Volume *20*, Nos. 1&2, 2022 ISSN: 1556-9195

Psychotherapy and Politics International

BAATN

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND POLITICS INTERNATIONAL

AIMS AND SCOPE

Psychotherapy and Politics International explores the psychological implications and consequences of the political, and the political implications of the psyche, both in theory and in practice. The premise of this journal is that psychotherapy is a social and political activity that asks us to examine the processes of self-deception that perpetuate individual unhappiness, as well as social structures that are inequitable and oppressive. Historically, political concepts and values, and their effects, have not been central to the therapeutic process, although that has changed. The journal welcomes articles from all modalities or schools of psychotherapy internationally and from across the political spectrum.

COPYRIGHT

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.02

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcement from the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network

Eugene Ellis,* Director and Founder of BAATN; Honorary Fellow, United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy; Editorial Board Member, *Psychotherapy and Politics International*

The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network (BAATN) is honoured to take ownership of *Psychotherapy and Politics International* from its former owner, Wiley Publishing. BAATN is home to the largest community of psychotherapists and counsellors of Black, African, Asian, and Caribbean heritage in the UK. Our network of therapists is committed, passionate, and actively engaged in addressing the psychological needs of Black, African, and South Asian people in the UK through its online directory, delivery of training programmes, mentoring of students, and compilation of website resources for the public. Whilst we are UK based, we also maintain strong links with colleagues all over the world. Our therapists, and therapists in training, are at the cutting edge of honing established theoretical models and developing new ways of working that recognise oppression as a significant factor in contributing to people's distress.

Psychotherapy and Politics International will continue its tradition of academic rigour and both insightful and challenging analysis of psychotherapy and psychotherapeutic theory through a lens of politics and power. We want to express our commitment to working internationally and to engage with new colleagues and develop friends across the globe. Over the coming years we think it will be essential to encourage and develop new writers, especially those with younger voices, and to diversify the variety and range of authors and contributors. Our aim is to be open and responsive to both the current readership and the new readers we hope to gain. We are excited about this coming journey and hopeful about *Psychotherapy and Politics International's* potential into the future.

*Contact details: eugeneellis@baatn.org.uk

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–6
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.03

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

EDITORIAL

Keith Tudor,[*1] **Karen Minikin**,[2] **and David Pavón Cuéllar**[3]

[1]Professor of Psychotherapy, Auckland University of Technology, Aotearoa New Zealand
[2]Principal, Insights—South West; Leadership team, Black, African and Asian Therapy Network
[3]Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Morelia, Mexico

We are delighted to be writing this editorial—the first under the journal's new owners, the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network (BAATN); and the first as a new co-editing team. For my part (Keith), having edited *Psychotherapy and Politics International* (*PPI*) for the past 10 years, I am delighted and relieved to welcome Karen and David as co-editors—ngā mihi mahana ki a kōrua | warm greetings to you both—and to say that I am looking forward to handing over the editorial reins to them during the rest of this year, at the end of which I will be stepping down as editor. For my part (Karen), I am looking forward to working with Keith and David this year. I am also relieved to have Keith's support and experience as a dear friend and colleague and am very much looking forward to collaborating with David. I hope this will be an innovative time for the journal, a time to encourage and support new authors and editors, whilst also gaining the benefit of having experience and some familiarity as a support. For my part (David), I hope to help maintain the rhythm of work that Keith has sustained all these years, always respecting the freedom, originality, and pluralism that characterises this journal. The crucial thing for me is that the journal remains open to critical and politically engaged articles that find little or no place in other periodicals on psychology and psychotherapy. I would like to include more texts from outside the English-speaking world, especially from traditionally marginalised groups and regions in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. In any case, I trust that all this will be possible with the invaluable support of Karen and Keith.

[*]Contact details: keith.tudor@aut.ac.nz

THE TRANSITION

Now writing in a collective voice, we firstly elaborate some aspects of the transition of the journal news and, secondly, introduce this double issue.

As reported in Keith's last Editorial (Tudor, 2021), after 20 years of association with *PPI*, Wiley decided not to continue to publish the journal, following which and after a number of discussions, we decided to move to open access publishing and are delighted to be doing so through the good offices of Tuwhera Open Access Publishing, under the auspices of Auckland University of Technology. ('Tuwhera' is the Māori word for 'open'.) At the same time as assuring the basis of the journal's continued publication, Keith was in dialogue with Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR), with which the journal has had a close association since its inception, and with BAATN, both about funding the costs of the journal (i.e., the position of an editorial assistant), and ownership. In the end, PCSR withdrew and BAATN agreed to take responsibility for owning and running the journal. Notwithstanding the complexities of such a transition, we have managed this in good order and time, with the following results:

- We have new owners who have both a respect for the journal's history and a clear vision for its future—see the Announcement preceding this Editorial (Ellis, 2022), and who are funding the employment of our editorial assistant (see below).
- We have a new look to the journal that reflects this and acknowledges our commitment to diversity and pluralism—personally, politically, and professionally, in psychotherapy and in this publication.
- We have a publisher who is committed to open access (see https://tuwhera.aut.ac.nz/publications), which is congruent with the journal's politics, and who supports a number of other journals (see https://tuwhera.aut.ac.nz/publications/peer-reviewed-journals).
- We have taken the opportunity of this transition and having more control over the publication to increase the number of issues of the journal from three to four per year, beginning with this double issue. We plan to publish in February, May, August, and November each year, and to continue the tradition that Keith introduced of having special issues (for news of which see below).
- We have retained our unique sections; thus, in addition to the high-quality, peer-reviewed articles that form the major part of each issue, we will also have editorials, guest editorials, controversial discussions, talks, notes from the front line (which may or may not be peer-reviewed), and reviews (of various forms of media), as well as art and poetry.
- We have a new editorial team, comprising three co-editors, which we are planning to extend to four from next year.
- We have reorganised and streamlined the editorial board so as make it more reflective of activist scholars in this area—of psychotherapy, politics, and internationalism—and have asked the members of the editorial board, both old and new, to be more involved in

promoting, reviewing submissions for, and themselves contributing to *PPI*. We haven't finalised the board yet, so expect to see the published list (in the journal information and on the journal's website) expanded over the next two issues.

- We have engaged the services of Angie Strachan as our new editorial assistant—ngā mihi ki a koe | warm greetings to you, Angie, welcome to the journal. Angie has already proved invaluable in seeing us through the transition from Wiley to Tuwhera, and in getting this first double issue to publication.
- As part of the transition, Wiley has passed on all back issues of the journal, which Tuwhera will upload onto the journal's website, thereby making *PPI* fully searchable across its 20 years, 60 issues, and over 400 contributions: all within one site. We are planning that this work will be completed by the end of the year.

THIS ISSUE

Turning to this issue, we are delighted to introduce a genuine double issue comprising seven peer-reviewed articles (including a controversial discussion), a talk, and a book review, the first three of which represent different aspects of what Totton (2000) identifies as politics *in* psychotherapy.

The first article, 'Spheres and civilization' by Christopher Justin Brophy explores connections between Freud's politics of the psyche, as reflected in his work *Civilization and its Discontents* and Plato's Aristophanes as presented in the dialogue, the *Symposium*. In a genuine tour de force, Brophy argues that Freud draws heavily from the human origins myth of Plato's Aristophanes to expound his own political theory. Specifically, Brophy draws our attention to certain psychical (psychic) conflicts that lie in *Civilization and its Discontents*, i.e., the desire to return to an earlier state of psychic existence, the erotic drive, and the death drive which, Brophy argues, are originally articulated in Plato, along with their application to politics. Brophy's skill and the major contribution of this article is not only in making and exploring these connections, but also in applying these to contemporary concerns and questions.

The second article in this issue also explores psychoanalysis, and is another tour de force; in this case, it is a psychoanalytic critique of capitalism, in which the author, Julien-François Gerber, sets out to strengthen what he refers to as the recent psychoanalytic 'turn', or, more accurately, 'return' to the study of capitalism and its alternatives. He does this by identifying thematic strands—libidinal repression (which he refers to as Eros), repetition compulsion (Thanatos), the hedonistic will to power (Ahriman), and narcissistic rationalising (Lucifer). Gerber bemoans—perhaps somewhat controversially—that the psychoanalytic study of the economy has never formed a 'self-conscious field of inquiry', which this article seeks to remedy.

The third article in this trilogy, ‘Listen with love', by Tom Denyer, Kat Wade, Matthew Whitney, Divine Charura, and Gillian Proctor, explores anti-racism dialogue in psychotherapy and counselling training. In addition to representing an important focus on racism and anti-racism, we welcome the fact the article is based on research, which the journal has increasingly promoted in the past five years (see Rodgers & Tudor, 2017). Using a thematic analysis of letters written by a cohort of psychotherapy and counselling students, in response to an anti-racism letter by Professor George Yancy entitled ‘Dear White America’, the article identifies and explores five themes: of connection (whereby participants were willing to challenge their racism), disconnection (being unwilling to challenge their racism), anger, disappointment, and empathy.

