Working forensically with toxic thinking: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger

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Introduction

In an increasingly networked world, enterprises are being expected to organise around the individual needs of the customer. This is easy to say but difficult to do. Take, for example, the challenges facing the car industry. To quote a recent McKinsey interview with Bill Ford:

> "It used to be that the auto industry, and the car itself, were part of a self-contained ecosystem. If there were breakthroughs, they were developed within the industry … that's all been turned on its head; we now have disruption coming from every angle, from the potential ways we fuel our vehicles to the ownership mode. We have a whole generation that just wants access to vehicles as opposed to ownership … the reality is that we will not own, or develop, most of the connectivity technologies involved. So we have to be a thoughtful integrator of other people's technologies and understand where we add value." (Kaas and Fleming 2014)

In such highly networked worlds, collaboration is the new normal. The dilemma faced by Ford is between 'developing our own technologies' (i.e. going it alone) and 'integrating other people's technologies' (i.e. collaborating), except that Bill Ford is arguing that the former approach will no longer work. A version of this dilemma experienced by a manager would be between 'if I develop our own technology I know I'll have a job, but it won't be so good for the enterprise' and 'if I use that technology I'll be working myself out of a job'. For the manager, other people's technologies will be toxic to the organisation as the manager knows it, but the point made in the interview is that such thinking by the manager will be toxic to the survival of Ford.

The manager's response to what is perceived as a toxic environment is in defence of the organisation he knows, which supports his identity as a manager. Even though the 'bad' choice of using other people's technology may not be dismissed directly as being toxic, it may still be excluded because it 'feels wrong' despite there being arguments in its favour. Choices that are felt in this way to be toxic to the organisation are killed off not by a single act of dismissal but rather by the cumulative effects of many small exclusions, micro-aggressions against forms of thinking and behaviour that are felt to be alien. The manager, in holding on to particular ways of judging what is appropriate for the enterprise, is reflecting the affect he attaches to its way of giving meaning to his work. The construction of this containing will use concepts supported by the manager's particular 'feel' for what is right, the roots of which will be in his particular unconscious relation to it *aka* libidinal investment in that construction. Such thinking, however, can paradoxically be toxic both to his own future and to the future of the enterprise.

The libidinal economy of an enterprise may thus unconsciously kill off good ideas that are essential to the survival of the enterprise. Working psychoanalytically in an enterprise to prevent such 'murders' therefore demands a 'forensic' way of working, in which careful attention must be paid to the way such dilemmas are contained, or not. This involves questioning the affects unconsciously attached to existing constructions that link them to their consequences for the enterprise - 'forensic' because the motives of such 'murders' are never obvious!

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The paper explores the difficulties encountered in challenging existing libidinal investment in particular ways of organising – the libidinal economy of an enterprise. To do this, it examines an example of an enterprise that stood accused of toxic thinking, in this case of institutional racism.

The example of Institutional Racism

In the 1999 MacPherson inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, the UK's Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) were described as 'institutionally racist'. This was taken to mean that racist behaviour was built into the way the enterprise operated[1]. Definitions from various sources were:

> "The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people." The MacPherson report

> "Institutional racism is that which, covertly or overtly, resides in the policies, procedures, operations and culture of public or private institutions - reinforcing individual prejudices and being reinforced by them in turn." A. Sivanandan, Director, Institute of Race Relations

> "If racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs or practices, that institution is racist whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have racial intentions." The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE)

To quote Bourne (Bourne 2001) p17, "in the case of MacPherson's definition, while he correctly identifies an organisation's collective failure as the crux of the problem, he fails to locate such failure in the structure, workings and culture of an organisation, which includes not only processes, behaviour, policies, practices and procedures, but also the organic relationship between them and the dynamics that that throws up [as does Sivanandan's definition][2]. Instead, he attributes this collective failure, in part, to people's attitudes and behaviour. And, by going on to use words like `unwitting prejudice' and `thoughtlessness', he further compounds the confusion between personal and institutional racism [as specifically refuted by the CRE definition]." Quoting an example from Bourne from the UK's criminal justice system (Bourne 2001) p14,

