

NOTE FROM THE FRONT LINE

Emancipation and its discontents

Sophie Mendelsohn*  Independent researcher; founding member of the Collectif de Pantin

ABSTRACT

Based on two ‘anecdotes’, I seek to highlight the limits of emancipation in contemporary Jewishness from two different angles, and how psychoanalysis takes this into account: on the one hand, in relation to the identification required of diaspora Jews with the State of Israel, and on the other, in relation to the assimilation that has been imposed on many diaspora Jews.

KEYWORDS: emancipation; assimilation; Jewish self-hatred

Let me recall an ‘anecdote’ from a still recent past: on May 6, 2001, in Vienna, at the invitation of the local Freudian Society, Edward Saïd, the famous theoretician of orientalism, was to be giving a lecture entitled ‘Freud and the extra-European world’. At the request of a number of members of this society, the invitation was cancelled two months in advance, in protest against Saïd’s gesture, captured by a camera, throwing a stone at an Israeli post on the Lebanese border in July 2000, shortly before the start of the second intifada. The photo was published in *The New York Times*, and Saïd himself declared that he was having a stone-throwing contest with his son, and that it was a ‘symbolic gesture of joy’ to mark the end of Israel’s 22-year occupation of Lebanon. Faced with the local scandal that this affair caused, the director of the Vienna Freudian Society at the time said he was ‘sorry’ about the situation, strangely disassociating himself from the decision that he had taken, before adding, in typical denial: ‘it is not fair to believe that Mr. Saïd was refused because he is Palestinian’, since everyone knew he was Palestinian at the time of his invitation. However, was it really known when he got invited? Isn’t it rather at the moment when he is refused,

*Contact details: somendelsohn@gmail.com

and by this very act of refusal, that we are actually led to know that he actually is a Palestinian? Wasn't it then, and only then, that a few Jewish psychoanalysts in Vienna found themselves in a position to recognise, in spite of themselves, and then in a defensive mode, that it's not possible to be Palestinian, without being Palestinian—meaning that striving to think through the colonial condition that governs Palestinian existences, as Saïd never ceased to do, can only lead to acts aimed at breaking out of this condition, towards a political liberation.

However, it could also be that it was the subject of Saïd's lecture that was problematic, and that it was in fact a way, less immediately visible, to censor in advance what Saïd was about to say. It turns out that he was indeed following Freud's recommendation that his patients should learn to live without comforting fictions, for it is in the annihilation of such debilitating and dangerous chimeras that our only hope lies. What the story of Saïd's refusal in Vienna makes clear is that psychoanalysts themselves are not immune to the temptation to produce these kinds of comforting fictions: the blind defence of Israel as both the State of the Jews and 'the only democracy in the Middle East' is a version of what a comforting fiction can be which has found its full and deadly potency today. In this lecture, which finally took place in London at the Freud Museum a year later, Saïd argued that Freud's relationship with Judaism was eminently conflictual, from the psychoanalyst's final text, *Moses and Monotheism*, published after his death. Drawing on Freud's thesis, which he himself had been tempted to reject, that the founder of Judaism, Moses, was not Jewish but Egyptian, Saïd emphasised that Israeli legislation contradicted, repressed, and even annihilated the potential for openness inherent in Jewish identity, which stems from the divisions and fractures that constitute it. This led Jacqueline Rose, a British feminist literary theorist, who was discussing Saïd's lecture in London that day, to say that 'Israel represses Freud'... (Saïd, 2003, p. 66).

As it happens, Jacqueline Rose herself is Jewish, and she had the opportunity to testify to her own conflicted relationship with the State of Israel, for which she was sometime later branded a 'self-hating Jew', an accusation she fought against in an article in the English newspaper *The Guardian* (Rose, 2007). I refer all the more readily to her rather simple account of her way of coping with Israel, as it seems to me I could have written it myself:

There was something strange about going to a country that was not my own, in the sense that I had no actual relationship with it—either personally or in my family's past—a country to which, as a result, I was not returning, but where to say so is already, in the eyes of the country itself, a reason for reproach. Not to return as a Jewish woman to Israel, not to feel a sense of belonging, not to recognise the very fact and existence of Israel as, in itself, a historical return, is to break every time the symbolic parameters of the nation.... It is a nation that desires its potential citizens in exile, the Jews of the Diaspora, to return to their homeland, with as much fervor as it banishes the former occupiers of this land and deprives them of their dream of one day possessing a State. (Rose, 1996, p. 2).