Following these articles on different aspects of politics *in* psychotherapy, the next two articles report on examples of the politics *of* psychotherapy.

In the first, another research article, ‘The politics of humanitarian aid’, Lorien Jordan, Desiree Seponski, Amber Kelley, and Nea Krpo offer a case study of the use of eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) in Cambodia. The article starts from the position—and analysis—that the global expansion of psychotherapy through humanitarian aid is a political act, and offers some detailed justification of this with regard to the role of international aid organisations in decision-making about therapeutic care, and the privileging of certain therapeutic modalities. This particular study focuses on the experience of the practitioners who have to navigate the conflicts created by political acts and decisions, and suggest that Cambodians working as psychologists become dependent upon and caught between competing aid organisations.

In the next article, Bert Olivier offers a different kind of case study, that of the current coronavirus ‘pandemic’. Before expressing ideas that go against the prevailing views on the subjective factor of events, the author reflects on how prejudice has influenced the responses of society, governments, and the media to contagion, and defends himself in advance against readers who might judge his article to be particularly biased. Then Olivier recalls Leonard Shlain’s characterisation of the 16th century witch hunts in western Europe and finds a similar kind of ‘mass psychosis’ in the global reaction to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, a delusional psychosis on a massive scale induced by endemic fear of lethal contamination and fed by governments and by the World Health Organization. The author wonders what psychotherapy could mean in these conditions and, inspired by Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Ian Parker, ends up by conceiving the clinic as a space in which there is room for personal revolt against mass psychosis on the horizon of a revolutionary option with an anti-capitalist orientation.

In the next article, ‘Meditation, critical psychology, and emancipation’, Dániel Ványi argues that the original Buddhist notion of meditation can be regarded as an emancipatory practice, as opposed to being a legitimation of oppressive social relations. The article both deconstructs

and constructs the self. Firstly, Ványi discusses the Buddhist notion of meditation as a practice of the deconstruction of the illusion of a substantial, i.e., separate, solid, autonomous self. Secondly, referring to theories of the social construction of the self, he argues that the notion of such a separate self is an ideology closely tied to social relations of power. Finally, Ványi concludes that, as a practice of deconstruction, specifically of the self, meditation is an emancipatory practice.

The possibility of emancipation is at the heart of the controversial discussion entitled 'A critique of leftist gaming' between Jan De Vos and Alfie Bown. The origin of the discussion is Bown's book *The Playstation Dreamworld* and its critique by De Vos in *The Digitalization of (Inter)Subjectivity*. De Vos's main argument is that the psychological conceptions underlying digital technologies, as well as their essential link with capitalism, would compromise the emancipatory anti-capitalist psychoanalytic project of 'leftist gaming'. Bown's response is to play an active role in the digital realm, get involved in games, look to the future, and take a stand against the capitalist structure inherited from pre-digital time, staying both in and out of digitality. De Vos ends with a reflection on capitalism that cannot completely digitise subjects, unable to fully incorporate them into its algorithms, and therefore needs them to be on the edge, between digitality and what comes before or outside of digital.

These articles are followed by a talk. This section was introduced a few years ago with a contribution from Bob Hinshelwood (2017), and offers readers the opportunity to read a contribution from a significant colleague in the field talking, as it were, directly to us. In editing these contributions, we endeavour to do justice to them as a published article, while retaining the original tone of the talk.

In this contribution, we are pleased to present—and honour—the work of the recently retired British-American person-centred psychologist, Maureen O'Hara. In this talk, based on a presentation originally given to The First International Online Seminar on the Person-Centred Approach last October, O'Hara presents her vision of what she refers to as 'Academies of hope'. In it, she reminds us of the indefatigable commitment of Carl Rogers (with whom O'Hara worked closely for 20 years) to cultural transformation, humanisation, and peace. O'Hara suggests some defining aspects of the origin story of the person-centred approach, and critiques what she views as a certain retreat from these; and describes how this (original) cultural transformation project is still at work in the 21st century.

This issue concludes with a review by Erica Burman of the book *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* by Lara Sheehi and Stephen Sheehi. The review summarises this cutting-edge book that reviews the challenges of psychotherapeutic practice and training in the context of ongoing oppression and trauma in Palestine. The themes of psychic alienation, anti-colonial struggle, and the case histories and accounts from practitioners working at the front line make this review a compelling read which offers strong support for the book.

As ever, we hope that you, the reader, find these articles stimulating, and, especially if controversial, something to which you might want to offer a 'contra', opposing, different, or diverse view.

LOOKING FORWARD

As we have noted above, the next, generic issue will appear in August, following which we have a special issue on 'War, Trauma, and Refugees: Psychopolitical Responses', the call for which is as follows:

> Against the backdrop of the invasion of the Ukraine, this issue invites submissions from psychotherapists and those in allied 'psy' professions to consider the psychopolitics of war and its impact; present and intergenerational trauma; and the experience of being a refugee and/or working with refugees from war. This might include discussion of the terminology used in this field, for instance, regarding invasion rather than war, and 'forcibly displaced people' rather than 'refugees'. We are particularly interested in articles and other contributions – Controversial discussions, Talks, Notes from the Front Line, Reviews, Art and Poetry – about the differential treatment and different experience of people of colour in these situations and positions. The deadline for submissions is **31st July** and the issue will be published in November.

We are also planning ahead for issues next year and are considering special issues on gender, on neurodiversity, and on psychotherapy education and training, the call for papers for which will follow. Please feel free to submit articles for generic issues as well as these special issues.

REFERENCES

Ellis, E. (2022). Announcement. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, *20*(1&2). https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.02

Hinshelwood, R. D. (2017). Reflection or action: And never the twain shall meet. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, *27*(1). https://doi-org/10.1002/ppi.1401

Rodgers, B., & Tudor, K. (Eds.). (2017). The politics of psychotherapy research [Special issue]. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, *15*(3).

Totton, N. (2000). *Psychotherapy and politics*. Sage.

Tudor, K. (2021). Editorial. The 100th anniversary of Sigmund Freud's group psychology [Special issue]. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, *19*(3). https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1601

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–15
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.04

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Spheres and civilization: Plato's Aristophanes and Sigmund Freud's politics of the psyche

Dr Christopher Justin Brophy,* Assistant Professor, Providence College, Rhode Island, USA

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* draws heavily from the human origins myth of Plato's Aristophanes to expound his own political theory. More specifically, the politically relevant psychical conflicts that lie at the center of *Civilization and Its Discontents*—the desire to return to an earlier state of psychic existence, the erotic drive, and the death drive—find their original articulation and political application from Plato's Aristophanes as presented in the dialogue, *Symposium*. The exploration of connections between Freud's work and Plato's (1) shows how attuned ancient sources are to modern concerns; (2) increases our understanding of Freud's theories by providing a more substantial context for considering his work; and (3) offers the possibility of alternative answers to modern questions.

KEYWORDS: Plato; Freud; Aristophanes; myth; eros; politics; psyche

*Contact details: justin.brophy@providence.edu

In 'Joseph de Maistre's Civilization and Its Discontents', Graeme Garrard takes exception to Paul Roazen's claim that Sigmund Freud is the first political thinker to recognize the importance of the conflict between the psychic development of the individual and the development of civilization (Garrard, 1996). Garrard argues that Freud was not the first proponent of such a theory and explains the striking similarity of the opinions of Joseph de Maistre to those of Freud. Garrard's contribution is quite excellent, but the first proponent of this theory of psychical conflict belongs to Plato's Aristophanes in the dialogue, *Symposium*. The present essay shows that Plato's Aristophanes is the originator of the theory in question and that Freud draws directly from it in *Civilization and Its Discontents* to work out his own political thought.

Not only does Freud rely on Plato's Aristophanes in *Civilization* more than is typically supposed, but Freud also shows himself to be a qualified Socratic ally in his politics of the psyche. More specifically, the politically relevant psychical conflicts that lay at the center of *Civilization and Its Discontents*: the desire to return to an earlier psychic state, the erotic drive, and the death drive, find their original articulation and political application in Plato's Aristophanes. Despite the fact that Freud continually cites the speech of Aristophanes in his work, Freud's own belief that psychological relief is found by bringing to conscious understanding that which was previously unconscious finds deep affinity with the Socratic quest for self-knowledge. Freud, however, neglects to appeal to Socrates' speech since Socratic self-knowledge in *Symposium* relies on pursuit of a transcendent principle—the Beautiful, or the Good—the existence of which Freud denies. Thus, a consideration of Freud alongside Plato both properly contextualizes Freud's own theory while offering alternative resolutions to the existing tensions Freud recognizes between individual and society.

