Introduction

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The Columbus Centre, which existed from 1963 to 1980, was an institute established at Sussex University for the comparative study of the dynamics of persecution and extermination – the causes of such behaviour by human societies in general, with National Socialist Germany particularly in mind. It was the creation of the Hon. David Astor (1912-2001 - hereafter 'Astor'), who part-financed it, and Professor Norman Cohn, MBA (1915-2007), its director. It attempted to harness psychoanalytic and other disciplines (including sociology and anthropology) to the historical study of group behaviour. The documents are reproduced from Astor's archived papers, held by Boodle Hatfield, Solicitors, by kind permission of Richard and Bridget Astor.

Astor was the editor, from 1948 to 1964, of Britain's oldest Sunday newspaper, *The Observer,* which was then owned by his family - a rôle that made him an influential figure in British public life. He was the second son of the 2nd Viscount Astor (Waldorf Astor, 1879-1972), and his wife Nancy (1879-1964), Britain's first female Member of Parliament. ('The Honourable' – normally shortened to 'The Hon.' - is a courtesy title used by the sons of viscounts and other peers with hereditable titles in the British peerage). The 1st Viscount (William Waldorf, 1848-1919) was a United States citizen who, with a fortune already made in American real estate, settled in this country from 1890 and became a naturalized British subject in 1899.

William Waldorf Astor, who sought political influence here, in part through newspaper ownership, had purchased *The Observer* in 1911, and had been created Baron in 1916 and Viscount in 1917. In time he bequeathed *The Observer* to his elder son, Waldorf. Waldorf was also politically active, serving as a Member of Parliament and junior minister until his father died, when his elevation to the Lords obliged him to resign as an MP. Thereafter he was to be a British Member of the League of Nations and a founding member (and chairman from 1935-49) of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House).

Before the war, Astor had spent time in Germany, seen the rise of Hitler, and had been impressed by various anti-Nazi commentators. He became convinced that Nazism had a dangerous appeal that was not confined to Germany. When war came, he wanted to widen it

into ‘an international civil war’, to inspire people throughout Europe to reject Hitler's racist and militaristic ideas, and to ensure that both Britain and Europe could look forward to a society which was the opposite to that envisaged by Hitler. He turned to *The Observer* to provide a vehicle for his ideas and, with his father’s blessing, became deeply involved in its administration from 1941, combining this with military service. In 1948, his father appointed him editor.[1]

The appointment was highly successful. Peregrine Worsthorne, a journalist not sympathetic to Astor’s political and intellectual stance, was later to call him “the greatest British editor of the post-war era.” Astor built *The Observer* into the most intellectually distinguished and influential newspaper of its day, assembling a team of very high-calibre writers to make it a paper, in his own words, “for political and cultural discourse with an élite of society...”. Deliberately politically non-aligned but liberal in its outlook, focussing on ideas as much as news, it became in its heyday the paper of choice for, and an important mouthpiece of, British centre and left of centre intelligentsia. Its international reputation also stood high.

Astor was also one of many of that generation deeply influenced by the development of ideas about the workings of the human mind, including theories of psychoanalysis. A shy and introspective individual (he had suffered a nervous breakdown at Oxford and never completed his degree), he underwent psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud’s daughter Anna for many years.

Norman Cohn was an historian of originality and distinction. His career path was unusual: he started out as a linguist, but his background and life experience evidently drove him to the particular aspect of history in which he was to specialize. He was born in a well-to-do south-east London suburb to a German Roman Catholic mother and a Jewish father. He gained a first class degree in French from Oxford in 1936, and was then awarded a further three years to read German. His first wife was a Russian, Vera Broido, whose own mother was a victim of Soviet terror and was executed in 1941. Vera was close friends with the Berlin correspondent of the

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[1] Anthony Sampson, ‘Astor, (Francis) David Langhorne (1912–2001)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Jan 2005; online edn, Jan 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.londonlibrary.co.uk/view/article/76549, accessed 15 Sept 2014]

Manchester Guardian, Frederic Voigt, the thesis of whose book *Unto Caesar* (1938) - that Communism and Nazism were both forms of secularized millenarianism - made a great impression on her.[2]

After army service in the Second World War (some of it spent in intelligence work, listening covertly to the conversations of German prisoners of war), Cohn resumed a university career teaching French. But his first major work, published in 1957, was not in his academic specialism but was a development of the Voigt thesis. It was writing it that turned him into an historian. Called *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, it was a study of the millenarian movements that flourished in Europe between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries and their relationships to situations of societal anxiety and unrest. Here Cohn argued that the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, chiefly Marxism and Nazism, shared a 'common stock of European social mythology' with apocalyptic medieval movements such as the Flagellants and Anabaptists. That mythology was, he suggested, a belief in the end of history – a millennium when, after much suffering and struggle, there would come about an earthly paradise for the elect and the destruction of their enemies: the established church, rich landowners and Jews would be swept away by the poor of medieval Europe; or under Nazism, the world Jewish conspiracy would make way for the Third Reich; or under Marxism, the proletariat would triumphantly succeed the bourgeoisie. The book, which was, in effect, an attempt to apply psychoanalytical techniques to an historical issue, had its critics. Some reviewers felt that although it was undoubtedly scholarly and suggestive, Cohn had over-simplified his analysis of millenarianist movements, and that his comparison of them with modern totalitarianism was unproven.[3] Nevertheless, the work had

