

Gina Clayton and Mike Fitter

Review: Audergon, A *The War Hotel: Psychological dynamics of violent conflict*, London: Whurr Publishers, 2005

The War Hotel: Psychological Dynamics in Violent Conflict, by Arlene Audergon,
London: Whurr Publishers, November 2004

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Arlene Audergon's new book, 'The War Hotel', (www.warhotel.com) should be read by anyone with an interest in conflict and the human psyche. *The War Hotel* is addressed not only to people who are directly affected by or working with conflict, but also to those of us who are armchair watchers of the TV news, concerned, but unsure of our relationship to the scenes we see. The author's thesis is that those who make war – politicians and military leaders – understand how human psychology can be used to support war. And those who turn away and close their hearts and minds to war as it erupts and continues are as much participants in the unfolding drama as are those who become swept up in it. The consequent purpose of the book is an examination of this psychology to generate awareness of our part in the creation of war, so that we may be able to use our selves and our psyches differently.

The book runs through many subjects in a wide-ranging, cross-disciplinary account of human relationships to conflict. Arlene Audergon discusses the way in which we consent to and even generate war through for instance, a misplaced view of what will bring or constitute justice, through our need to be right, and the blinkered view that privilege gives us. The second part of the book is based on the idea that the many manipulations which make us accept conflict are terror tactics, as they work on the production of fear to bring us to do that which we otherwise would not do. The terror tactics she discusses include desensitisation, demonising, targeting leaders, disinformation, the breaking of culture, chaos and crackdown. This reversal of the usual use of the phrase 'terror tactics', by applying it to powerful engines of the state rather than marginalised groups, works well at an important level to which this whole book is addressed – destabilising the conventional order of power. By going into our helplessness she undermines it – thereby demonstrating the method she advocates – and concludes with Ghandi 'whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it'.

The later stages of the book show how our high ideals, our religious feelings and even our love for each other can all be used to support and even initiate war. Another skilful reversal comes in the title of part four 'Altered states of war'. 'Altered states' are often thought of as sublime, sometimes as an aspect of illness. Here however they are the states of mind that people may enter before and during warfare. We seek the transcendent and may find it in the fierce loyalty and comradeship of war, and the sublime inspiration of a cause to be fought and even die for. The inspiration that things could be different builds towards the latter part of the book, where the author reveals the dynamics of 'hot spots' – those moments of awkwardness or charge, which we tend to gloss over or avoid, but which she shows contain the potential for revelation and provide a window into transformation and healing.

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There is nothing neutral about this book. It is an impassioned case for engagement with the totality of human experience in order to bring about transformation of the dynamics of conflict. The author draws on her own considerable experience of work in conflict and post-conflict situations, particularly in the Balkans. The many examples given from this work are a major strength of the book, offering as they do compelling evidence of fresh possibilities which may emerge in the most dire and apparently intractable situations. We benefit greatly by reading these stories, as Arlene Audergon's lucid understanding of experience gives us a very fresh and direct account combined with clear-hearted insight. They give a real groundedness to the optimism which lifts the reader, and convinced us at least that awareness can make a difference in the world.

The core message that pervades the book is that it is vital to have awareness of psychological dynamics. There are those in positions of power who do understand how to influence people by speaking directly to their deepest hopes and fears, and who will do this for the purpose of creating war in pursuit of their own interests. It therefore requires those of us who wish to promote peace to have at least equal awareness of those very dynamics, and engage actively, helping to bring awareness into the conflicted system. Else we leave the field of influence empty and open to those with malign purposes, and thus are implicated bystanders. Strong medicine and an important message.

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