Freud's treatment of *Symposium* has not gone unnoticed in contemporary scholarship. However, the scholarship does not recognize the full extent to which Freud relies on Plato's Aristophanes, especially when it comes to the relationship between the psyche and society as presented in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Malcolm Bowie argues that Freud's use of *Symposium* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is purely instrumental: 'It is called upon to initiate, and confer respectability upon, a characteristic Freudian departure into theoretical reverie' (Bowie, 1987, p. 80). Tamise Van Pelt is interested in how both Freud and Lacan impose binaries onto Aristophanes' myth such that their readings impede Freud's revolutionary 'de-centering of the subject' (Van Pelt, 2000, p. 1). Stella Sandford offers the most pertinent and the most interesting treatment of the relationship between *Symposium* and Freud (Sanford, 2010). Among other textual connections, Sandford notices Freud's oblique reference to Plato's Aristophanes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Sandford, 2010, pp. 56–59). However, Sandford's concern is not with the political significance of Freud's appropriation of *Symposium*. She is concerned rather with the degree to which Freud imposes a 'modern natural-biological concept of sex' onto a more nuanced Platonic view (Sandford,

2010, p. 5). Sandford's research is not irrelevant to the present study, but it is not centered on the political dimension of Freud's work that the present piece seeks to address.

Even contemporary scholarship that focuses on Freud's political significance does not address the importance of Plato's Aristophanes for Freud's political views. Roazen's book *Freud: Political and Social Thought* mentions Plato a few times, but never explains the importance of Plato's *Symposium* to Freud's thinking (Roazen, 1968). In a more recent treatment, Roazen identifies the central psychical conflicts in *Civilization* and shows how they are responses to Wilhelm Reich, but he again fails to mention *Symposium* (Roazen, 2003). Mladen Dolar even uses the Platonic term, '*erōs*', to describe the Freudian conflicts presented in *Civilization*, but his work does not mention Aristophanes (Dolar, 2009). This essay seeks to fulfill this lacuna in the literature by (1) introducing Plato's Aristophanes by means of a brief exposition of his speech in *Symposium*; (2) detailing Freud's use of Plato's Aristophanes in his work; and (3) showing how *Civilization and Its Discontents* both follows the movement of Aristophanes' speech and comes to a quasi-Socratic conclusion with regards to the politics of the psyche.

PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM* AND ARISTOPHANES' SPEECH

We can date the symposium that is recounted in Plato's dialogue to 416 BCE. Agathon, a tragedian, is celebrating the victory of one of his plays at the Lenaia, an Athenian festival featuring dramatic competition. Several of the Athenian elite attend Agathon's party, including Aristophanes, the great comic poet, and Socrates. The attendees agree to make speeches in honor of the god, Erōs.

In all, the dialogue presents us with seven speeches in praise of love. These speeches run the gamut of attempting to describe, define, control, re-direct, and praise erōs. Perhaps the most famous speech of the seven, at least as famous as the speech of Socrates, is the one given by the comic poet, Aristophanes. Aristophanes, who speaks fourth, departs from the previous encomiasts by arguing that in order to understand erōs, it is necessary to first understand human nature. His speech then gives a myth of human origins that serves as the starting point for his exposition of erōs.

Aristophanes claims that if people truly understood the power of the god, Erōs, they would build their greatest altars to him and offer him their best sacrifices (Plato, ca. 385–370 B.C.E./1991, 189c; please note that all further references from this source cite the Stephanus number). Erōs is a physician whose ability to cure is the greatest happiness of human beings (189c–d). This claim is extraordinarily important for understanding Aristophanes' thinking, but in order to name erōs a 'cure', he must first explain what it is in human beings that requires such a cure. The language of 'cure' already opens possibilities for Freud's appropriation as we will soon see!

Aristophanes states that human nature was not always the way it is now (189d). First, there were three kinds of human beings, not just male and female, but also a combination of the two, the androgynous (189d–e). Aristophanes goes on to describe what humans were like in their original state: the shape of each human being was completely round, with back and sides in a circle, each had four arms and four legs, and two faces on a rounded neck. Each had two sets of sexual organs (190a). Aristophanes continues:

> It also traveled upright just as now, in whatever direction it wished; and whenever they took off in a swift run, they brought their legs around straight and somersaulted as tumblers do, and then, with eight limbs to support them, they rolled in a swift circle. (190a)

These aboriginal humans, Aristophanes explains, were terrible in strength and might and 'they had high thoughts and conspired against the gods' (190b). Aristophanes recounts that this attempt of the humans on heaven both failed and left the gods at a bit of a loss about what to do. On the one hand, if the gods were to wipe out the entire human race, then they would no longer have the devotion and sacrifices of humankind. On the other hand, they could not just let the deed go unpunished.

Luckily, for the gods, Zeus had a brilliant idea. Zeus surmises that if he were to cut down the strength of human beings by splitting them in two with his thunderbolts so that they have to walk on two legs instead of four, they would cease their rebellious behavior while continuing to exist (190c–d). Zeus warns that should the humans misbehave again, he will split them in half again so that they have to hop around on one leg (190d). This latter detail constitutes one of the few truly comic aspects of Aristophanes' ultimately tragic speech.

Zeus does as he says and uses his thunderbolts to cut the original humans into two. Additionally, he has Apollo turn their heads towards the wounds inflicted by the thunderbolts, sew them up, and smooth them over. However, Apollo leaves some of the marks behind. That way, every time human beings look at their stomachs and bellybuttons—where Apollo sewed up the wounds—they are reminded of their rebellion against the gods and subsequent punishment: 'But he [Apollo] left a few wrinkles around the belly and the navel, as a reminder of the ancient suffering' (191a). On first glance, it appears that Zeus has indeed managed to put humans in their place while also preserving the sacrifices that they offer to the gods. However, there is a problem with Zeus's plan. The natural form of human beings had been cut in two and each of the halves longed for the half that was now separate. So, these incomplete humans go around looking for their other half and then throw their arms around the other and attempt to join themselves back together into their original state. Aristophanes says that they started to die from hunger and laziness because all their time was taken up trying to get back to their original state (191a–b).

So, Zeus has to devise another plan. The new plan is to move the genitals of these fractured humans around to their new front-sides. That way, the attempt of the humans to weave together results in intercourse. While intercourse does not constitute a return to original

nature, it is a closer approximation than their current efforts to reunite (191c–d). For heterosexual couples, this arrangement allows them to beget and propagate the race. For same-sex couples, there is sexual release. Aristophanes relates, 'So Eros for each other is inborn in people from as long ago as that, and he unites their ancient nature, undertaking to make one from two, and to heal human nature' (191c–d). *Erōs* cures the wound of human nature because it reunites us, approximately, to our original nature. There is still more to Aristophanes' teaching on *erōs*.

'Each of us then', Aristophanes says, 'is a token of a human being, sliced like a flatfish, two from one; each then ever seeks his matching token' (191d). When a lover meets his or her particular half, 'they are then marvelously struck by friendship and kinship and Eros, and scarcely willing to be separated from each other even for a little time' (192b–c). Aristophanes gives us one of the most compelling definitions of love in all of literature: 'Eros then is a name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness' (192e–193a).

Finally, Aristophanes reminds his listeners that it is due to an injustice that humans have been split into two (193a). He gives further admonition, 'So there is fear that if we should not be well ordered towards the gods, we shall be split in two again…' (193a). Additionally, 'This is why all men should urge each other in all things to worship the gods, so we may escape this and meet with that, because Eros is our guide and general' (193a7–b2). It is by befriending the gods, rather than opposing them, that we are able to find our other half and have the opportunity to find some of the happiness that was our original nature (193b).

Here, Aristophanes has introduced a political dimension to his *encomium*. The hermeneutic of *erōs* is not complete in Aristophanes' speech without a statement of how humans should act in society, especially with reference to the gods. Aristophanes calls *erōs* 'leader' (*hegemōn*) and 'general' (*stratēgos*), signaling their importance for guiding both individuals and society. Theological claims about human behavior with respect to the gods can never be separated from political concerns in a Platonic dialogue. Socrates was put to death because of the political effects of his alleged teaching of youths to disbelieve in the gods of the city. The primary message of Aristophanes' speech seen in this context is: obey the gods and find your happiness in human relationships which can approximate original nature. The message is reinforced by threat of future punishment.

Plato's Aristophanes offers us a principle for political organization centered around fear of the gods and fear of being severed yet again. We can surmise that Aristophanes believes both that a healthy piety and respect for traditional arrangements is politically necessary. If we were to look at the historical Aristophanes, we would find that his criticisms of Socrates, found in his own *Clouds* and recounted by Plato in *Apology*, cohere remarkably with Plato's presentation of Aristophanes in *Symposium*. In *Clouds*, Aristophanes accuses Socrates of corrupting the youth and undermining the gods of the city. This is not insignificant because it

suggests that the historical Aristophanes sees a tension between the practice of philosophy and the maintenance of the *polis*.

Given the fraught relationship between the historical Aristophanes and Socrates, it is only reasonable to juxtapose in *Symposium* Aristophanes' myth with Socrates' speech in favor of the practice of philosophy to show the difference in approach between these two figures. While a comparison of the speeches of Aristophanes and Socrates would constitute material for an entirely new article, it is important to show here that there is something about Socrates' philosophical pedagogy that Aristophanes thinks is a threat to political stability. If Plato's *Symposium* is in any way a response to the charges of Aristophanes against Socrates—and this seems exceedingly likely given the appearance of Alcibiades, one of the 'corrupted youth' at the end of the dialogue—then the dialogue should be seen at least in part as a defense of Socratic dialectic.