> "the home secretary decided to try to suspend the right of defendants in certain cases covering minor thefts, handling, assault and criminal damage to opt for trial by jury. They would automatically appear before magistrates. The reasoning was that this would save court time and, therefore, money. The government has refused to accept that because black people are grossly over-represented in stops on the street and in charging (by the police), they will, under the new system, lose not only the safeguard (of intervention) provided by the Crown Prosecution Service, but also that afforded by a jury. Magistrates consistently accept police versions of events, which is why black people consistently opt for trial by jury. The legislation is racist because it will affect black people's access to justice. No, says the government, this has nothing to do with racism, only with efficiency. "

Three things are going on here:

1. A "flight into personal paralysis and interpersonal discord" (Trist 1977; Boxer 2014), in which ambiguities in the definition of institutional racism allow systemic, structural and institutional issues to be rendered issues of personal racism.
2. The covering over of an underlying dilemma facing the enterprise by a rationalisation that is accepted as valid. "We are meant to accept the idea that both [sides of a dilemma] can be simultaneously true", that we know and at the same time do not know that constitutes turning a blind eye to the facts. (Steiner 1985)
3. A betrayal of the interests of the 'other', in this case of black persons, through a non-engagement with a dilemma that, if it were to be taken up, would disrupt the current

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[1] 'Enterprise' is used here to refer to an operationally and managerially distinct entity that may also be referred to as an institution or an organization.

[2] Square brackets indicate comments added by the author.

systemic, structural and institutional assumptions built into the behaviours of the enterprise (Eigen and Boxer 2009; Boxer 2015).

The paper explores the psychoanalytic basis for these three things: the flight to the personal, turning a blind eye and betraying the 'other'.

The flight to the personal

The systemic, structural and institutional assumptions built into an enterprise's behaviour are its 'theory-in-use', not to be confused with the theory 'espoused' by the members of an enterprise, speaking about the way an enterprise is *expected* to behave (Argyris and Schon 1974). Such espoused theories are importantly distinct, and, as we see later, form the basis on which members of an enterprise can collude in their turning of a blind eye. The accusation, however, was that racism was built into MPS's theory-in-use, and that this theory-in-use was toxic to its ability to provide effective policing to an ethnically-diverse community.

To understand what it means for particular patterns of behaviour to be 'built into' an enterprise as its 'theory-in-use', we need to start from a consideration of the ego of the subject as a theory-in-use. This is an unthought known that is made manifest by the subject's object-relating that has a valency to the behaviours of the enterprise that support the subject's identifications (Bollas 1987). The 'inner world organisation' of the subject's ego need not correspond to the 'organisation-in-the-mind' constituting the internal imago approximating to the 'real life' enterprise. Neither need the relationships between the part-objects of the subject's ego constitute a loved whole object for the subject that approximates to the organisation of the enterprise *per se*. Depending on the nature of this correspondence, therefore, the subject may exhibit a full range of paranoid-schizoid and depressive responses in relation to the enterprise (Klein 1935).

Thus the enterprise may function as a psychic retreat for the ego's complex network of object relations, holding projected part-objects together in ways characteristic of a particular organisation. For such a psychic retreat, containment is provided by a group of objects treated as if it were a single object, namely, the enterprise (Armstrong 2005). While the organisation of the enterprise may be an enactment of an internal state, however, its organisation may also emerge from the repertoire of subjects' responses to anxiety. These responses may arise from subjects' persecutory or annihilation anxiety associated with what are experienced as threatening part-objects (in Ford's case, technology dismissed directly as toxic), or they may arise from depressive or existential anxiety associated with what is experienced as a threat to the loved whole objects with which a subject is identified (technology that doesn't feel right for how we do things here at Ford) (Klein 1988[1948]).

Either way, the explanation of institutional racism in the flight to the personal is in terms of its relation to the subject's inner-world organisation. While many police officers felt personally (and unjustly) accused in this way by the inquiry, the definition of "institutional racism" was itself clearly intended to point to something else. Police officers were not being personally accused.