It is precisely on this point that Rose mobilises psychoanalysis, to help us, she says, ‘understand the symptom of the State, why there is something within the very process founding the State as reality that threatens and overtakes it’ (Rose, 1996, p. 2). In so doing, she echoes an indication given by Saïd in his first book, *Beginnings*, in which Freud already had his place, and which in a way links the psychoanalytical episteme to the knot of insoluble conflictuality that Jewish identity carries in his eyes, and on which its inherent potential for openness precisely rests. In the section of this book devoted to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he situates psychoanalysis as a ‘type of knowledge so devastating that it is unbearable to behold’ (Saïd, 1975, p. 170). However, no comforting fiction can protect us from it, though. Additionally, if psychoanalysis, through its type of knowledge, can indeed give access to what in the very process that founds the State exceeds and threatens it, then it becomes possible to enter into the implications of Rose’s lapidary formula, ‘Israel represses Freud’. I would even go so far as to add, paradoxically, that as a Jewish state, Israel is probably the State for which Freud’s repression is most imperative.

By imposing the agenda of an exclusive sovereignty based on the need for security, and by giving it the ethno-national form of a State paradoxically referred to the European model at the very moment when it was entering an endless crisis, Zionism structured itself on the repression of the colonial question. Ideologically, this repression is underpinned by an abstract universalism that allows us to ignore the social and racial system of domination that organises the political situation thus constituted. At the individual level, the precarious equilibrium constituted by such a status quo gives rise to a multi-layered denial that it’s up to us to question. Octave Mannoni, a French psychoanalyst who confronted the colonial situation at first in an ambiguous way, and later had the courage to critique his own position, gives an early indication of what is involved in the decolonisation of oneself, which begins by rejecting the framework of thought imposed by universalism (see Boni and Mendelsohn, 2021; and www.collectifdepantin.org).

This involved a psychoanalytic return to the ‘Jewish question’. He writes:

At the beginning of my analytic practice I remember being tempted to tell a Jewish patient, who was having difficulties with his own Jewishness, that there really were no Jews, that it was just a word, a label that had been stuck on their backs—an indefensible interpretation, because even if the Jewish race has no scientific (or ‘objective’) existence, the problem raised for each Jew by his relations with non-Jews cannot be resolved, far from it, by this kind of denial. (Mannoni, 1966, p. 296)

Nor can be the problem every Jew faces on account of their relationship with Jewishness, particularly if it has been prevented by assimilation, considered as a result of the praised politics of emancipation. Refusing to give in to the temptation which would have consisted of declaring that being Jewish doesn’t change anything, so as not to have to take it into account in his listening, he nevertheless notes that he could very well have given in to this if his patient had encouraged him to do so by solving the problem before it even arose—

'many Jews try this solution [the universalist solution] themselves, striving to assimilate with non-Jews and often succeed, provided that they pay a price for this negation in the form of anxiety and disorders of all kinds' (Mannoni, 1966, p. 296).

This observation is an invitation to psychoanalysts to take an interest in the subjective price paid for using this universalist solution against oneself. In order to appreciate the disorders thus created, we need to be prepared to understand that it is precisely the imperative of emancipation that requires a black person, Jew, or Muslim to assimilate in order to speak about the disorders it causes. Because if we do not speak about the disorders we are affected by, then what is the point of ending up on a psychoanalyst's couch? The extent of what is at stake can no doubt be gauged by considering the alternative that emerges: either psychoanalysis is reserved for those who do not risk undermining the universalist solution, to the exclusion of all others, and it itself becomes a de facto segregating practice; or psychoanalysis must actually be able to accommodate the anxieties and disorders of all kinds faced by all those who are likely to turn to it, and then it has no choice but to stop believing in the universalist solution itself, or at least to stop using it as a ploy to actively ignore the blind spots it has created—and Edward Saïd got a chance to know about it in a brutal way.

REFERENCES

- Boni, L., & Mendelsohn, S. (2021). *La vie psychique du racisme. 1. L'empire du démenti* [The psychic life of racism. 1. The empire of denial]. La Découverte.
- Mannoni, O. (1966). *La décolonisation de soi. Clés pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène* [Decolonising oneself. Keys to the imaginary, the Other Scene]. Seuil.
- Rose, J. (1996). *States of fantasy*. Clarendon Press.
- Rose, J. (2007, February 8). The myth of self-hatred. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/feb/08/holdjewishvoices6>
- Saïd, E. (1975). *Beginnings*. Basic Books.
- Saïd, E. (2003). *Freud and the Non-European*. Verso.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sophie Mendelsohn practices psychoanalysis in Paris, France. She is a founding member of the Collectif de Pantin, which addresses questions about the clinical issues of France's colonial and post-colonial heritage, mobilising the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis in a political perspective. She is the author of articles and books on that topic, including the coordination of the recent *Psychanalyse du reste du monde. Géohistoire d'une subversion* [Psychoanalysis and the rest. Geohistory of a subversion] (La Découverte, 2023).