We should not conclude, however, that although Plato's Aristophanes takes a decided political position that he does not recognize the psychical tensions at play. Aristophanes does not call explicit attention to the tensions, but they are there for the careful reader to discover.

Aristophanes proposes that *erōs* is the cure for the wound of human nature. In his view, human woundedness is due to a mode of existence that is different from that of our original nature. This new mode of existence is due to a just punishment inflicted on us by the gods. *Erōs* is curative because it moves us in such a way as to give us a close approximation of our original nature, in which state we are happy and content. The problem with Aristophanes' interpretation of his own myth is that it cannot account for the original humans' assault on the heavens. Aristophanes tells us of the original humans, 'they had high thoughts and conspired against the gods' (190b). However, if they were happy and contented in their original nature, what moved them to have such 'high thoughts?' Of what would such thoughts consist for a being who is already happy?

It would seem that what Aristophanes describes as wholeness is not a wholeness at all, but just a state without *erōs*. *Erōs* may aid human beings in bringing them back to their original nature, but it would seem—on Aristophanes' own account!—that there is another drive at work within those original humans who seek to displace the gods: an aggressive or violent drive. The sexual satisfaction that *erōs* offers human beings approximates original nature and so offers some succor for human beings, but it cannot fully account for the violent drive that moves the original humans to rebel against the gods. Aristophanes' myth gives a hermeneutic for understanding *erōs*, but rather than using the same myth—or another myth—to comprehend the violent desire of original humans, Aristophanes uses it as a warning and mode of imparting fear on his hearers.

'Of what would such thoughts consist for a being who is already happy?' It appears that Aristophanes believes that this question is one that should not be asked—at least publicly—for the sake of the political order. Aristophanes calls to our attention a tension between

human desires (both erotic and violent) and politics and seems to abandon the tension in favor of political order. Not only does Aristophanes abandon consideration of this tension, but his myth, through its threat of punishment, serves as a deterrent to renewed critical inquiry. Jonathan Lear writes, 'This absorption in the purely human realm serves as a distraction from any tendency to strive for the transcendent. "'Eros' is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete" (129e)' (Lear, 1998/1999, p. 152). We can conclude that central to Aristophanes' account is the conflict between the development of the individual and that of society—the exact conflict central to the account in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Whereas Aristophanes indicates that the effects of human drives need to be moderated, Freud is not so sure.

SIGMUND FREUD AS READER OF PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

Aristophanes' methodology, his understanding of the internal forces of human nature, and his conclusions regarding the tensions between human desire and political society all anticipate Sigmund Freud's political reflections. Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, fleshes out Aristophanes' suggestions and, I argue, expounds a political philosophy that takes to heart the implications of Aristophanes' myth. I am not arguing that Freud's is a model of what a fully developed Aristophanean political philosophy looks like—I imagine there are numerous possibilities, and, as I argue, while Freud draws mainly from Aristophanes, he ultimately shows himself to be a kind of Socratic ally. Here, I am mainly interested to show that Freud presents us with a useful interpretation and fleshing out of the principles in Aristophanes' speech.

Before comparing Aristophanes' thought to that of Freud, I first want to show clearly that Freud had internalized *Symposium* as an interlocutor. A look at Strachey's index (Freud, 1954) shows that Freud cites Plato 14 times in his corpus. The full list of citations is in the *Standard Edition* (*SE*) IV: 67; V: 620; VII: 134, 136 *n*; VIII: 79 *n*. 1; X: 240 *n*. 2; XVIII: 57–8, 58 *n*. 1, 91; XIX, 218; XX: 24; XXI: 210; XXII: 209, and XXIII: 149 *n*. 1. Most of these citations refer to *Symposium*. Of these, Aristophanes' is the speech most cited from the dialogue. (Note that all further citations from this source are in this article referred to as *SE*.)

The most important of these citations are from 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' (1921), 'The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis' (1924/1925), and 'Why War?' (1932/1933) (as cited in Freud, 1954). Freud's use of *Symposium* in these works spanning 28 years show his constant return to the dialogue. In the preface to the fourth edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud writes, 'Anyone who looks down with contempt upon psycho-analysis from a superior vantage-point should remember how closely the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato' (*SE* VII, p. 134). He then states in the actual work, 'The popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic

fable which tells how the original human beings were cut up into two halves—man and woman—and how these are always striving again to unite in love' (*SE* VII, p. 136). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud explains that human sexuality traces 'the origin of an instinct *to a need to restore an earlier state of things*' (*SE* XVIII, p. 57). He goes on to reference Aristophanes explicitly, 'What I have in mind is, of course, the theory which Plato puts into the mouth of Aristophanes in this *Symposium*, and which deals not only with the *origin* of the sexual instinct but also with the most important of its variations in relation to its object.' Freud goes on to cite the speech, particularly how Zeus severed the original humans. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud states, 'In its origin, function, and relation to sexual love, the 'Eros' of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psycho-analysis…' (*SE* XVIII, p. 91). In 'The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis', Freud decries equating 'sexuality' with 'genital pleasure' and writes, 'it had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-preserving Eros of Plato's *Symposium*' (*SE* XIX, p. 218). Finally, in his letter in response to Albert Einstein, called 'Why War?', Freud writes,

> According to our hypothesis human instincts are of only two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite—which we call 'erotic', exactly in the sense in which Plato uses the word 'Eros' in his *Symposium*, or 'sexual', with a deliberate extension of the popular conception of 'sexuality'—and those which seek to destroy and kill which we group together as the aggressive or destructive instinct. (*SE* XXII, p. 209)

Freud never directly cites *Symposium* in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, but the influence of Aristophanes is clear. In the fourth part of *Civilization*, Freud discusses how society restrains erotic desire through law which defines what constitutes an acceptable sexual relationship. To defend his view that monogamous, heterosexual relationships are not normative by nature, but only by custom, Freud writes in a footnote, 'Man is an animal organism with (like others) an unmistakably bisexual disposition. The individual corresponds to a fusion of two symmetrical halves, of which, according to some investigators, one is purely male and the other female' (*SE* XXI, p. 105 *n.* 3). Despite a misinterpretation of Aristophanes' original humans—some were androgynous—it is clear that 'some investigators' must be Aristophanes. Later in part V, while discussing the role of *erōs* in civilization, Freud writes, 'In no other case does Eros so clearly betray the core of his being, his purpose of making one out of more than one; but when he has achieved this in the proverbial way through the love of two human beings, he refuses to go further' (*SE* XXI, p. 108). This might as well have been directly lifted from Aristophanes' speech. That Freud read and internalized Aristophanes is clear. However, listing Freud's relevant citations—including indirect references—to *Symposium* does not tell the complete tale of the dialogues' profound influence. It is only after we flesh out Freud's political thought in *Civilization* that we can fully understand the deep connections.

FREUD'S POLITICAL THOUGHT AS THINKING THROUGH *SYMPOSIUM*

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud follows the general trajectory of Plato's Aristophanes. He begins by stating that humans have a state of original nature to which they seek return, posits the existence both of *erōs* and a death instinct that together create a fundamental tension in civilized society, and explains that the decisive step towards civilization is curbing individual instinct for the sake of community. Guilt is the price for living in civilized society.

In *Civilization* sections I and II, Freud attempts to explain the source of religious feeling. He surmises that the root of religious sentiment is not in an 'oceanic feeling' of original wholeness *pace* his friend, Romain Rolland, but rather in a return to the state of the undifferentiated ego. A child at the mother's breast does not differentiate between its ego and other external objects. Rather, the growing awareness of these distinctions is the process of human development. For Freud, distinguishing between the ego and the object is 'the first step towards the introduction of the reality principle which is to dominate future development' (*SE* XXI, p. 67). The past life of the mind can never be completely forgotten and while all may not share the religious feeling (Freud claims he does not), all humans have the experience of helplessness and desire for the protection of the father.

Freud is very clear that the best approximation of our pre-differentiated state is the experience of being in love. In section I, Freud states that, 'At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away. Against all evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'you' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact' (*SE* XXI, p. 66). In section II, after listing various causes of human suffering and various means that offer succor, Freud writes about the best succor of all, 'And perhaps it does in fact come nearer to this goal than any other method. I am, of course, speaking of the way of life which makes love the centre of everything, which looks to all satisfaction in loving and being loved' (*SE* XXI, p. 82). Freud begins his inquiry in the same manner as Aristophanes. Both posit an original nature for human beings and then argue that the best process by which to face our desire for protection and happiness—our original state—is to fall in love. In fact, Lear notes that Aristophanes' grounding of the erotic in human affairs is simply that which Freud called 'transference': 'For transference just is human love life as it manifests itself in the social realm' (Lear, 1998/1999, p. 152).

