

The Cultural Complex: Contemporary Jungian Perspectives on Psyche and Society.
Edited by Thomas Singer and Samuel L. Kimbles. Hove and New York: Brunner-
Routledge, 2004.

Reviewed by David Tacey

The term ‘cultural complex’ is new, but I am not sure if the idea is new. Jung wrote a great deal about archetypes in nations: Wotan in Nazi Germany, the senex or old man in Switzerland, eternal youth in America, and so on. His attempts to invent a ‘national psychology’ of the Aryans and the Jews is by now notorious, and plays a huge role in the international exclusion and demonisation of Jungian psychology. Jung argued in 1933 that to find ‘differences between Germanic and Jewish psychology ... implies no depreciation of Semitic psychology’, but his detractors and Freudian antagonists did not agree. Jung chose the worst possible time in history to develop his theory of national types and differences, and it is due to this lack of synchronicity with the world, and to Jung’s own naiveté regarding political matters, that Jungians have shut down on this aspect of his work.

Thomas Singer and Samuel Kimbles have lifted the lid on this Pandora’s box. The time is right to reconsider nations, places, countries, continents, in light of their archetypal constellations and psychological complexes. However, I do question the claim of Singer and Kimbles that their project is new. I would say: recovered from years of suppression, yes, but not new. Although Jungians worldwide have agreed to stay quiet on the ‘national differences’ theme, there have always been major figures like Joseph Henderson who have argued for more cultural exploration in Jungian analysis. Similarly, in different ways, James Hillman and Andrew Samuels have long argued that Jungian analysis must not confine itself to the individual and the private, but must become engaged more directly with world, politics, society, ecology, economics.

There is a sense of excitement to this volume of essays which is positively infectious. Jungian analysts set themselves the task of exploring ‘problems’ called Mexico, Brazil, Australia, Japan, Africa, the United States, psychoanalytic culture, Western Europe. The windows of the clinical room have been opened to the outside world, and everyone relishes the fresh air. This is wonderful in itself, and I warmly welcome this volume and look forward to more in this tradition. But I have to admit that the sight of Jungians ‘discovering’ culture can be a little embarrassing. Some of these chapters attempt massive leaps of interpretation with very little groundwork preparation or academic material. The volume is uneven, with some weak chapters caught up in the temporary inflation of taking on the world.

To fully grasp ‘cultures’, we need more than anecdotal evidence gleaned from clients or personal leaps of intuitive insight ‘applied’ to the world. We need to know a lot of history, geography, economics, literature, and social enquiry – and not just know them, but also internalise them. It is good when introverts discover there is an outside world, but let us not forget that a rigorous bunch of disciplines called the social sciences and humanities have already noticed the outside world, and have been interpreting it for many decades. I don’t think the Jungian flash of personal insight is any substitute for hard study, wide reading, and legitimate engagement in sociology, history, literature, philosophy, and cultural studies.

While I am being critical, let me add that a book of this nature ought really be addressed to the wider culture. It is the culture itself that requires knowledge of its complexes, and yet the

persistent feeling I gained from this work was that it was Jungians talking to other Jungians. This is a conundrum in which many of us battle on a daily basis, myself included. Our field has specialist knowledge, and so it requires specialist language. But when we seek to communicate with the world and to convey important insights, we are still speaking within a bubble of jargon and specialised terms, so that the world cannot hear what we are saying. It sees our lips moving, our evident animation, but it cannot hear what we are saying. We cannot blame the culture for not listening if we are not speaking a language it can follow.

The fact that 'culture' has to be rediscovered or reinserted in Jungian thought from time to time is a cause of real concern. According to Jung's theory, we can never know the deep unconscious directly, only indirectly through culture. Similarly, in the theory of archetypes, we cannot know the archetype in itself but only through 'archetypal images' found in art, religion, literature, dream, and social environment. There is, in classical Jungian theory, no direct apprehension of the unconscious or its archetypes. The archetype itself is empty, without content, only a predisposition. As Thomas Kirsch writes in this volume: 'It is rare that one sees an archetypal experience without it being embedded in historical or cultural patterns' (185). When most people speak of 'archetypes' they are really speaking about archetypal images, without knowing it. The image is phenomenological, and as such is deeply embedded in cultural experience.

