

Enemies on the Couch: A Psychopolitical Journey through War and Peace, Vamik D. Volkan, M.D., Durham, North Carolina: Pitchstone Publishing, 2013; 496 pages.

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Vamik Volkan's career as a psychoanalyst has been an extraordinary one. Promoting peace, mediation and reconciliation around the world, he has been an important figure in helping various interested parties identify unconscious obstacles to conflict resolution, even among those whose [hatred](#) has sometimes spanned centuries. He has worked with heads of sovereign states and important national commissions to design strategies to reduce conflict and to disrupt the transmission of trauma across generations. He has also been engaged in political efforts to bring psychoanalytic insights to better achieve forgiveness by those victimized, apologies by those who have inflicted harm, and reconciliation between enemies. To these ends, he has not only worked extensively in the United States where he practices but also in Palestine and Israel, Turkey, Croatia, Senegal, Bosnia, Kuwait, Malaysia, to name only some, to make possible and facilitate dialogue between various warring groups. *Enemies on the Couch, A Psychopolitical Journey through War and Peace* is Dr. Volkan's personal chronicle of many of these encounters. He also recounts the many lessons learned as a result of these interventions. He offers insights on how psychological factors influence intra- and international relations and how knowledge about them can make important [contributions](#) to more peaceful coexistence.

Dr. Volkan's book, along with his many previously published books and articles, [documents](#) ways in which the gap that currently exists between psychoanalysis in the consulting room and the knowledge it offers for positive social change might be effectively bridged. His publications, too, reveal how sustained his effort has been over the years to translate psychoanalysis, a science of subjectivity and the therapeutic dyad, into one useful for social and political interventions in conflict [situations](#). It is what Dr. Volkan refers to as "political psychology in practice." *Enemies on the Couch* is very rich in detail and full of many personal anecdotes, all told and referenced to make these larger points. And the book provides ample evidence for gains achieved when familiar sites of political conflict are perceived through these psychological lenses.

In particular, Professor Volkan emphasizes the powerful irrational role that "large-group identity" holds over individuals around the world, whether in Israel and Palestine, Georgia and South Ossetia, or in Croatia and Bosnia. Through these specific instances, he makes clear that one ignores irrationally held attachments at one's peril. [In promoting](#) common understandings and co-operation, group identities must simultaneously be respected while their potential to smother an individual's capacity to think and to reason must subtly be disarmed. In detailing various sets of negotiations between opposing parties, Dr. Volkan demonstrates the impossibility of success when the negotiators experience themselves as solely speaking *on behalf of* the groups with whom they identify. "These participants become more effective negotiators of their large-group conflicts," Volkan (p42) writes, "When they held on to their individuality and began seeing those in the other group also as separate and distinct individuals...in some ways like themselves, with similar feelings, aspirations, fears and shortcomings." [As](#) he writes,

this “psychological understanding” of others, when overlooked, effectively insures the failure of negotiations. He describes these emotional dynamics as an *echo*, where there is an obstruction of dialogue due to the “shadow” of a mutually significant but perhaps differently experienced or interpreted external event. The result is impasse and, at least in retrospect, its outcome can be seen as having been predetermined. Grave consequences, in short, easily result when this interpersonal dimension is overlooked.

The central organizing principle guiding Dr. Volkan’s book is that, for most people in the world, *personal* identity is powerfully **defined or even eclipsed by** the local political and cultural constructs where they occur. The strength of group identity, typically primitive in nature, **is** the source of deeply held hatreds for other groups. It also defines the enormous challenges posed in any effort to undermine the irrational intensity of political conflict. The strength of these collective identities **presents** special challenges for those committed to **minimizing** the conflict between various adversarial groups. Yet as Dr. Volkan argues, psychoanalysis enables us to understand that an identification with larger political and cultural identities, however **all-encompassing**, never can totally usurp the uniqueness or idiom of an individual. He applies this insight especially to the efforts made to mitigate group conflicts. Progress towards peace requires attention to the **idiosyncrasy** of each negotiator: the negotiation process itself must cultivate the expression of the unique personal qualities of the participants. In the case of Israel and Palestine, in particular, *Enemies on the Couch* captures the terrible price paid when large-group identity is allowed to run roughshod in the unconscious life of negotiators on both sides.

Professor Volkan spends some time in the book describing the relation of group identity to the individual developmental process. He describes how an individual comes to locate him or herself as the carrier of an oftentimes culturally epic or heroic tale of achievement or adversity, how personal desires and frustrations can become experienced under the shadow of those myths. Identity then becomes inextricably attached to a particular understanding of an ancestral past and, most often, according to Dr. Volkan, is marked by a particular experience of collective trauma and loss. For him, any sense of personal loss, even personal **traumatic** loss, becomes intertwined with the larger group identity. It often serves as **a defense** against personal remembering and “working-through.” Externalization or projection, either positively directed toward the group or negatively directed toward the enemies of the group, in the end, serve as potent cultural resources to inhibit personal “knowing.” Political compromise, then, as Dr. Volkan argues, may simultaneously be experienced as profound danger both to the group and to the individuals who comprise it. The threat of annihilation is not too strong a characterization of the unconscious danger felt when communities move toward some form of reconciliation.