After arguing that nothing does more to collapse the boundaries between ego and object than loving another, Freud states,

> The science of aesthetics investigates the conditions under which things are felt as beautiful, but it has been unable to give any explanation of the nature and origin of beauty, and, as usually happens, lack of success is concealed beneath a flood of resounding and empty words…. All that seems certain is its derivation from the field of sexual feeling. The love of beauty seems a perfect example of an impulse inhibited by its aim. 'Beauty' and 'attraction' are originally attributes of the sexual object. (*SE* XXI, p. 82–83)

This is a significant passage. Freud sees the concept of beauty originating in a sexual object. He does not seem to think that beauty can lead to any kind of real transcendent experience, and he certainly does not suggest that there is a form of Beauty to which one can ascend—both claims that Socrates makes in his own *Symposium* speech. Rather, Freud seems to be much more in line with Plato's Aristophanes in thinking that *erōs* comes to rest in human relationships. To cite Lear again, the aim of Freudian psychoanalysis 'is not to leave the human realm behind but to get deeper into it…. Whatever 'higher' or 'deeper' meanings there may be, they do not transcend human life, but lie immanent in it' (Lear, 1998/1999, p. 166). The significance of this position becomes clear as we consider further Freud's work.

Freud goes on to argue that *erōs* is not the only drive at work in human beings. In sections IV and V, Freud shows how *erōs* is used to eventually serve the ends of human civilization, but also points out that there exists an aggressive drive in human beings that works against the unifying nature of *erōs* (*SE* XXI, p. 112–114). In section VI of *Civilization*, Freud names this natural aggression as a 'death instinct' and thus puts his finger on the very central conflict that Plato's Aristophanes articulates in his myth but does not adequately address. Namely, whereas Aristophanes does not ask probing questions about why humans in a state of original wholeness rebel against the gods, Freud posits that there exists in humans both a death instinct as well as *erōs* which cannot be easily quelled.

We have to pause here and appreciate how Freud has thought out Aristophanes' original conundrum. As we saw earlier, Aristophanes sees different sets of desires in human beings. On the one hand, *erōs* manifests itself in the desire to be with our other half, both physically and spiritually. On the other hand, Aristophanes sees a violent desire in original humanity to storm the heavens and overthrow the gods—a desire that he thinks is clearly destructive for society. However, Aristophanes does not spend the same amount of time discussing the desire to overthrow the gods as he does discussing *erōs*. It seems to be Aristophanes' political strategy not to call attention to this violent desire and instead emphasize union with one's other half as the best approximation of original nature. This makes sense. Politically, it is more efficacious to emphasize the desire that can find some legitimate succor in human relationships, but better to use a myth that implores obedience than probes the depths of the violent desires. However, it is also clear that Aristophanes takes issue with the pursuit of truth that Socrates undertakes and in which pursuit Socrates encourages the young—perhaps because Plato's Aristophanes thinks that this will lead to the kind of inquiry that he seeks to avoid and that may lead to political instability.

I have no direct evidence that Freud explicitly derived his concept of the death drive from the conflict in Aristophanes' speech. I have shown that Freud had read and cited Aristophanes' speech before he first spoke about the death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (indeed, one of the works where he cites Aristophanes). It is fair to say that Freud, either consciously or unconsciously, appropriates the unresolved tension in Aristophanes' myth and attempts to deal with it by positing another drive in addition to *erōs*, the aggressive

drive. At the same time, Freud hedges his bets a bit as he is very much aware that the death instinct is closely related to *erōs* and in some cases even subsumed under it (e.g., *SE* XXI, pp. 117, 119). It would be a mistake therefore to draw too strong a divide between these two forces. Nevertheless, Freud ultimately concludes that while 'civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind', the aggressive instinct works against *erōs*. Freud says, 'And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species' (*SE* XXI, p. 122).

For Freud, the question of whether civilization is a good thing for human beings is one that is not settled. Freud states quite early in the course of his inquiry that it is a mistake to presume upon the goodness of civilization (*SE* XXI, p. 86–87). One of the reasons Freud takes such a stance is because of the repression against individual drives that is the necessary work of civilization. Freud declares regarding civilization, 'The essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such restrictions' (*SE* XXI, p. 95). Civilization, he argues, is not for the perfection of humans, but quite possibly the opposite. Freud eventually goes so far as to say:

> The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as a need for punishment. Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city. (*SE* XXI, p. 123–124)

Guilt is the price human beings must pay for living in civilized society. The individual must be restricted in important ways in order for society to function.

This closely aligns with the lesson of Aristophanes' myth. Aristophanes praises *erōs* by stating how he brings us as close to our original nature as far as possible, but his speech does not finish on this high note. The *encomium* does not end with the beautiful definition of *erōs* as our universal longing for completion. Rather, we are left with an admonition and threat of future violence. If we do not restrain ourselves, we will be punished again by Zeus. Aristophanes' myth makes our very bodies a token of shame. When we look down at our bellies, we are reminded of our disobedience and subsequent punishment by the gods. The reminder of guilt prevents us from making the same mistake twice.

So far, we are able to see how Freud's work on political theory closely follows the movement of Aristophanes' speech in *Symposium*. Both begin with a statement about human origins, both point out a fundamental tension that *erōs* and a violent instinct bring to societal existence, and both conclude that guilt is the price of living in civilized society. We also see how closely related Freud's two primordial human instincts are to the fundamental erotic

tension in Aristophanes' speech. However, there is also a significant difference in the political thinking of these two figures.

Plato's Aristophanes sees a problematic tension with *erōs*, crafts a myth such that a careful reader will see the tension, but ultimately concludes his speech by not calling explicit attention to the tension and proposing a solution to that tension which he knows is not a fully adequate 'cure'. Freud, on the other hand, explicitly calls attention to this all-important tension and even intensifies it by positing a separate death instinct in opposition to the life instinct of *erōs*. The question remains, 'What is the upshot of explicitly naming the conflict inherent in human nature rather than alluding to it in myth?'

Freud has no issues in explicitly naming the conflict between the aggressive and erotic desires and explaining civilization's repression of them precisely because he is comfortable with leaving the question of civilization's goodness ambiguous. Aristophanes, on the other hand, is much more circumspect because he has decided the question in favor of civilization. Aristophanes is concerned with the preservation of the *polis*. The ultimate purpose of his myth is to promote stability and order through fear and shame. It is not Socrates' philosophical dialectic that promotes the *polis*, but rather Aristophanes' civic myth. Indeed, it is clear that the historical Aristophanes thought that the works were politically efficacious. We need only to look to the *parabasis* of *Clouds* where the leading cloud, speaking for Aristophanes, explains how he was responsible for the downfall of the tyrant, Cleon, and how he, more than any of the other gods aids the *polis* (Aristophanes, ca. 423 BCE/1998, pp. 535–579). Aristophanes wants to praise *erōs* and show its capacity for healing, but his speech leaves ambiguous the role of a violent desire in the original humans' downfall. He allows his myth to instill fear and to admonish the listener to act well lest he anger the gods.

I can now show how Freud is a qualified Socratic ally. Since Freud is not convinced that civilization is an unrestricted good for the individual human, he allows for humans to find modes of expression in the face of civilization's repression of instinct. Freud writes,

> Other instincts are induced to displace the conditions for their satisfaction, to lead them into other paths…. Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life. If one were to yield to a first impression, one would say that sublimation is a vicissitude which has been forced upon the instincts entirely by civilization. (*SE* XXI, p. 97)

For Freud, the repression of human instincts by civilization leads to higher psychical activities. Although he does not use the language of 'repression' or 'sublimation', the speaker to immediately follow Aristophanes in *Symposium*, Agathon, speaks of the higher activities for which *erōs* is responsible. Agathon claims, 'Eros is a poet who is, in sum, good in respect to all creation over which the Muses preside' (196e). Agathon goes on to point out that each of the gods who are responsible for a particular *technē*, are inspired by *erōs*. Apollo invents

archery, medicine, and divination; the Muses, music; Hephaestus, smithing; and Athena, weaving. Each of these gods and goddesses produces these things 'under the guidance of eros and desire' (197a). Even Zeus, 'in guiding of gods and men', is inspired by *erōs* to practice his craft (197b). Agathon has a very strong sense of the power of erotic love to inspire human beings (and even gods!) to higher 'psychical activities'. Whereas Aristophanes emphasizes human longing in his speech and the necessity of *erōs* to lead human beings towards a state resembling original nature, Agathon emphasizes human fullness and ability in all the arts and sciences. For Agathon, *erōs* is responsible for this fullness and therefore deserves praise and honor. For Socrates, *erōs* finds an outlet in philosophy which leads to a vision of the Good.

Socrates, who in his own speech describes an orderly ascent of *erōs* to the Good, or Beautiful, itself, attempts to reconcile these two proclivities of Aristophanes and Agathon. We see this first in Socrates' own myth that describes *erōs* as the offspring of poverty and resource (203b–204c). *Erōs* is a mix between human longing and human fullness. Among other things, this description of *erōs* is a thinly veiled attempt by Plato to personify Socrates *qua* man and *qua* philosopher as *erōs*. The man is roughshod but gives beautiful speeches. The philosopher is full of love for the wisdom that they can never fully possess.