What is the problem, then? The problem is that the Jungian tradition forgets the theory of indirection and cultural relativity, and carries on 'as if' direct knowledge of the archetypes is possible. In other words, culture falls out of sight, into the unconscious, and we imagine we are dealing directly with Platonic forms or archetypal absolutes, with the 'things' in themselves. Then there is only a short step to the appropriation of Jungian ideas by the New Age: gods and goddesses on display, eternal objects of the mind, always available and always 'usable' by the ego in need of guidance and direction. The New Age misreading of Jung is actually incipient in the tradition, to the extent that it forgets its ideas are embedded in historical and social processes, and not metaphysical. Jungian thought is forever forgetting the relativity of its ideas, thus antagonising the social scientists who find its explanations portentous, unreal, and inflated.

The reminders of Henderson, Samuels, Hillman and others are actually calls out of the clouds and into earthliness and humility. The fact that we have to discover and then rediscover a 'cultural unconscious', a 'cultural complex', and a 'cultural attitude' is a sign that the field is failing to combat its own hubris, its flight into metaphysics. As Jung said, any contact with the archetypal is inevitably inflating, and I think we should attempt to counter this with the grounding experience that immersion in social and historical context can give. Jungian thought is a phenomenological science that forgets what it is, and then thinks it is metaphysics. As I have suggested, this irritates its critics even more, who take delight in knocking it off from its high perch.

I especially enjoyed the chapter on Australian complexes by Craig San Roque. His study on Alice Springs, my own hometown, spoke directly to me and evoked enormous emotion. In his powerful narrative of psychic dissolution and atrophy of instinct in central Australia, one could almost see the cultural complex rising from the land itself, as a spirit of the place. Only, this spirit is no vivifying force or elevating pneuma; it is a veritable demon who lures people to destruction. When the spirit is not nurtured, it does not die, but turns into a monster. Through lack of attention to human fairness, racial equality, and social justice, through wilful ignorance to questions of meaning, purpose, and spirit, the 'soul' of Australia has become dulled, zombie-like, self-destructive.

It no longer serves a purpose in the whole, and seems intent on subverting the whole and bringing the human enterprise to collapse and ruin.

All in this country shares this complex, but it tends to be carried and held by black Australians. White Australians are so busy and frenetic, they rarely glimpse the appalling abyss that is now the dead heart, or empty centre, of the nation. Unless, of course, white Australians happen to slip and fall, to be disrupted in their routines of busyness and avoidance. Then they sink into depths of depression and despair that claim victims on a daily basis. Australia has one of the highest rates of suicide and depression in the world, and yet its conscious narrative is that it is a Lucky Country, where all are adequately served, and where everyone enjoys the benefits of democracy and freedom. But freedom from what, and freedom for what? When we fall out of the persona, and into the soul, the world down under is not as good as we imagine.

San Roque traces the processes of decay, dissolution and despair in the psychic life of indigenous Australians. Yet as he points out, the plight has really gone beyond despair. We are possessed of a destructive complex of enormous proportions that has lulled many of us into the belief that destruction is good, okay, inevitable. It seems to come with its own soporific, its own dose of anaesthetics. As Henry Lawson said, there are elements of the soul that are 'past caring'. Aboriginal Australians appear to offer little in the way of defence against this psychic vortex. Suicide is rife, so is drug addiction, chroming, petrol and glue sniffing, violence, alcoholism, and personality disorders. White Australians throw some money at these problems, but naturally they do not go away.

The insidious feature is that the complex belongs to the whole culture, yet only one race of people is fully and totally suffering from it. The race which is least defended against the psyche, which has fewer material possessions to serve as diversions and digressions, is the one that receives the full and lethal force of an activated cultural complex. This takes us back again to the problem of 'race' – to the problem that opened, and closed, Jung's investigations into questions of national difference. I certainly hope that the search for cultural complexes is not a novelty or passing phase, and that this work will not remain a side issue to Jungian studies. The next step is to understand that all complexes are cultural, or enculturated, just as all archetypes are historically and socially conditioned. The gods make us, but we remake the gods in our own image.

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