In the end, Professor Volkan’s rich description of various such encounters around the world is path breaking. It yields the contours for a psychoanalytic political psychology still in its early formation. Few other commentators on political conflict better appreciate the **dangers, both** for the collectivity and the **individual, when** boundaries between the individual and political society are too porous and permeable. Psychoanalytic concepts provide a schema through which to better understand the potential for conflict between groups that often result. As *Enemies on the Couch* implicitly makes clear, there are three interrelated sets of concerns that help understand

the prominence of group conflict throughout the world and that also identify certain directions toward conflict's mitigation.

First, as already described, Dr. Volkan focuses on large-scale group identity. Individual identity formation becomes shaped and profoundly compromised by the centrality of an exogenous, bigger-than-self large-group identity. This is the case especially in areas where political conflicts between ethnically or religiously defined group structures are paramount in social life. "Knowing thyself" oftentimes takes the form of being different from the religious, ethnic or racial "other." The power of the other in shaping identity eclipses the capacity of individuals to create and solidify their own personal identity. Large-group identity often produces a radical rupture between experiencing the "humanness" of one's own group and the subordinated humanity of the other. (The last sentence was crossed out because it seemed to repeat something that has been said before...). OK

Second, as Dr. Volkan's descriptions of various conflicts reveal, identity formation inevitably involves a coming-to-terms with the experience of loss and the management of mourning. Identity expresses the human capacity to situate oneself along the continuum of history, first as [the son or daughter of particular parents](#), and, more broadly, as a present-day inheritor of the legacy of one's ancestors. Typically, as Freud describes it, loss is [overcome](#) through a mourning process. In time, the self is able to move forward cognizant of what has been lost but not forever paralyzed under its shadow. But as Hans Loewald powerfully expresses it, there are conditions in which loss is not or cannot be mourned. It is when ancestors become experienced instead as *ghosts*, forever playing a haunting role in the present. Professor Volkan, recounting his experiences in Albania and Romania, in Latvia and in Russia, and in the Middle East, describes the costs paid when particular large-group identities become one and the same with preserving the memory of an unjust past, a "chosen trauma," with an expectation that all those in the present have an obligation to seek revenge. Freud's shadow of the object, under these conditions, becomes very dark indeed.

Finally, the psychoanalytic political psychology that Dr. Volkan pioneers is one that carefully explores the various mechanisms through which trauma becomes transmitted across generations. Traumatic injury is collectively deposited in large group psychology, producing traumatized or injured self-images. Necessarily, as many analysts have made clear, such injury becomes unconsciously and sometimes consciously transmitted through time. In each generation, Volkan (p. 162) argues, the [shared](#) group's core task is "keeping alive the mental double of the ancestors' trauma." "If the next generation cannot effectively fulfill their shared tasks—and this is usually the case—they will pass these tasks on to the third generation, and so on."

Taken together, these organizing concepts help clarify the basis of a contemporary politics that has emerged in various polities around the world: the aspiration to achieve from one another apology, forgiveness and reconciliation. Each of these ideas [presumes](#) a depth-psychological understanding of the person and reflects an understanding, made clear in *Enemies on the Couch*, that group-based conflict resolution requires addressing the psychological injuries incurred by individuals in those settings. In seeking ways to strengthen the individual against the group, to implement mechanisms designed to disrupt the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next, and to more forcefully recognize the strangle-hold that large group identity can hold over its adherents, Dr.

Volkan's work more fully fleshes out various struggles around the world for recognition, [what Axel Honneth in the subtitle of his book *Recognition*, describes as "the moral grammar of social conflicts."] - We prefer to have the whole citation, if possible, or none at all. We suggesting cutting the bracketed above. Please consider this... If my "solution" to the problem of including the quoted phrase doesn't work for you, you can delete but I would like to have a way of using "the moral grammar of social conflicts" since it completes the idea I am trying to make about the importance of recognition.

Psychoanalysis, if it chooses to, can build upon Vamik Volkan's path-breaking insights. It can stand on his shoulders and continue to make important contributions for a more just, less conflictual and humane world. Dr. Volkan's career in facilitating political reconciliation around the world, captured beautifully in *Enemies on the Couch*, demonstrates the role that an analysis of unconscious processes can play on the world stage. For those so motivated to promote this direction of "applied psychoanalysis," *Enemies on the Couch* is a good place to start.