Against this backdrop, we can better understand the 'ladder of love' portion of Socrates' speech (208e–210e). The passage begins with the recognition that some are pregnant in respect to their bodies and others in respect to their souls. When one is pregnant in soul and reaches the age when he might beget, he seeks the beautiful in whom to beget (209a8–b2). More specifically, the pregnant man 'is straightaway resourceful in speaking about virtue and what sort of thing the good man must be concerned with and his pursuits; and he undertakes to educate him' (209b–c). The ascent through love of bodies, then souls, then purposive practices and laws, then wisdom, then the Beautiful itself takes place against the backdrop of education. That is to say, erotic ascent takes place against the backdrop of Socratic dialectic. Whereas Aristophanes' mythical education instills fear, Socrates' dialectic education constitutes an ascent to the divine—just like the aboriginal humans who sought to displace the gods!

However, Socrates does not haphazardly promote a form of inquiry that is politically dangerous, at least according to Plato. *En route* to the vision of the Good, the potential philosopher learns to appreciate 'purposive practices and laws' on the one hand, and 'wisdom' on the other (209e–210e). Socrates recognizes, *pace* Aristophanes, the importance of both societal order and the individual pursuit of the Good. How else are we to understand this figure who features prominently both in *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, dialogues that treat, respectively, moral formation and erotic ascent? In Freudian language, the balance is more ambivalent. Does Socrates teach one to simultaneously repress and sublimate?

A Freudian interpretation of the Socratic balance between Aristophanes and Agathon is another study altogether. What is clear now is that Freud draws inspiration from the speech

of Aristophanes and the tension in Aristophanes' myth is at the center of Freud's own political thinking. However, it is also clear that Freud is a Socratic ally in the sense that he recognizes the importance of the higher psychical activities and the attempt at coming to a greater self-knowledge. Surely, Freud would not join Aristophanes in his skepticism about Socrates and the potential upending of the traditional order through the practice of philosophy. In fact, Freud's entire therapeutic method seeks to bring to light that which remains repressed. Aristophanes deflects and represses; Socrates and Freud philosophize or psychologize precisely to come to greater knowledge.

At the same time, Freud is only a Socratic ally in a qualified manner. This qualification is twofold. First, Freud is much more circumspect about the goodness of civilization than Socrates. While it is certainly true that Socrates throughout Plato's dialogues calls into question many of the traditional beliefs of ancient Athens, he certainly spends a lot of time talking about the ideal form of government. As briefly explained above, Socrates at least recognizes a tension between the pursuit of philosophy and the political good, but he thinks the tension itself is necessary— something one need navigate. This is not necessarily the case for Freud.

Second, for Socrates, *erōs* clearly has a transcendent object: the Good, or the Beautiful. As I showed earlier, Freud does not put any stock in such a transcendent object. Therefore, we need admit an important difference between the two thinkers on this point. When Allen surmises that Freud conflates the views of Socrates and Plato's Aristophanes because Freud cites Aristophanes' speech exclusively, I wonder if Freud simply understands the difference between these two speakers but does not wish to entangle himself with a Socratic erotic ascent that ends in admiration of a transcendent form (Plato, ca. 385–370 B.C.E./1991, pp. 31–32). This seems to me a much more likely explanation.

It is clear from our study that Aristophanes plays a very active role in Sigmund Freud's political thought. *Civilization and Its Discontents* follows the movement of Aristophanes' speech in *Symposium*, takes up the central conflict of that speech as the central conflict of individuals living in civilization, and ultimately comes to a conclusion more in line with the thinking of Socrates than of Aristophanes. The study as a whole shows the political importance of *Symposium*, a dialogue not often considered for its significance to political theory. It also reveals the debt of Freud to Plato and shows that while Freud's theories of the unconscious break new ground in the work of political theory, Freud nonetheless takes perennial political problems as the starting point for his own work.

REFERENCES

Aristophanes. (1998). *Clouds* in *Four Texts on Socrates* (T. G. West and G. S. West, Trans.).

Cornell University Press. (Original work published ca. 423 BCE)
Bowie, M. (1987). *Freud, Proust, and Lacan: Theory as fiction*. Cambridge University Press.
Dolar, M. (2009). Freud and the political. *Theory & Event, 12*(3). https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.0.0085
Freud, S. (1954). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (J. Strachey, Ed. & Trans.). Hogarth Press.
Garrard, G. (1996). Joseph de Maistre's Civilization and its Discontents. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *57*(3), 429–446. https://doi.org/10.2307/3653948
Lear, J. (1999). *Open minded: Working out the logic of the soul*. Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1998)
Plato. (1991). *The dialogues of Plato: The Symposium, vol. 2* (R. E. Allen, Trans.). Yale University Press. (Original work published ca. 385–370 B.C.E.)
Roazen, P. (1968). *Freud: Political and social thought*. Alfred A. Knopf.
Roazen, P. (2003). Freud and his followers. In T. Ball and R. Bellamy (Eds.), *The Cambridge history of twentieth-century political thought* (pp. 392–411). Cambridge University Press.
Sandford, S. (2010). *Plato and sex*. Polity.
Van Pelt, T. (2000). *The other side of desire: Lacan's theory of the registers*. SUNY Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Justin Brophy is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Providence College in Rhode Island, USA. He earned his doctorate in Political Theory from the University of Notre Dame (South Bend, Indiana) in 2020. His areas of research include Ancient and Contemporary political theory, the role of desire in human action, and philosophical conceptions of the psyche. He is especially interested in bringing the wisdom of ancient texts to bear on questions of contemporary importance.

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–23
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.05

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

The psychoanalytic critique of capitalism: Elements for an overview

Dr Julien-François Gerber,* Assistant Professor, International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article provides a preliminary overview of the psychoanalytic critique of capitalism. It aims to fortify the recent psychoanalytic turn in—or return to—the study of capitalism and its alternatives. After identifying the main approaches to the psychoanalytic study of the economy, I present some of the key critical contributions along four broad thematic streams: libidinal repression ('Eros'), repetition compulsion ('Thanatos'), hedonistic will to power ('Ahriman'), and narcissistic rationalising ('Lucifer'). The Ahriman/Lucifer pair is proposed here as a new coupling able to capture wide-ranging trends in this literature. Over time, debates have changed in emphases and concepts, but a large part of the core questions has remained the same and as relevant as ever. While there have been complementarities as well as disagreements between the different contributions, the psychoanalytic study of the economy has regrettably never formed a self-conscious field of inquiry, something that this article seeks to remedy.

KEYWORDS: alienation; death drive; hedonism; money; consumption; economics

*Contact details: gerber@iss.nl

INTRODUCTION

> Economy without active emotional human structure is inconceivable; so is human feeling, thinking and acting without economic basis. One-sided neglect of one or the other leads to [either] psychologism [or] economism. (Wilhelm Reich, 1930, p. 27).

What follows is an attempt to systematise the psychoanalytic critique of capitalism. The objective is to reinforce the contemporary 'psychoanalytic turn' in—or return to—the study of capitalism and its alternatives. This return is, for example, visible in the number of recent conferences or panels on the libidinal economy, in the growing influence of Lacanian thought on capitalism, or in the political turn within Jungian studies. The common thread revolves around questions like: What is the mental 'infrastructure' of capitalism? How are we socialised into it and what are its psychological costs? Why does capitalism have this grip on so many of us? How does the economy condition us? Or vice versa, how do we unconsciously shape and support it? Additionally, by extension, as David Graeber (2004, p. 75) puts it, 'what, precisely, are the possible dimensions of non-alienated experience?'—the supreme question of critical theory.

In mapping these issues, my goal is to start addressing the lack of overviews on the psychoanalysis of capitalism. Economic questions continue to be surprisingly conspicuous by their absence in major surveys of psychoanalysis in the social sciences (e.g., Elliott & Prager, 2016), although Yannis Stavrakakis's (2019) recent edited volume has a short entry on capitalism from a Lacanian perspective. This neglect is unfortunate because economic problems—due to their enormous influence and often dire consequences on people and the planet—are more than ever in need of being understood at a deeper level. To be sure, it is not that psychoanalysing capitalism has never been done. There have been many important contributions as we shall see, but the psychoanalytic study of capitalism has never formed a self-conscious field of inquiry. Worst, most contributions are disconnected from each other, and often fragmented in closed theoretical boxes. The Freudo-Marxian, Lacanian, and Jungian approaches—the major perspectives used so far to examine capitalism—have largely evolved independently and with minimal cross-fertilisation. Language barriers cannot be a good explanation, even if it is true that important works are, for example, only available in German or French (two languages included in the present overview). The purpose of this article is thus to encourage dialogues within this 'field', in the hope that a more integrated psychoanalytic critique of capitalism might someday emerge, sooner rather than later.

Let us start by briefly clarifying a few terms in the most basic ways. A psychoanalytic approach to capitalism includes but goes deeper than purely cognitive methodologies because it takes in the unconscious. It posits, whatever its lineage, (i) that the (politico-economic) context of childhood is pivotal in shaping adult (politico-economic) personalities; (ii) that the conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche interact dynamically and often conflictingly, depending on the (politico-economic) contexts; and (iii) that individuals and groups alleviate these conflicts with various mechanisms that have important (politico-

economic) consequences. Many psychoanalytic critics of capitalism would add that (iv) an appropriate (politico-economic) transformation would help foster individual and collective healing and flourishing.

