

Interview with Neil Altman

Catarina Bray Pinheiro and Filipe Baptista-Bastos



Neil Altman is a Psychotherapist who has influenced many of us. His book "The Analyst in The Inner City" is a classic that astonishes those who have never worked in Public Practice and welcomes all those who, working in state services, feel particularly alone and often misunderstood. We hope that one day it can be translated into Portuguese. The natural ease with which he writes about current and classical psychoanalytic theory and technique, relating it to the hard life of the city and the difficult life of the Psychotherapist, is unusual. As can be seen in his latest book "White Privilege". For years we have had a seminar in the Psychotherapist Training Course of the Association for Relational Psychoanalysis - PSIR dedicated to "The Analyst in The Inner City". Perhaps without knowing it, we feel that Neil Altman is one of us.

1. While reading your book "White Privilege", I thought of the world described by Norman Mailer in "Armies of The Night" and the world of "Falling Man" by Don De Lillo. What world are we in now?
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Neil Altman was thoughtful by the similarity: What about my book that reminded you of those books?

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: In the book “White Privilege” you made reference to the march in Washington, and the Martin Luther King speech, and then you talk about our world today. Reminded me the Don De Lillo's book because the book describes a world that would be nearby and we currently do not experience that world. Then I thought: what Neil Altman thinks about it? The war in particular.

Neil Altman: You want to know what I think about how the world has changed since 1960s when everything seems to be changing? My books were published in the 1990s and 2000s, but my vision and my sensibility was formed in the 1960s. When I look back now on the 1960s, I think that it was a very brief utopian moment that was unrealistic.

I was in Brooklin and in Haight-Ashbury, in San Francisco, during the summer of love and it seems like the all world has changed. There were protests against the Vietnam war. There was the civil rights movement. And those of us who were young at the time thought that the whole world has changed, but it hadn't. At that time we were ignoring the fact that most people felt left out and alienated by those days, and when you ignore people they have a way, sooner or later, of making their presence known.

What happened recently in US, Donald Trump spoke to all of those people who had felt alienated in 1960s, and who saw it as a sense of arrogant appropriation of the country in a way that excluded and marginalised them. So the anger that you feel from the right wing now is because, for so long, they felt they have been pushed aside by the left wing people, so they felt ready to be lead into a movement of revenge.

Even at that time I was alienated by the anti war movement. They said “don't trust anyone over 30!”, and I thought that was wrong. And now I would call it splitting. I didn't have a psychoanalytic word for it at that time. I think the hippies and the political activists were marginalizing so many people, so I retreated from the political movements in to into a more spiritual point of view and hated the hippies. What I didn't see about the hippies was that most of them were abused children who were running away from home. We are talking about “flower

power” and “new age”, but actually there was something very ugly behind it that was not acknowledge. So even then I was skeptical about those movements. I think now we are seeing the back lash of it.

When I wrote my latest book “White Privilege” what I meant to show was that these movement of people who are woke, quote and quote, it’s contemptuous and exclusionary of people who feel left out of their movement. My book was meant as a sort of warning and a remainder that if you talk to people and you tell them that they are actually racists, and they need to be anti-racists, they are going to object to that, and it would be (be) counterproductive. We are talking about white people in the USA who don’t want to be forced to feel guilty, even though, in a way, they should feel guilty and worried about their disregard for people who are dismissive of racial and ethnic minorities. But You don’t talk to people by making they feel like they are bad, because they will not accept that. That’s something that we have learned from the kleinians, that guilt is very difficult to tolerate. So political approach that tries to make people feel guilty is going to be counterproductive and it actually feeds the right wing, it feeds the trumpists in the US. That’s how I understand the current moment.

Politically, of course, I don’t claim to fully understand that, and I have no idea how it’s playing out in Portugal right now.

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: Do you have any idea how it’s playing out in Europe?

Neil Altman: I don’t know. I didn’t go to Europe since the pandemic, but it seems to me that when Marine Le Pen is threatening Macron, in France, that something fundamental has changed in Europe also. It is basically the same problem as in USA. People feel economically threatened by emigrants and we always had diversity in USA, but Europe has not. I think people who are hurt and threat by emigration in Europe have to be listen to, even though they may be racists. You don’t address their concerns simply by calling them racists.

