


BOOK REVIEW

Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine, by Lara Sheehi & Stephen Sheehi (Routledge, 2022)

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This is a very difficult and important book for psychoanalysts, psychologists, and anyone involved in practice concerned with alleviating distress and challenging injustice, including the ways that oppression creates distress as a recognisable and understandable response to injustice. *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* is specifically about what psychoanalytically informed practice looks like in Palestine. However, it is also a treatise about and meditation on how political conditions necessarily inform psychic states, and how mental health practice is necessarily and inevitably always political.

This book documents and represents Palestinian clinicians' determined, committed persistence and creativity (the term *sumud* or stalwartness echoes across the book, as a critical alternative to the individualising term 'resilience') in generating and sustaining mental health services for alienated and traumatised Palestinians across the Occupied Territories, the West Bank, and Gaza. Unfortunately, but indicatively, perhaps, the Sheehis were denied entry to Gaza. So, notwithstanding the centrality of Gaza to radical, critical Palestinian mental health practice—as in the well-known Gaza Mental Health Project—we hear less about the Gazan context. In a sense, the book literally 'gives voice' to these dedicated clinicians, translating from Arabic to inform an Anglophone audience of the conditions of and for psychotherapeutic practice across historic Palestine in current times. It is based on face-to-face interviews with clinicians (who include psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, but mainly psychoanalysts or psychoanalytically informed therapists), as well as reflections on the authors' experiences of conducting psychoanalytic teaching and training sessions in Palestine, and they draw on their own responses of being materially present in useful ways.

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However, this is more than a document of how Palestinian clinicians survive, mobilise, organise, and practice amid conditions that are almost unbearable to think about—of occupation, of day-to-day violence and witnessing violence, of the constant threat of violence erupting at any moment, of checkpoints, deportations, being stripped of papers, and more. Since the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, we are now well-attuned to the awful and widespread resonances of being choked, and indeed strangulation and asphyxiation has long been discussed in relation to racist and colonial violence. The book also offers a major conceptual analysis of the clinicians' accounts of practices of resistance the authors have documented and witnessed.

A key message is that Palestinian clinicians do psychoanalytic work that is vital to the struggle against not only psychic alienation and dispossession, but also for the broader political anticolonial struggle. Countering racist psychiatric and psychological narratives and claims long-written into the history of our disciplines and reinscribed in current practices that Palestinians—like other colonised peoples—lack the capacity for psychoanalytic work, the case histories recounted by the clinicians attest to the ways unique individual forms of distress can be explored and addressed through psychoanalytic intervention. Further, they document how—in the words of one of the clinicians—the occupation is everywhere. That is, these clinicians' mental health practice engages with how the political context of occupation, dispossession, exile, and ongoing violence produces and frames individual forms of distress and pathology, as the examples given of dreams and symptoms highlight.

The case histories and accounts of practice that take centre stage in the book are hard to read, as they should be, confronting the reader with the psychic fallout of 70 years of oppression. They testify to despair, alienation, and more. Beyond this, in addition to completely dispelling the racist-colonial trope of the colonised as 'depthless savage' (p. 181) who is unable to reflect, consider, or conceptualise, a key tenet of the book is to ward off reactionary representations of Palestinians, including the clinicians, as victims or dependents. Such tropes of humanitarian discourse and indeed aid conditionality are a particular target of criticism as, even if they are well-intentioned, are working to rob Palestinians of their dignity and their agency. Importantly, this agency can take less apparently 'desirable' forms, including violence and suicide. Instead of avoiding such difficult topics, it is a central argument of the book that the conditions in which Palestinians are living, and increasingly dying, require us to understand such actions as expressions of resistance and (mobilising a trope from Sara Ahmed's (2014) queer phenomenological analyses) 'willfulness'; that is, an expression of self-assertion and of will. Under conditions of great political and psychic duress, rather than being a form of self-castration or aggression against the self and others, the authors argue that the capacity to fantasise about, plan, and even complete suicide may be a key form of staying alive, or in the case of completed suicide, a call for continued liveability to others.

