici. La comprensione di questi fenomeni è indispensabile per capire come una cultura riesca a elaborare psicologicamente una minaccia alla propria esistenza.

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