2. In your book “White Privilege” you say that true guilt, the opposite of “guiltiness”, is important for change. And that in the US there is almost no recognition of the genocide of Native Americans. In Portugal we also tend to deny the violence of colonization and slavery. Several authors speak of a daily racism, in which what has been denied re-emerges, a kind

of collective enactment waiting to be resignified. Hence the challenge is to recognize our unconscious racism. What role can psychoanalysis play in this transformative movement?

Neil Altman: The ideia of enactment that we have in “one to one” psychoanalysis is a very helpful idea when you look at political movements. When you have people who are trying to address exclusionary politics, the first thing that happens is that you exclude the right wing. It’s an enactment and that shouldn’t be a basis for disqualifying the anti-racist movement by saying it’s just as exclusionary, as the people that they are trying to change. Of course when you try to address an exclusionary process, the first thing you do is exclude somebody. I think it is very important to recognize that and it is something that psychoanalysis teaches us: when you try to solve a problem the first thing you do is to reproduce it. You become the one who’s excluding others. That is very disappointing, but in the same time it also gives us a way to join the people that you are trying to talk with, and say: “we all exclude other people”. We all create others. We all are other. We have to start by joining together to solve the problem in ourselves. Each of us. It won’t be solved in our lifetimes. It is going on for centuries.

For example, people talk about anti-colonialism, post colonialism and so on, meanwhile they continue ways of life that perpetuate colonialism. People here are talking about climate change and exploitation of the global soil, meanwhile we are driving our cars and we want technology that relies on minerals from Africa. So it is our problem. It is not some other group of bad people. I think that is the first step, but it is very difficult to do that because people had a very hard time accepting guilt. Therefore we want to project guilt on somebody else and we are still doing that. We have to start with that kind of recognition and then figure out how to deal with that.

I don’t know what the way forward is, but I do know that trying to make people feel guilty will always backfire. If you do that they will find a way to say that you are the one who is causing all these problems.

Portugal situation, in particular, I don’t know. I’ve been in Portugal two or three times and one thing I remember, back in the 1960s and 1970s, is that there were maps of the world in Lisbon that showed a little Portugal and a huge empire. Brazil which is many times the size of a tiny little Portugal and then all African

colonies that Portugal had. It was a matter of pride that colonization was there and the idea was that Europe, in general, including Portugal, believed that they were bringing civilization to the rest of the world. Only recently, in the last few decades, because of the influence of Frantz Fanon, that showed us that psychological violence was intailed in colonization.

What is the next step? Now there are so many angry people in the world and for the most part they are inflicting violence on each other. For example, what is the reaction in Portugal to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil? Why are people supporting him? We have to take it seriously, that the history of colonialism in Brazil is an important part why Bolsonaro is able to take power there.

3. Melanie Klein has been accused of coldness and, in some ways, even a lack of humanity. Why Klein? Why do you quote her so much in your texts?

Neil Altman: Klein is a contradiction because her way of working. I would never want to be in an analysis with Melanie Klein. Because she was so arrogant. When you read a kleinian analysis, the analyst makes the interpretations and the patient has to agree and if the patient doesn't agree, that is resistance. It is the most authoritarian technique. That is changing more recently with some italian kleinians, who are less authoritarian.

The thing that I appreciate about Klein is that she put the focus on depressive anxiety. Anxiety that has to do with accepting guilt. I think that is a hugely important idea. And also the role of splitting on an individual level and on a social level, on a political level. I think those are indispensable ideias. I can't say that Klein is an angel or a devil. That point of view is very complicated and has negative aspects and also positive aspects. If we think of Klein as being only negative then we are reacting with our own version of splitting.

Bob Dylan said "You take what you need and you leave the rest". That is the way I feel about the Kleinians.

Even though I disagree with her technique and find it very authoritarian, there is a kind of rigor to the way that she thinks about the meaning of what people said. You might disagree with what they come to, but it is still very rigorous. The kleinians have been in the forefront of people who addressed marginalized

patients. Like the Journal of Child Psychotherapy in England has the best articles about working with economically impoverished families and children.

If you ask me: are the Kleinians having a good influence or a bad influence? I will say: Yes.