The political economy is where processes of appropriation, production, consumption, distribution, and waste take place, as constrained by needs, wants, power, institutions, technology, labour, and natural resources. Evidently, these phenomena are not only studied by economics, but also by a variety of disciplines among which psychoanalysis can play an important role. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the economy is much more complex than what economists tend to see. It has powerful unconscious and symbolic dimensions; it is a reality associated with desire, fears, fantasies, sexuality, individuation, death. As it deals with these loaded notions, psychoanalysis has often been dismissed for being 'non-scientific': it is undeniably deeply hermeneutic, not easily quantifiable, and therefore more delicate and complex than cognitive approaches. However, it seems that ever more social scientists (and even economists) are dissatisfied with the exterior-oriented reductionism of standard socioeconomic and cognitive explanations.

Yet, overall, social scientists working on economic questions have only rarely used psychoanalytic insights. I can only regret that the late Neil Smelser, a father figure of economic sociology and a fully trained psychoanalyst, never elaborated any 'psychoanalytic economic sociology' apart from occasional writings in an Eriksonian perspective (e.g., Smelser, 1998). The same applies to his famous doctoral supervisor, Talcott Parsons, who was also trained in psychoanalysis. Similarly, very few economists have spoken favourably of psychoanalysis, although some of the most influential ones have, like Joseph Schumpeter and John Maynard Keynes. Schumpeter believed that psychoanalysis had 'vast possibilities of application to … economics' (1954, pp. 41–42) and Keynes was notoriously fascinated by psychoanalysis (Dostaler & Maris, 2009; Winslow, 1986). In a very psychoanalytic way, he wrote that 'the essential characteristic of capitalism' is its 'dependence upon an intense appeal to the money-making and money-loving instincts of individuals as the main motive force of the economic machine' (Keynes, 1931/1980, p. 292). Psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic writers, for their part, have frequently mentioned economic questions, but virtually never in any systematic ways.

In this article, I focus on the psychoanalytic *critique* of capitalism and, therefore, largely leave aside the managerial literature on the psychoanalysis of companies, marketing, and finance. This article is divided into two sections: the first one presents the main historical and contemporary psychoanalytic approaches to economic questions; the second one discusses what I see as the four main thematic streams of the psychoanalytic critique of capitalism.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PSYCHOANALYSIS OF CAPITALISM

Beginnings

Sigmund Freud was keen on applying his ideas to economic questions (Birken, 1999). He famously compared the mental 'economy' with a business enterprise, whereby the libido (i.e., the life energy or 'Eros') is a form of currency that can be variously saved, profitably invested, spent in sexual pleasure, or locked up unproductively in neurosis like a sleeping asset (Bennett, 2016). In mainstream neoclassical economics, he demolished the model of the rational and well-informed *Homo economicus* and assumed instead misinformation about oneself as the needed starting point. It is emotions and unconscious desires, he argued, that are the key moving forces behind human behaviours; and this is also true in the economy where Keynes's notion of 'animal spirits' could be seen as a psychoanalytic counterpoint to *Homo economicus* (Sedláček, 2013). In Marxist economics, Freud criticised the dominance of economic factors over psychological ones in determining behaviours but he was open to the possibility of combining psychoanalysis and Marxism: 'If anyone were in a position to show in detail how these different [economic and psychological] factors [interconnect], then he would not only have improved Marxism but would have made it into a true social science' (Freud, 1933/1964, p. 239).

In his early writings, Freud conceptualised human beings as conflicted between, on one hand, their libidinal energy rooted in the *id* and seeking pleasure, play, and love—what he called the 'pleasure-principle'—and, on the other hand, the 'reality-principle' that Freud often conceptualised as the constraints of the economy. The essence of the *ego*, accordingly, lies in the repressed desires unable to be fulfilled in the harshness of economic reality, which is partly reflected in the *superego*'s prohibitions and injunctions. In Freud's own words,

> the ego, driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, repulsed by reality, struggles to master its economic task of bringing about harmony … If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness it breaks out in anxiety—realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the super-ego and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id. (1933/1964, p. 61)

From 1920 onwards, however, Freud moved away from the antithesis of the 'erotic' versus the 'economic', and emphasised something much more troubling: the clash between Eros and the 'death drive' (or Thanatos, although he himself never used the term). The idea of the death drive arose from the observation that some patients had no desire to be cured and even persistently re-enacted their past traumatic experiences. Thanatos thus came to refer to the self-destructive tendency of repeating trauma, loss, and failure; an experience that provides some kind of satisfaction to the subject but no pleasure per se. It could be understood as an impulse directed at getting rid of all tensions and at attaining total inactivity and rest. Freud called it the 'Nirvana-principle'; a principle with far-reaching economic implications as we see below.

Early Psychoanalytic Take on Money

Some of the early followers of Freud wrote on economic questions and their main concern was the psychoanalysis of money (e.g., Fenichel, 1938; Ferenczi, 1914/1952). For them as for Freud, the connection between money and faecal matter was deeply rooted in our psyche: 'Wherever archaic modes of thought predominate or have persisted … money comes into the closest relation with excrement' (Freud, 1908/1964, p. 174). Géza Róheim (1923) noted that in his Melanesian field site, the shells used as money are also called 'excrements of the sea', and Ernest Borneman (1976) found hundreds of German and English expressions linking money and defecation. This connection—so it was hypothesised by early Freudians—goes back to the infant's first relations and sensations, as we see below relying on more recent takes. In this initial framework, the accumulation of money was interpreted as a form of retention originating in the child's excessive toilet training and associated with a personality type allegedly well-adapted to capitalist societies—the 'anal character'—marked by its tidiness, parsimony, and discipline.

Broadening of the Psychoanalytic Study of Capitalism

This group of early psychoanalysts had four prominent 'outliers' of Austrian origin also working on economic questions (Table 1). On the political right, two of them had a profound influence on the management of capitalism in the 20th century, Edward Bernays and Ernest Dichter. Bernays, Freud's nephew, pioneered the field of public relations and propaganda and applied psychoanalytic tools to the benefit of tobacco and banana companies among many others (Bernays, 1955). Dichter, for his part, founded the field of marketing and launched the application of Freudian techniques to the study of consumer behaviour and the advertising industry (Dichter, 1960). This psychoanalytic tradition is still alive (e.g., Samuel, 2010) and not limited to Freudian insights. Carl Jung's ideas have also been used by pro-marketers who have tried to use 'deep metaphors' (archetypes) to influence consumers (e.g., Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008).

On the radical left, the anarchist psychoanalyst Otto Gross was the very first author who used Freud's ideas to criticise capitalism and suggest more healthy alternatives based on an early form of feminism and sexual liberation (Heuer, 2016). Not dissimilarly, the radical psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich elaborated the first attempt at reconciling psychoanalysis and Marxism (Boadella, 1973). Like Gross, Reich realised that individual therapy will always remain limited unless coupled with broader societal changes. In particular, he argued that the traditional model of the patriarchal and authoritarian family was the veritable 'factory' of reactionary ideology and structures: this model represses and often brutalises sexuality and ends up supporting the entire politico-economic structure of capitalism. He called his approach 'sex-economy', thereby highlighting that both sexual and economic liberation are

Table 1. ***Main Approaches to the Psychoanalytic Critique of Capitalism***

	Key figures	Influences	Key ideas on capitalism
Radical mavericks (1900s–1950s)	Gross, Reich	Freud, Marx, Kropotkin	The patriarchal family supports capitalism; emotional and politico-economic liberation pair
Freudians on money (1910s–1930s)	Abraham, Ferenczi, Fenichel, Jones, Róheim, Schilder	Freud	Money-related behaviours can be linked to the individual's psychosexual development
Frankfurt school (1930s–)	Fromm, Marcuse; at large: Jappe, Rosa, and many others	Marx, Hegel, Freud, Reich	Capitalism causes repression and generates alienation: 'one-dimensionality' (Marcuse) and capitalist 'social characters' (Fromm)
Tavistock Institute (1947–)	Bion, Rustin, Richards	Freud, Klein	Organisations have an unconscious life that can be psychoanalysed and healed
Post-structuralist mavericks (1970s)	Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Goux	Marx, Freud, Lacan	Any economic system is always both political and libidinal; alienation is thus a fiction (Lyotard), but free desire can be subversive (Deleuze & Guattari)
Psychoanalytic feminists on capitalism (1970s–)	Mitchell, Dinnerstein, Illouz	Freud, Klein, Lacan, Horney, Marx	Feminist critique of Freud; capitalist culture reshapes gender roles, families, and sexuality
Essex school (late 1970s–)	Laclau, Mouffe, Glynos, Stavrakakis	Lacan, Gramsci, Foucault, Marx	Capitalist 'common sense', roles, and identities are grounded in big symbolic discourses
Ljubljana school (late 1970s–)	Žižek, Zupančič, Tomšič; at large: Johnston, McGowan	Lacan, Freud, Marx	Capitalism is fuelled by a nexus comprising lack and unfulfillable desires, drives, and *jouissance*
Ghent school (1980s–)	Verhaeghe, Vanheule, Declercq	Lacan	Capitalism generates mental illnesses that are clinically observable
Jungians on capitalism (1980s–)	Abt, Drewermann, Lietaer, Samuels, Steppacher, Sedláček, Zoja	Jung, Freud	Deep structures influence economic behaviours, economic change as well as economic theory
Lacanians on growth and development (2000s–)	Kapoor, Bjerg, Wilson, de Vries, Dhar, Sioh	Lacan, Žižek, Freud, Marx	Economic growth and development are boosted by drives and *jouissance*