Turning a blind eye

In each situation faced by the MPS, there was a collusive rationalisation for its behaviour *aka* espoused theory,, which the MacPherson report felt was inconsistent with the MPS's theory-in-use. Thus in the inquiry into Stephen Lawrence's murder (Skidelsky 2000) p4, we see the MPS culture characterising the incident in terms of 'thuggery':

> In his evidence to the inquiry Detective Sergeant Davidson accepted that 'one essence' of the attack was racist, but stuck to his view that the suspects would have killed anyone that night: 'because these lads had attacked whites before, very … similarly with a similar knife. I believe this was thugs. They were described as the Krays. They were thugs who were out to kill, not particularly a black person...,

> and I believe that to this day that that was thugs, not racism, just pure bloody minded thuggery'. The Report adds that this was the attitude of as many as 50 per cent of those involved in the investigation.

From this perspective, the MPS was bringing its own routine practices to bear on the murder, albeit exhibiting in the process "a maze of bungling and incompetence, starting with the failure to order the early arrest of the five suspects, and continuing through all kinds of lapses of judgment, failure to follow proper procedures, delay in following up clues, and so on." (Skidelsky 2000) p3. The poit made by MacPherson was that all this involved turning a blind eye to the perceptions of the black community.

When observed over time, a systematic bias was apparent, exhibited by the enterprise's theory-in-use and described as institutional racism. The MPS had a culture of 'how we do things around here' that manifested tacit assumptions reigning over the 'systematic bias'. To some extent these tacit assumptions were built into the structuring effects of the MPS's systems and procedures and could be drawn out into the open and questioned. Many recommendations were made by MacPherson to change systems and procedures. To the extent that such assumptions could not be drawn out into the open, however, they formed a ceiling. Culture change is made intractable by the resistance to, and difficulties in, raising this ceiling. This resistance reflected the interests of those whose libidinal investment were supported by the enterprise, who could be said to be *affiliated* to the enterprise's existing culture.

Double subjection

The defences arising from experienced depressive anxiety provide a way of understanding this resistance. The ego's object-relating is a relation between object-signifiers and signified-objects in which the substitution of one object-signifier for an organisation of relations between object-signifiers is a *metaphoric* substitution. Depressive object-relating, while leaving the focus on the person and their history, focuses on the subject's defence of the whole-object characteristics of their organisation-in-the-mind, leading the subject to split it off from the realities of the behaviours undertaken in the name of the enterprise (Klein 1988[1952]). Depressive object-relating in defence of whole objects therefore offers a way of accounting for the subject's turning of a blind eye. It is the libidinal investment in the metaphoric substitution that constitutes the 'whole object' that is being conserved, manifesting Freud's pleasure principle. The 'systematic bias' is an evidencing of a culture of object-relating supported by MPS's systems, structures and institutional arrangements.

'Symbol formation' is about the progressive freeing of the signifying relation between object-signifiers and signified-objects (Segal 1986[1957]), but symbol formation does not itself address the particular relating by a subject of a whole object to an organisation of part-objects. This organisation is implicit in the organisation of the subject's ego, originally through the introjection of the maternal object as a container capable of containing anxiety and elaborating that anxiety meaningfully (Segal 1986). At later stages of development, it is also implicit in the vertices in relation to which symbol formation is progressively organised (Bion 1965). The subject can be said to be *doubly subjected*, therefore, both to the effects the ego's relation to the unconscious, but also to the socially mediated formation of vertices (Boxer 2014).

Consider the narratives articulated by the individuals interviewed in the course of the MacPherson inquiry. The individual's organisation-in-the-mind was the implicit context within which their narrative was formed. This organisation-in-the-mind was not independent of the larger context of the MPS and its behaviours, but structured by the socially constructed vertices apparent in its espoused theory. Double subjection, however, meant that the individual's organisation-in-the-mind was also being structured by its valency with the ego's relation to the unconscious, whether or not as a whole object. The individual's double subjection was both to socially constructed ways of organising meaning (the vertices) and to the structuring effects of the unconscious organisation of cathexes, or libidinal investment. The individual's conservation of their affiliation to the MPS culture was a conservation of this particular way of living his or her double subjection.

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By turning a blind eye, this affiliation remained undisturbed and unquestioned. But if this is not to be another version of the 'flight to the personal', we must consider how come the libidinal investment in socially constructed ways of organising meaning is so persistent. An answer lies in considering the nature of the libidinal investment in its *organisation* and its way of organising the relation to the 'other'.