The fact that Lara and Stephen Sheehi are, as Arabic speakers, literally able to understand, converse with, and translate the words of these clinicians and their patients/clients makes

this book remarkable in itself. Indeed, they report the relief the clinicians express at being able to discuss with them in a shared native language. (Lara Sheehi and Stephen Sheehi identify themselves in the text as Arab-Americans, from Druze and Maronite backgrounds.) This book therefore not only allows Anglophone readers to be more informed but makes a perhaps even more important conceptual-political point. Unless educated outside Israel, Hebrew is the language in which the Palestinian clinicians have had to work in in all their relationships with the Israeli state. In their training, in professional organisations, and in direct analytic and supervisory relations, these clinicians—like their clients—are colonised by Hebrew as the state national language. There are many instances of clinicians reporting detailed examples of how they are regarded as less competent, not merely for speaking Arabic but even for their capacity to be able to do this. This is direct racism. There are also many examples of Jewish Israeli supervisors disregarding Palestinian clinicians' attributions of complex subjectivity and psychodynamic formulations of their clients, preferring instead less depth-oriented approaches and explanations. There is one notable case of a clinician being expressly advised to terminate therapy with their client, who instead covertly continues. This is presented as an act of anticolonial solidarity and resistance.

Fanon, of course, famously opens his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, one that so powerfully testifies to the lived experience of colonisation and racialisation, with a chapter on language as a key instrument of colonisation. For those Palestinians who are within what is sometimes called the 'Green Line' or Occupied Territories, or who the authors sometimes designate as 'captive citizens', Hebrew governs their access to training and is the medium in which all professional psychotherapeutic activity takes place. As Fanon (1952/1970) wrote: 'To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture' (p. 29), while: 'To speak... means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation' (p. 13). Speaking the settler colonial language is key to internal colonisation processes. However, Fanon also wrote of language operating 'as a retaining wall relation... to the group' (p. 29). The forging of a group identity, of a sense of commonality and joint purpose, enacted through language is highly politically significant here. The commitment to provide training and therapy in Arabic to Palestinian clients is a conscious, deliberate, and in their terms willful, anticolonial and decolonisation practice that (re)affirms Palestinian presence and identity.

Not only, then, is Hebrew part of a colonial practice that threatens to extend the geospatial occupation of Palestinian clinicians into a psychic one, but rather the commitment to working in Arabic becomes figured not only as a question of extending access for clients, but also as key to the ethical practice of the assertion of indigenous rights and continuing cultural presence, an expression of 'pre-existing and lived legitimate sovereignty' (p. 174). Psychoanalytic practice in Palestine, under conditions of occupation, is part of the 'countertechnologies of presence, self-affirmation and autonomy' (p. 181), that also connects a 'psychoanalytic commons' with the wider social and political fabric of continuing 'resistance, willfulness, defiance and affirmation' (p. 205).

By now you will have realised that this book, far from pretending objectivity or dispassion, is an avowedly partial work committed to bringing a Palestine-centred perspective on the mental health consequences of occupation to an international professional audience. It is expressly informed by the theories and practices of the revolutionary psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, both drawing on his descriptions of the psychic impacts of colonisation—of depletion, petrification, zombification—but also—in the final substantive chapter—his wide-ranging social and community-based approaches to institutional psychotherapy, learnt from Tosquelles during his training in France, and applied as medical director of the major psychiatric hospital in Algeria between 1953 and 1955. Indeed, this is a very Fanonian text, albeit amply and scholarly (more scholarly than Fanon in his texts, at times), updated with current postcolonial, decolonial, feminist, and queer theory including Ahmed, Sandoval, Mignolo, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and more. While not the main focus of the book, it is also—importantly—deeply informed by a knowledge of psychoanalytic theory and practice as generated from and through Arabic and Islamic cultures and literatures.