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[2] William Lamont, 'Cohn, Norman Rufus Colin (1915–2007)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Jan 2011 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.londonlibrary.co.uk/view/article/99001, accessed 3 Feb 2014]

[3] See for example reviews by:Heinz E. Ellersleck, *American Sociological Review,* Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 1958), p.30;

R. H. Hilton, *The Economic History Review,* New Series, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1958), pp. 507-508;

Michael Fixler, *Church History,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (September 1958), pp. 245-246;

John L. Phelan, *The Journal of Modern History,* Vol. 30, No. 3, (September 1958), pp. 205-206.

great impact and was listed by *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1995 as one of the one hundred most influential books since the Second World War.[4] It was translated widely and is still in print.[5]

The particular incident that did most to crystallise Astor's idea for the Centre was the trial in Jerusalem in 1961 of Adolf Eichmann, a German official with extensive executive responsibility for the establishment and operation of the Nazi death camps. His trial caused enormous interest, much of it focussed on what the philosopher Hannah Arendt dubbed 'the banality of evil'.[6] What struck some commentators, not least Arendt, was Eichmann's ordinariness (although the question of his character and its interpretation was to be the subject of much subsequent debate). His demeanour reflected his defence in his trial: he presented himself as simply an effective administrator carrying out a government function to the best of his not insubstantial administrative ability. This was a picture that seemed the very epitome of rational methods applied to irrational and appalling ends. How, commentators asked, could a sophisticated, cultured twentieth-century European society that Germany represented produce such barbarity? What qualities in Eichmann, or more generally in Hitler and his coterie, in Nazi party supporters, in German mass opinion, or even in humanity in large, were at stake? The Columbus Centre was one hitherto little studied attempt to forge answers to such questions.

In an article 'The Meaning of Eichmann' published in *The Observer* on 26th March 1961 (and repeated in a later speech and in an article in *Encounter* Magazine), Astor had called for study 'in a scientific spirit' of what had happened in Nazi Germany and in the Final Solution, proposing that "...every relevant fact should be explored, comparative studies made and the historian's and psychologist's knowledge brought together..." so that much more could be known

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[4] '100 Most Influential Books Since World War II', *Times Literary Supplement,* 6 October 1995 (39).

[5] Crawford Cribben, Review of Catherine Wessinger, ed., *The Oxford Book of Millenarianism.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November 2011.

[6] See her 1963 book on the trial *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil* (New York, Viking Press.)

about the workings of irrational hate in politics.[7] Subsequently he produced a memorandum (unpublished) developing his ideas, 'Project for the study of social and political psychopathology', in which he suggested the need for studies specifically on the motivations for the Nazi exterminations; and suggested they be compared with an analogous case in history and a current, perhaps smaller situation which produced racial and religious persecution.[8]

Norman Cohn read the published pieces and wrote to Astor on 23rd July 1962. "Ever since the end of the war", he said, "I have been trying to further just such an enquiry ... What I should like to see is a massive exploration, undertaken by historians and psychologists (and possibly also anthropologists and sociologists) working in close collaboration. The exploration should not be limited to Nazism or to anti-Semitism but should range freely over the vast field of fanatical beliefs and behaviour."[9] Astor and he met, and work towards the Centre's establishment began from that meeting.

The documents on this website cannot tell the whole story of the Centre's establishment and life, but they give a series of glimpses of the thinking behind it and of its development. The archive includes, for example, papers written by Cohn to explain his thinking to a group of people Astor brought together early on to discuss the proposal. He contended in these that groups of people faced with a deadly threat tend to de-humanize their enemies – the process which, for example, allowed allied airmen to bomb German cities and kill many thousands, including women and children. Sometimes a group will distort or magnify a conflict out of all recognition, or even invent one. Here, he suggested, the dehumanization process is being activated primarily by the subjective psychic needs of the 'in-group' – the dehumanizers. When the in-group is subjected to some form of trauma – overwhelming social change or epidemics, for example - the dehumanization can be carried to extremes: in effect, group paranoia occurs.

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[7] David Astor, 'The Meaning of Eichmann', *The Observer*, 26th March 1961.