Betraying the 'other'

We can start by examining the effects of affiliation in the light of the reality principle, and ask what kinds of complexity are being spanned by the way an individual's network of object-signifiers is organised, and over what timespan does this span-of-complexity make discretionary choices available in producing effects? Span-of-complexity and timespan-of-discretion allow us to consider the structuring effects of a particular form of affiliation on an individual's choices, reflecting the individual's unconscious investment in a particular organisation of object-relating (Jaques 1982).

Consider the following hierarchical relationship, in which dilemmas arising between a Finance Director's and an HR Director's spans-of-complexity are contained by their affiliation to the Board.
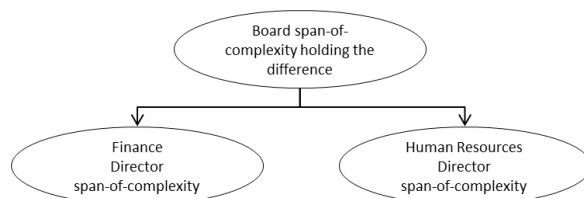

Figure 1: A containing hierarchy

The dilemma contained by the Board involves maintaining a balance between two spans-of-complexity, each one representing a distinct way of organising behaviours in terms of a set of assumptions, processes and outcomes. These are distinct ways of organising meaning, in which the Finance Director maintains correct cost ratios in existing and acquired businesses by cutting costs, and the HR Director maintains the motivation of people employed by growing and developing more and more people. The dilemma arises because too much emphasis on developing people distorts cost ratios, flipping the enterprise into cost-cutting; and too much cost-cutting becomes demoralising, flipping the enterprise into needing to develop people. The dilemma is represented in Figure 2 as an oscillation back and forth between two spans-of-complexity within the continuing span-of-complexity of the Board (Cronen and Pearce 1985). The MPS was subject to many such oscillations.
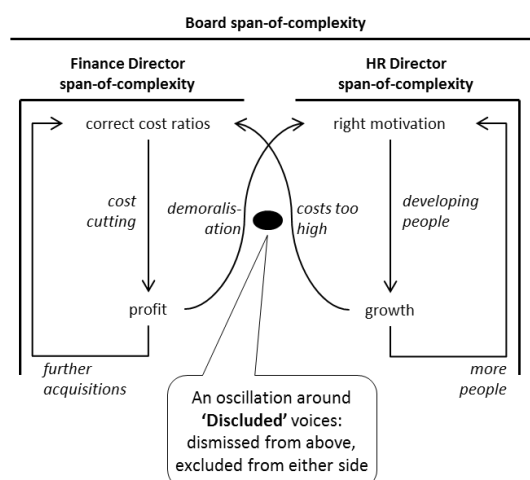

Figure 2: The relation to discluded voices

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Such oscillation, however many spans of complexity it moves between, is also around an underlying impossibility. This impossibility reflects an underlying tension between (in this dilemma) the interests of people and of capital. The impossibility is because, however this dilemma is held, there will be some people losing out. The voices of these people are 'discluded' by the particular way in which the dilemma is contained. 'Disclusion' means that, within the context of the structure of affiliation that is the enterprise, these voices are dis-missed from 'above' by the way the Board contains the dilemma, and ex-cluded through their falling outside existing spans-of-complexity.[3] Mr and Mrs Lawrence experienced disclusion, for example (Skidelsky 2000) p4:

> The notion that racism was one of several mingled motives for the attack on Stephen Lawrence is not self-evidently absurd. Yet the Report finds the attitude of these officers 'deplorable'. Why? Because 'any suggestion that this was not a purely racist murder is understandably anathema to Mr and Mrs Lawrence and indeed to the black community ... and can only lead to the conclusion in the minds of Mr and Mrs Lawrence that proper concentration was not brought to bear upon the investigation of the racist murder of their son, and that such an approach must have skewed the nature and direction of the investigation'.

The voices of Mr and Mrs Lawrence were discluded at the time of the original investigation, even though it later emerged that the MPS had placed a police 'spy' close to the Lawrence family in preparation for the original inquiry. An undercover officer had been "positioned close to the Lawrence family campaign" to exchange "fascinating and valuable" information about the grieving family, including details on Doreen and Neville Lawrence's marriage. (Dodd and Evans 2014).