4. With the current management model, NHS experiences the reduction of a relational clinical practice. With our minds colonized by the demands of the "market", it becomes very difficult the already difficult task of thinking. In your opinion why do healthcare institutions, composed of people with long trainings, become so resistant to spaces of reflection? So how can we work on the receptivity of the institution?

Neil Altman: I think European countries like Portugal are way ahead of the US that way. The health system in the USA is almost entirely a free market situation and it shows that free markets don't produce compassion, they produce ruthlessness. The national health systems in the European countries for the most part were products of fairly homogenous cultures where people identify with majority of their fellow citizens.

In the US with its history of slavery in the country itself, a long history of segregation, a history of excluding a huge percentage of the population, it is not surprising that health services were less available to people of color.

As the emigration hits the european countries I think you are seeing more exclusion of people of color in Europe also. I think we need to understand why people in France will be attracted to Marine Le Pen, not to condemn it only because there is inhumanity to our emigrants and arrogance, but also to address what their concerns are. It is not just by increasing the taxes on some people to provide services to other people. There are real problems that have to be addressed in a collaborative way, making a community out of the society that we live in.

Free markets are a classic example of a technique for avoiding guilt. If greed produces guilt, like ruthlessness, and then you develop a system where it's a virtue to be acquisitive, then there is no reason to feel guilty about that. A free market approach to healthcare means that those with resources are going to get a good healthcare and those without resources are not going to get it. That's why there is so much iniquity in the treatment of the Covid-19, rich people get

treatment and poor people don't. That applies at the level of nations.

The United States has access to so much more vaccines than Africa. It shows you that, when some parts of the world are deprived of vaccinations, everybody suffers. But does that mean that people in the rich countries are going to cooperate with people in poor countries to make sure that everyone gets vaccines? No. It doesn't happen, people aren't used to think in that way. But when they realise that the rich countries are colluding with efforts to grab vaccines for themselves, that will produce guilt which people will not accept.

The free market system has been shown with Covid-19 pandemic that we are all at the same boat, but people don't want to accept that because it makes them feel guilty. It would make them feel guilty if they realise how many people are suffering from lack of a healthcare.

We are not talking explicitly about psychoanalysis, but in a way we are, because we are talking about splitting, about guilt and we are talking in a social level which I think mirrors what happens on a personal level.

5. The question of power is essential in a Psychotherapy Session, how can we establish democratic relations in Psychotherapy?

Neil Altman: There is a paradox in your question. How can we establish egalitarian relationships in therapy? We can't do that. It has to be done.

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: We with our Patients? With the people that make Therapy with us?

Neil Altman: If we feel that we know what's best, that a democratic setup in the therapy relationship is better than Kleinian authoritarianism, let's say, are we not being authoritarian in our own way?

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: How can we do it?

Neil Altman: We try to be democratic and we end up to be authoritarian! That's called an enactment.

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: There's no way?

Neil Altman: No! That's not true because all enactments make you feel there is no way out. The first thing that happens is that you try to solve a problem and then you became the problem. Some people will say there is no way out, but that is the all issue in a relational psychoanalysis. You have to start with a feeling that there is no way out and then you get creative. Very often the way out is to say: I am perpetuating this problem with you. How did we get here? How did we get to the point of perpetuating the problem between us? I'm trying to be democratic, but I'm forcing to be democratic on you. It is an enactment.

I think that feeling that's no way out, that's what Stephen Mitchell thought about when he talked about "pulling your self up by your boot straps". Nobody can do it, because when you try to pull up, you fall down. There is no way out. That's when you start to get creative.

You have to reflect on your own participation. That's the way out. And you try to get the patient to work with you, to understand how did we get to this situation where there's no way out.

In Ukraine, I don't understand all the influences on that situation, but one thing I think I can see, is that people in Western Europe didn't understand that the dissolution of the Soviet Union will feel like an narcissistic injury to people in Russia. That was a blind spot. When the US and Western Europe try to expand NATO to the East, getting close to Russia, then Russia feels threatened, angry and becomes aggressive about that. There was a failure empathy by US and Western Europe, and that happens on the individual level too.

If you send jobs overseas; if you hire people in the global south; if you take jobs away from people in their own country and you hire people from Vietnam or India to do it for cheaper wages, then your workers are angry about that, and you are chocked. Where did all that anger came from? It comes from the blind spot that we all have. We don't want to see what we are doing that make other people angry.