[8] David Astor, 'Draft memorandum: 'Project for a study of social and political psycho-pathology.' Papers held by Boodle Hatfield, Solicitors, *hereafter '*Astor papers'. Undated.

[9] Astor papers, Cohn to Astor, Letter, 23rd July 1962.

The Centre remained in existence for seventeen years, yet it seems to have been largely forgotten after its closure. Under Cohn's direction nine books were produced. The Centre's involvement in the production of each varied in degree, and the critical receptions the books received were also diverse. Some were very successful, others less so. In a brief history of the Centre (included on this site), written towards the end of its existence, Cohn suggested that on balance and overall, the Centre succeeded in its aims. But in a discussion with Daniel Pick in 2006 (extracts are provided in the 'podcasts' section of the present website – 'Norman Cohn and the Columbus Centre'), Cohn suggested that, in his heart of hearts, Astor was probably disappointed. But he also remarked that Astor's vision was either unrealisable, or, if it were realisable, would have demanded something much larger and more far reaching than it was possible to produce with the money available.[10] The latter judgement was almost certainly the right one. Cohn, as we have seen, originally envisaged 'a massive exploration'; Astor seems to have envisaged an eventual permanent institution akin to Chatham House, with which his father had been so deeply involved, and to have hoped that the Columbus Centre would be a foundation for this. But by 1980, Cohn had reached retirement age, evidently had no ambition to take the project further, and was resistant to Astor's proposal for some form of stocktaking conference. Astor, meanwhile, was being worn down by the effort of keeping *The Observer* going as an independent concern in the face of growing commercial competition and the industrial anarchy prevalent in Fleet Street at that time. A major sponsor – the Wolfson Foundation – declined to contribute further. And so, in 1980, the Centre was wound up.

Although there was no consensus amongst contributors to the Columbus Centre about the appropriate role for psychoanalysis, Freudian thought certainly figured large. Perhaps part of the explanation of the Centre's failure to make a lasting impact in Britain might be linked to the marginal position of psychoanalytic thought in the historical profession. There was no notable British equivalent of American-style 'psychohistory', although clearly the period in which the Centre was conceived – the late 1950s and early 1960s -

[10] http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2012/07/norman-cohn-fba-a-colloquium/

had witnessed great cultural interest in psychoanalysis on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1958, the president of the American Historical Association, William L. Langer, a diplomatic historian, based at Harvard, had famously devoted his presidential address to a call on his colleagues to employ psychoanalytical ideas in historical enquiry.[11] But there was always controversy attached to such a call. Many disputed the claims of psychoanalysis, both clinically and theoretically. Psychoanalytic applications to individuals were always contentious; Freudian group theories, or interpretations of whole populations all the more so. In *The Pursuit of the Nazi Mind* Daniel Pick chronicles how many attempts by governments and international organizations immediately after the Second World War to harness psychoanalysis to the construction and maintenance of peace – applying psychoanalysis to groups – were attempted, and how often they ran into difficultly or were subjected to sustained critique.[12] Meanwhile, the political stasis engendered by the Cold War meant a kind of peace which, combined with the extraordinary post-war economic boom in western economies, produced something of a revival of faith in political solutions to political problems. The economic travails, the political instability, the neuroses engendered by the shock of half a century of industrial warfare, often enough seemed to recede in public memory. Warfare and humanitarian outrages continued, but they happened by and large away from Europe and the United States, and were rarely subjected to the kind of psycho-political analysis that had been commonplace in relation to fascism and Nazism. The urgency behind the effort represented by the Columbus Centre was dissipating – or at least changing its nature - and psychoanalysis declined in prominence in the late twentieth century as a putative key to the understanding of collective political ills.

As an attempt to harness to the study of group behaviour in history the new disciplines that came to prominence in the twentieth century - psychoanalysis in particular, but also sociology and anthropology, the development of the Columbus Centre, which these papers illustrate, provides an interesting picture of the kind of thinking and attitudes prevalent in some British liberal intellectual

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[11] William L. Langer, 'The Next Assignment.' *The American Historical Review, Vol. LXIII, No. 2.* 2nd January 1958.

[12] Daniel Pick, *The Pursuit of the Nazi Mind: Hitler, Hess and the Analysts.* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 182-215.

circles at that time. Despite the decline in the prominence of psychoanalysis, it is worth noting the comment that Eli Zaretsky makes in his 2004 *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* that there should surely survive "...a set of understandings...that each individual has an inner world that is, in good part, not only unconscious but repressed..."; and, beyond that, an understanding that "...society and politics are driven not just by conscious interests and perceived necessities but also by unconscious motivations, anxieties and half-spoken memories ... that even great nations can suffer traumas, change course abruptly and regress...".[13] These are concepts that those involved in the Centre recognized. They have continuing validity, and the need to study them has not gone away.

[13] Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis.* (Vintage Books, 2005), p. 343.