It is this disclusion, therefore, that makes the racism institutional, as it is built into the very ways of organising meaning in which individuals are libidinally invested. The disclusion manifests itself in the form of micro-aggressions, "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative slights and insults" (Wing Sue, M. et al. 2007). It is these micro-aggressions that lead to the eventual 'murder' of good ideas. They have the effect of 'discluding' the other and enabling the enterprise to 'turn a blind eye'. For example:

> In all sites, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) research participants described mistrust of the police and an expectation of discrimination. For example, an African-Caribbean woman said she worried about her son being "stitched up" by the police "because I am Black. We worry, worry, worry until our men and boys are back home safe every night. I tell my son if you see the police, don't give them any excuse, stand perfectly still, hands away from your pockets and answer politely and truthfully. But you know, the problem is if you do that they think you are being lippy." (Foster, Newburn et al. 2005) p64

These experiences, and the mistrust and hostility they engender, are passed on to younger people who may not have had such experiences themselves. The research showed that local African-Caribbean young people strongly believed that the local police were racist, but were unable to describe instances of behaviour which they had experienced as racist. They were unable to untangle: "What is actually their experience and someone else's, what is the truth of the situation, what is prejudice and what is the law and what is just a person's attitude. It's all got mixed up."

The limitation of structures of affiliation are therefore reflected in their inability to hear the voices of those not already affiliated to their ways-of-understanding. It is this inability that, in its extreme form, gives rise to the "stalemate, monothematic dogmatism and polarization" associated with maladaptive responses to turbulent environments (Baburoglu 1988). This dynamic of disclusion

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[3] The origins of this word 'disclusion' is from a step-grandson. We were spending the day with him. He has encyclopaedic knowledge of Star Wars and used the metaphor of his 'dark side' to describe the anger he sometimes felt in relation to his brother and sister. His brother and sister are somewhat older, and he associated his anger with finding himself on the outside of their pairing within the context of the family. He said: "I know it is not a real word, but I get angry when they disclude me". The feeling of disclusion is one that I, too, am familiar with from my own family history, so it was easy for me to take it up and use it as you read here.

does not come from any individual, but from the cumulative effect of many individuals' libidinal investments in these 'ways of doing things'.[4] It is therefore the structure of affiliation with its ways of organising meaning that is toxic because of the damaging effects of what it discludes, its 'crime' being the disclusion of 'other' voices.

Forensic process

'Forensic' denotes the application of scientific methods and techniques to the investigation of crime. Any structure of affiliation will be producing this effect of disclusion all the time, so that the adoption of a forensic process implies some focus on what is being lost through these effects. In the following example, this was appropriate support for the victims of domestic violence (Foster, Newburn et al. 2005) p63:

> Police services sometimes struggled to provide an appropriate and professional service for those minority communities who had little or no spoken English. While all sites off e red some form of interpreting service, trained interpreters were often scarce, and sometimes not appropriate for the needs of the victim. For example, workers with Asian women who were victims of domestic violence reported that most interpreters used by the police were middle-aged Asian men. For the women concerned, reporting domestic violence to the police was problematic under any circumstances, doing so in front of a male interpreter even worse.

Here, the MPS was addressing the 'otherness' of the situation, but in such a way as to include its own ways of creating meaning within the situation and to exclude those of the 'other'.

Approaching this situation forensically, it was a dilemma in which the behaviours of the MPS were on one side of the dilemma, all other voices being discluded. The MPS was holding on to its particular ways of judging what was appropriate within its containing hierarchy, the affect attaching to this way of organising meaning. These ways of organising meaning discluded the 'other', representing a betrayal of the very communities it was claiming to serve.

In these dilemmas, therefore, the turning of a blind eye masked something further. It was a turning of a blind eye towards some not-knowing that, if taken up, would have changed the nature of the enterprise itself and therefore the forms of libidinal investment it could support (Lenthall 1998). In the case of the MPS, it would not be sufficient to recruit from the ethnic minorities it served. The MPS would have to recognise and identify the not-knowing covered over by its acts of disclusion in ways that challenged its existing spans-of- complexity and timespans-of-discretion. Such work defines forensic process, which aims to uncover what voices are being murdered by the cumulative effects of existing libidinal investments in its members. To understand this work psychoanalytically, we must consider what is beyond the pleasure principle, behind the defence of the subject's 'whole object'?