Perpetuating the problem when you are trying to solve it is what Jessica Benjamin address with her idea of the third. There is no way out in a dyadic situation. Two people who get themselves in a mess, they need a third person to come in with a different point of view.

One of the things that Winnicott wrote that is valuable for me is that: “when you said you felt hopeless that was the first time I felt hope.” The feeling that there is no way out. First acknowledge that there is no way out, and then maybe there is a way out.

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: In a way I was thinking that transference neurosis will always has to happen.

Neil Altman: Yes. That was part of Freud’s genius. When he realised that what at first looks like a terrible problem, is actually the way to cure. Finding the way out through that problem. The transference neuroses has to happen.

(Filipe Baptista-Bastos colocou o computador a carregar)

Neil Altman: You mentioned “the battery” and it makes me think of Power and Power is one of the things that I wrote about in my last book. When we say power, we mean violence but violence it is not power. You can see what is happening with Russia. They thought they have power because they have bombs. The US thought they had power in Vietnam because they had bombs. What about the power of people who don’t have bombs, but who really care about what they fighting for? Russian soldiers, much of them are mercenaries, they are fighting for money. Ukrainians are fighting for their homes. The people who are fighting for their homes defeat the people who are fighting for money. That’s not surprising. So where is the power?

You think, in the psychoanalytic relation, that the Analyst has power. But if the analyst feels that, he or she, has to know the right interpretation, like “we have the knowledge, so we have the power.” But in a way if we think we have to have the knowledge, we lose our power because nobody has the knowledge. If anyone has the knowledge it has to intail the patient. “I know about your problem better then you.”: That disempowers the analyst, and the patient.

6. Psychic suffering tends to be experienced as a medical problem. Modern society consumes the fantasy of “immediate health”. Is this search for invulnerability related to the increased demand for other approaches (psychopharmacological, cognitive-behavioral therapy, among others)?

Neil Altman: Yes. People are attracted to medical approaches to suffering, because they don't want to acknowledge that suffering is a part of life. It creates the paradox that trying to eliminate suffering creates more suffering.

Emmanuel Ghent addressed that question in his paper called “Paradox and Process”, he showed that an apparent paradox like that requires an attention to a process which is like what Jessica Benjamin referred to as a *third*. Trying to eliminate suffering creates more suffering. Then you have Bion. We have to recognize that Bion was produced by the Kleinian point of view. He put the focus on the ability to bear suffering, or on what we do to deny suffering. In a medical context we call it psychopathology and the best example that I can think of that on a social level is the writing of James Baldwin, who wrote about the culture of the white people in the US as resting on a denial of reality. What is the reality? The reality is suffering. It’s mortality, it’s death. It’s the fact that we all die. If we can’t engage that kind of suffering then we end up trying for omnipotence. Trying to be omnipotent is guaranteed to produce more suffering.

7. As you say, there is a split between the public and private sectors. Would you be a different psychoanalyst if you hadn’t worked in the public sector? And in what way?

Neil Altman: I can’t really answer that question because to me not working on the public sector was not an option. It’s not who I am. I just did that because that’s who I am. Wherever I am as a psychoanalyst is totally linked with the fact that I worked at the public sector. Because I can’t accept inequality. That is the sensibility that I had that made me noticed that the word *privilege* is about economic and political privilege, but not the privilege of having empathy. Why is that not called a privilege?

James Baldwin said that if a white person is in trouble there much better off knocking on a black person’s door than a white one, because black people have more empathy. Their culture is not devoted to the denial of suffering.

That’s what I like about psychoanalysis. Makes room for suffering. Specially Bion. That’s why I can’t reject Klein, because I feel that Klein, with all the problems of her point of view, she understands suffering. All forms of psychoanalysis pay attention to what people do to deny suffering. It’s called defense mechanism. That’s what I value about psychoanalysis.

The first thing we do when we became psychoanalysts it’s to try to avoid suffering in a different way, but at least we have the tools to recognize that.