More than this, the text is Fanonian in two further ways: firstly, it exemplifies and enacts the Fanonian precept that mental health can only be understood as situated within political conditions, and that political transformation in favour of justice is therefore necessary for personal healing, such that, in the words of one of the Palestinian practitioners, ‘resistance keeps us sane’. Importantly also, from Fanon, is an understanding of violence that reverses the dominant view, including the dominant but mistaken reading of Fanon (1961/1963) (partly produced by Sartre’s misrepresentation of Fanon in his Preface to *Wretched of the Earth*) as an advocate for violence. Rather, colonial violence is the condition of (in this case, Palestinian) existence, and to transcend or escape this requires a tremendous act of assertion, to become (in Fanon’s oft repeated word) ‘actional’.

The violence meted out on the colonised is physical and psychic. Indeed, some readers may balk, as indeed I did, at the claim in the beginning of the book but elaborated extensively throughout, that it is ‘the Israeli settler-colonial regime that not only “presumes” but *intends* Palestinians to die’ (p. 8, emphasis in original). However, set against the lived experience of the manifold ways that Palestinian life, language, culture, lands, and existence are progressively and materially being undermined, delegitimated, and—especially but not only in relation to the blockade of Gaza—deliberately pressured to live below subsistence levels of food, water, and mobility, it is hard not to allow this conclusion. As discussed in the Epilogue to the book, right wing Zionist Israeli ideologues, including Danny Danon, Israel’s ambassador to the UN published in *The New York Times* in June 2019, have made explicit the astonishing and chilling demand for the surrender or suicide of Palestinians as the condition for a peace deal. So, the violence of resistance which (unless one subscribes to a total pacifism) may sometimes be necessary (many examples come to mind), comes about because of pre-existing violence. Moreover, we especially need to remember how, as Fanon wrote in one of his final papers ‘Why we use violence’ (1960/2018), colonialism works by

making itself seem eternal and timeless, by erasing the history of another time before colonialism, or indeed the possibility of an alternative to it.

So, the second way in which I would characterise this text as Fanonian is in its style, its structure, its writing, and its relation to this particular historical–political moment. Fanon's writing is passionate, committed, and concerned with professional and political responsibility. Like Fanon's writing, this book spends a lot of time explaining and framing the claims that are being made, circling around and warranting the authors' key arguments (about *sumud*, the support for indigenous knowledge, the connections between Palestinian psychoanalytic practitioners and the broader struggle, and so on). Reading this book put me in mind of Fanon's (1959/1965) less well-known but very important second book, *A Dying Colonialism*, which was written in the midst of the Algerian liberation struggle from French domination (indeed the French title of the book was actually *L'An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne*). Like that text, this one is performative, it does what it is passionately advocating for; that is, it testifies to Palestinian existence and resistance, to processes of resistance and transformation that are underway, and to the possibility of a different political context. In this sense it is a hopeful book.

It is worth remembering here that Fanon was no supporter of populism or emotionalism. This is evident in his searing and prescient critique (in *Wretched of the Earth*) of the incipient dynamics of the native bourgeoisie merely replacing the colonisers, rather than transforming the class and other sociopolitical relations at play. Similarly, Lara Sheehi and Stephen Sheehi do not overlook the colonial collusions and coercions of the Palestinian Authority, and they acknowledge complexities of class and gender relations within Palestinian communities. Just as Fanon commented, in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* that he held back from writing the book out of suspicion of what he called 'fervour', which he describes as 'the weapon of choice of the impotent' risking 'self-combustion' (1952/1970, p. 3). Indeed, he claims he had to wait years until he could write about the 'truths [that] were a fire in me then' (p. 3). So, while rightly portrayed as a theorist connecting emotions, the body, and politics, Fanon was also advocating deliberative action, as a politician as much as a psychoanalytically informed practitioner. *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* similarly is not some passionate outpouring of rage and indignation. It is highly scholarly, well-considered, and researched, with a remarkable array of notes indicating resources that I am looking forward to following up, including both empirical and analytical work on Palestine and wider postcolonial theory. It is clearly the outcome of sustained, longstanding, and committed work, both practical and theoretical.

Last but very much not least, I want to finish by talking about psychoanalysis, and the other set of meanings structured into the title, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*, relevant to the concerns of this journal and its readers. The book opens by highlighting how psychoanalysis came to be inserted in Israel/Palestine (although it is noted that there was regional interest

in psychoanalysis from Freud's earliest writings). Beyond this, there are two major interventions made in this book, and grounded in and from the accounts of the practitioners.