Disclusion as covering over what is lost

Libidinal investment is not only an unconscious relation to what can be repeated. It is also a relation to what is lost, or rather what cannot be re-found (Freud 1961[1925]) p235-236, referred to in the following as a relation to *Das Ding*:

> "Das Ding is that which I will call the beyond-of-the-signified. It is a function of this beyond-of-the-signified, and of an emotional relationship to it, that the subject keeps its distance and is constituted in a kind of relationship characterised by primary affect, prior to any repression… It is then in relation to Das Ding that the first orientation, the first choice, the first seat of subjective orientation takes place"(Lacan 1992 [1959-1960]) p54

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[4] I believe this to be the 'psychosocial resonance' spoken of by Gilles Amado in his paper Amado, G. (2009). "Psychic Imprisonment and Its Release within Organizations and Working Relationships." <u>Organisational & Social Dynamics</u> **9**(1): 1-20.

This 'seat of subjective orientation' takes different forms, depending on what kind of 'losing' is at stake. These relate to the subject's experienced elaboration of identity (oral, phallic, voice) and to the subject's experience of limitation to this elaboration (anal, gaze) (Lacan 2014[2004]). These last two forms of experienced limitation correspond to depressive and persecutory forms of anxiety. Approached in terms of the relation of the MPS to its environment, however, the betrayal of the 'other' through acts of disclusion emerge from a refusal to continue with the elaboration of identity beyond the gaze of affiliation. To do wo would involve taking up a relation to the voice of the 'other', behind which is the voice of the unconscious, with its disruptive effects on the organisation of meaning supported by the gaze. This is the particular relation to what is still to be re-found.

The relation to the scopic partial drive (*aka* the gaze) therefore provides a way of understanding the nature of the libidinal investment in sustaining a particular form of affiliation (Boxer 2015). A crisis in this relation, giving rise to existential anxiety (*aka* depressive anxiety), arises when its founding precepts are shaken by events that it can no longer give meaning to. These are the events to which the forensic process gives particular attention, but they are also the events that may precipitate a second crisis leading towards a moment to conclude (Lacan 2006[1966]f). Moving beyond this crisis involves taking up a relation to not-knowing that is the relation to the invocatory partial drive (*aka* the voice). It is this preparedness to take up a relation to what is not-known in a situation that is most characteristic of a forensic process.

In Conclusion

We have used this case of the MPD being accused of institutional racism to explore the difficulties faced in challenging existing libidinal investment in particular ways of organising. After setting aside the 'flight to the personal', we have shown how 'turning a blind eye' allows the individual to conserve their double subjection in such a way as to leave their libidinal investment undisturbed. We have seen, however, how the unintended side-effect of this conservation is to 'disclude' the voices of those whose identities are not supported by an affiliated to the MPS – the betrayed 'others'.

But who cares about this betrayal? In the case of Ford, the owners care because its ways of organising meaning are toxic to the future of Ford. But is this also the case for the MPS? For the MPS to care about its 'others', it must take into consideration the toxic effects of its ways of organising meaning on the communities it is policing. The MPS has to care about the experience of the 'other':

> The definition of racism, after a long and meandering discussion, is that it is anything perceived to be racist. The perpetrators of racist activity may not know they are racist at all. All they have to do to be so called is to treat people in a way which is interpreted as being racist. Racism, in short, is insensitivity to the feelings of members of ethnic minorities. It is a cultural failure. The Metropolitan Police Service caused offence to the black community and therefore was 'institutionally racist'. (Skidelsky 2000) p3

The toxicity of toxic thinking, therefore, is in the eye of the 'other' and not in that of the thinker. Working forensically, with its use of the metaphor of 'murder' to focus on the perpetrator rather than on the victim, is therefore not to ask what is toxic, but rather to ask what or who is getting murdered and why. The conclusion of the paper is that the murders of 'otherness' are to cover over what has been lost and is felt to be impossible to re-find. Not to betray the 'other' involves dying enough to an existing way of organising meaning in order to make room for more than is currently possible, an ethic of living between two deaths, living between dying to an existing way of thinking and actually dying (Lacan 1992 [1959-1960]).

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