I am Jewish and sometimes I wonder why in christian churches, christians are so attached to Jesus in the cross. It is a reminder of suffering. For example, the colonial portuguese thought that if they had a big enough empire they wouldn't have to suffer. Another example is nuclear weapons, a fantasy that having a mean of violence will allow us to deal with suffering. If we have the capacity to destroy the whole world maybe then we won't suffer. It's crazy but it's what we do.

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: Like Michael Eigen says we destroy parts of ourselves to survive.

Neil Altman: Yes. If you read Michael Eigen too, you will see that it is all about suffering. If we have unlimited means of destruction, we can survive. Maybe the idea is really that we are trying to destroy something, but the goal is to survive.

It is like Emmanuel Ghent's idea, when he distinguishes between submission and surrender. Submission is a destructive process, but surrender is directed to the survival of a true self.

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: It's like Klein's depressive position: somehow I accept the things as they are. I surrender and try to create new things.

Neil Altman: Yes, the Depressive position means, that you accept the suffering and guilt as it is. It's a good point. Human beings have been trying to make this point through millennia. It's like Buddha's point that suffering is a project of not accepting transience. It's the same point that James Baldwin made, that white culture is built on a fantasy of omnipotence and immortality. That's the same point that Buddha was making 2500 years ago in India. People don't listen, they listen and they don't listen.

People have their Jesus on a cross in their churches like symbol of suffering, and they leave the church and go out and try to live a life without suffering.

Catarina Bray Pinheiro: It is very difficult to keep this perceptions alive.

Neil Altman: Yes. For all of us.

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: When you say people don't listen, I thought about the return of the repress.

Neil Altman: We should had the return of the dissociated. Things that we know and don't know.

8. There is something that we ask each other: what have you found lately in the clinic?

Neil Altman: What I am finding now? I think It changes as you get older. Now that I am 76 years old, I have different experiences in the clinic when I did when I was 35; 40; 50. So one group of patients are getting older. When I was 35 I didn't realise that people get older. It's a kind of perspective you get when you get older. Now I have a few patients who are also 65; 70, and the generation behind us, our parentes and grandparents, they were ready to die at that age. Now people are living longer. In Us and Western Europe people are living until their 90's.

Here I am with 75, I have patients who are 75, it's 20 more years. It creates new problems and new opportunities. Like: are you going to move to Florida and play Golf for 20 years? Are you going to retire and stop working?

Some other problems that I see in a clinic, on a daily basis, is people who don't know what to do with their lives. They thought they have to give up when they turn 65 and then they realise they still have a life. What to do with it? I didn't see that in myself. You have relationships, you have your career, you have problems in your career, you have problems in your relationship, but you don't ask yourself in the end what makes life meaningful. It's an existential king of problem that I see now.

I also have some younger patients and I find I work differently with them because in my mind I am thinking what did this person really care about? I can ask them to think with me about what they think they care must about.

I don't want to talk about specific patients for reasons of confidentiality, but I have patients with 20 years old who don't think about what kind of life they want to have and how they are prepared for it. I am taking another perspective these days that I used to.

I think the pandemic created a crisis of meaning for everybody. Suddenly the privileges that we created for ourselves, can quickly vanish. Makes people think about what really matters in life.

Filipe Baptista-Bastos: That's a question that stayed in people's mind or it is something of the moment?

Neil Altman: If I think It's going back to normal? I don't know. I think It's not possible. People have to adjust to that. We keep thinking that now we have vaccines, so we can take off the masks. That may work, for one generation, two generation, maybe one year, maybe one week until the next mutation comes. If we don't wear masks the vírus mutate quickly and a new vírus come and there's no vaccine. Precautions are important. In the rich country we can get vaccinated but in a poor country with no vaccine is producing more mutations and the mutations doesn't stay in the poor country. It's not sustainable. Trying to get back to normal it is not possible in a long run.

9. What is the near future of Psychoanalysis? In general and in institutions?

Neil Altman: I get involved with Community psychoanalysis, taking the consciousness of what we have gained from psychoanalysis about suffering; anxiety; depression and the problems that we create for ourselves from trying to avoid those. We can apply that to the community outside the consulting rooms. I think the future will have to do with that, if we can create a place for psychoanalysis in the world it will survive and make a contribution. I am optimistic that way.

There are movements around the world that are trying to apply a psychoanalytic point of view in the world.