The first is the notion the authors put forward of 'psychoanalytic innocence'. This extends discussions of (epistemologies of) white innocence or ignorance now current in discussions of racism and antiracist pedagogies that the authors apply to psychoanalytic institutional and individual dynamics. The book offers many examples of such 'psychoanalytic innocence' on the part of Jewish Israeli clinicians, trainers, and supervisors (and the authors also note how Palestinian practitioners are not immune from it either). This 'innocence' overlooks or ignores the structural-political conditions of both historical and current Palestinian existence, stripping away the political and focusing on individual problems and issues as if they could be understood outside these conditions. They show how this psychologises and pathologises, and works to confirm dynamics and models of inferiorisation of Palestinians and the Palestinian psyche. Building on this, the authors characterise this as a form of willful 'psychoanalytic misattunement', which they also portray as a form of 'bad faith' in professional practice. There are ample examples of professional psychoanalytic organisations, both Israeli and international, enacting such innocence as 'a practice of structural, *ideological misattunement* that involves affirming settler-colonial realities and logics and pathologizing Palestinian will and desire for liberation and self-actualization, collectively and individually' (p. 123, emphasis in original). Instead of understanding or excavating structural complicities with settler colonial logic, this innocence is evident in claims 'not only of neutrality and objectivity but also of universalism and pretentious empathy' (p. 124).

This is where the many 'dialogue' initiatives—some brokered by international psychoanalytic luminaries, come in for especial critical scrutiny. This is where, perhaps, there are very specific lessons for us as therapists. An oft repeated precondition for such 'dialogue' is disavowal of violence. However, this is a liberal politics of recognition that not only reinstates an individualist psychoanalytic model of the subject but also demands of the Palestinian 'dialogue' partner that they betray or separate themselves off from their cultural-political identification or affiliation. That is, they are recognised as a legitimate dialogue partner only at the expense of refusing or separating themselves from their cultural-political positioning. The authors embed this critique not only in an historical account of various conferences and dialogue initiatives, but they also mobilise diverse psychoanalytic resources to interpret these processes. Dialogue and Jewish Israeli expressions about the desire for peace are a symptom, they suggest, of misrecognition that promotes splitting and displacement. The reasons for this may be apparently well-meaning:

This misrecognition could be mis-ascribed to settler innocence, to the impulse to connect with the 'other'. The misrecognition could be attributed the subject's desire to 'recognize', in fact, the self in the other. It could be the product of a wish-fulfillment that hopes to avoid guilt and responsibility, or to make amends without accountability. (p. 131)

Using a combination of different postcolonial and psychoanalytic analysis, including Christopher Bollas, as well as Kleinian, Lacanian, and Fanonian formulations, they argue that 'Dialogue, then, is a symptom of anxiety produced within a liberal humanism that does not have room for the fullness of a willful and truly autonomous indigenous subject.' (p. 131). They mobilise this account of what they call (after Bollas) 'extractive introjection', whereby the Palestinian clinician is required to take in degraded and necropolitical (self-hating, even death-creating) affects, in relation to dialogue initiatives, documenting how invitations are predicated on assuming the position of the 'good Arab', rather than the (presumed bad) Palestinian, arguing that such dialogue initiatives are, then, part of a politics of Palestinian erasure.

Similar dynamics of wilful misrecognition are most especially evident in the reaction to the call from Palestinian civil society organisations for BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) of Israeli cultural, as well as political, institutions. Let us remember, here, that Palestinian individuals and organisations have little option themselves not to participate in the Israeli state, which they daily have to navigate (including through checkpoints) in order to live and work. Nevertheless, some (but not all) of the clinicians and organisations documented in this book chose to refuse Israeli state funding, in order to maintain their autonomy and independence. What comes over loud and clear is the call to international colleagues, therapists, and analysts outside Israel/Palestine, to call attention to what is happening, to refuse to collude in the liberal politics of erasure structured into depoliticised 'dialogue' initiatives, to support BDS, and to celebrate the lives and hopes of Palestinian practitioners.

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