necessary for true emancipation to take place. Practically, he advocated for work democracy, but saw this as only possible if people reach a certain degree of emotional freedom and are able to bear full responsibility for their lives. For him, our mass neurotic societies prevent this maturation and promote forms of paternalistic authoritarianism that reflect the internal character structure of many voters. However, if life energy (libido) is allowed to flow freely through an appropriate societal transformation, neurosis and the capitalist ethos of appropriation, subjugation, and accumulation can be subverted. These ideas had a major influence—albeit not always properly acknowledged—on the Frankfurt School and on Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* as we see below.

Post-War Flourishing

The Glorious Thirty (the 30 year period of economic growth in France, 1945–1975) saw a boom in the psychoanalysis of economic problems—especially through the Frankfurt School, the Tavistock Institute, and French post-structuralism. Such psychoanalytic–economic encounters became very influential until the late 1970s—largely boosted by the countercultural movements—and the topic involved some of the most read and quoted intellectuals of the 20th century. It is obviously beyond the scope of the present article to provide an overview of what these authors had to say about the psychoanalysis of capitalism, but a few salient features are presented in the rest of the article.

The Freudo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School expanded on some of the ideas originally proposed by Reich. Their project was to update Marxist theory to the new conditions of the early- and mid-20th-century capitalist societies. They argued that Marx's analysis of the 'superstructure' (i.e., ideology, mass culture) had to be refined. For that purpose, they revisited German idealism, particularly Hegel, and used insights from sociology and psychoanalysis. They showed how social structure, through the culture industry, appears at the deepest levels of our psyches, in our blind spots, neuroses, pleasures, and frustrations. The Frankfurt School's members who explicitly wrote on economic questions from a psychoanalytic perspective were few, most prominently Herbert Marcuse (1955, 1964) and Erich Fromm (1955, 1973), two scholars who have had an enormous influence beyond academia, as well as on a number of eminent road companions, like David Riesman (1950), Walter Weisskopf (1955), Norman Brown (1959), and, later on, Russell Jacoby (1975), Christopher Lasch (1979), and Joel Kovel (1989). This group continues to resonate in contemporary social thought and to inspire scholars like Anselm Jappe (2017) and Hartmut Rosa (2019).

In London, the Tavistock Institute played a pioneering role in psychoanalysing capitalist companies. The Institute's early associates included Wilfred Bion, who was influenced by Melanie Klein and who argued that groups and organisations have an unconscious life that can be psychoanalysed. This approach emerged out of the belief that modern psychoanalysis

could 'revolutionise' workplace relations. Two camps ended up emerging: a managerial one seeking to 'heal' organisations and reform capitalism, and a more critical one seeking post-capitalist alternatives (Gabriel, 2016). A small number of socialist Kleinians linked with Tavistock explicitly wrote about capitalism (e.g., Richards, 1984), and today, authors like Isaac Balbus (2005), David Tuckett (2011), Burkard Sievers (2012), and Michael Rustin (2015) can be associated with the Tavistock or the Kleinian tradition.

In France, post-structuralist intellectuals wrote extensively on the links between libido and capitalism. This group never formed a 'school' and included figures like Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-François Lyotard. Most had a complex relationship with Jacques Lacan, the main introducer of psychoanalysis in France. The cornerstone of Lacan's contribution is arguably the idea of the 'lack'. Lacan argued that our emergence from 'nature' into 'culture' is accompanied by a deep sense of loss or lack that influences all our subsequent pursuits. Every infant, he explained, experiences a first loss when they realise they are unable to permanently keep their mother for themselves, as the mother seems periodically attracted by other entities, including, most prominently, by the partner. All their life, the subject will thus unconsciously seek this elusive 'object-cause of desire' that attracted the caregiver. The infant then experiences a second loss when they acquire language and internalise a given cultural order—elements that Lacan called the 'Symbolic' order or the subject's 'Other'. Since any signifying system will always be incomplete, the subject will never be able to fully capture what has to be expressed or understood—what Lacan called the 'Real'. This again generates frustration and desire, and the infant's alienation from the (m)Other creates a longing for a sense of plenitude that will forever haunt them. Desires have thus a fundamentally traumatic origin, and an exogenous and unfulfillable nature, which has important implications for understanding capitalism (more below).

New Developments Under Neoliberalism

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed the rise of Lacanian approaches to the critical study of capitalism. This movement has been influenced by the Ljubljana School around the work of Slavoj Žižek and by the Essex school of post-Marxism around the work of Ernesto Laclau. What I call in Table 1 the 'Ghent school' (e.g., Verhaeghe, 2014) and the 'Lacanians on growth and development' (e.g., Bjerg, 2016; Kapoor, 2014) represent the most recent branches of these endeavours. On top of this, a Latino-American branch is arguably emerging now, spearheaded by David Pavón-Cuéllar (e.g., 2017). Much of this Lacanian-inspired critique originally started as an elaboration on the Marxian notions of 'ideology' and 'hegemony' (Laclau, 1987; Žižek, 1989). In a nutshell, one key idea could be summarised like this: the inevitable and painful gap between the 'Symbolic' and the 'Real' (as explained above) often ends up 'sutured' in the 'Imaginary', Lacan's third realm, through recourse to all kinds of fantasies. If 'capital itself is the Real of our time' (Žižek, 2000, p. 276), the link with capitalism becomes apparent. As we

see, fantasy, desire, and the disavowal of counterevidence become key means by which capitalism sustains itself ideologically, economically, and politically.

Since the mid-1980s, a small number of Jungian analysts and Jungian-inspired authors have also been writing on economic questions—most prominently Theodore Abt (1988), Luigi Zoja (1995), Andrew Samuels (2007), Bernard Lietaer (2013), and Tomáš Sedláček (2013). Jung never systematically wrote about the economy, but since his fundamental interest was to uncover the processes of human flourishing, he couldn't ignore the topic. He developed a stark critique of capitalist modernity, expanding on the concept of alienation (Gerber, 2021). For him, alienation is rooted in modernity's overconfidence in the conscious ego separating subjects from their 'Self'—their whole psyche that includes both conscious and unconscious parts as well as body, heart, and mind—thereby creating a profound sense of meaninglessness and disorientation. This form of alienation hinders the process of 'individuation', the lifelong journey of developing one's unique potential through the integration of conscious and unconscious materials. Jung perceived different depths to the unconscious, including the personal, family, cultural, and collective unconscious—that deepest level which contains the instincts and the archetypes. The latter are innate 'deep structures' that move the subject in ways both creative and destructive, and that often show polarities that must be held together as the subject individuates. For Jung, capitalist modernity overactivates certain archetypes, like masculine and rational archetypes; a process that has given rise to an unbalanced and destructive capitalist cosmology.

We have here a wealth of ideas that could one day give birth to an integrated 'economic psychoanalysis'—as Cornelius Castoriadis (1975/1987, p. 27) once put it—able to (i) discern the 'true' meaning of economic values, norms, and behaviours, (ii) relate it to politico-economic and cultural structures, and (iii) guide the construction of post-capitalist alternatives enhancing human and nonhuman flourishing. Below, I return to these different ideas and suggest an overall typology able to hold them together.

THE FOUR DIRECTIONS OF THE PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

Continuing on from the previous section, we could say that the psychoanalytic model of the 'economic actor' corresponds to an (undifferentiated) individual caught between instinctual drives and moral principles (Freud), between expression and repression of life energy (Reich), between the Real and the Symbolic (Lacan), and between opposite archetypes (Jung). How these different conflicts take form and are (more or less) resolved depend on many factors, including one's own abilities, childhood, gender, education, or culture, but it also very much depends—and this is crucial for our present purpose—on the kind of economic system the subject lives in. That system will define structures of oppression and privilege as well as some of the key ideological narratives against which the subject will have to individuate.

To start with, individuals can collectively *introject* the norms and values of a given political economy, as in the internalisation of a work ethic, social hierarchies, or ideology of the 'good life'. However, individuals can also *project* unconscious material onto economic phenomena or actors and thereby generate/strengthen them, as for example when the working class identifies with upper classes to protect itself against feelings of powerlessness (projective identification). Very often, the relationship goes both ways (introjected and projected) and produces a potent reinforcing mechanism, which helps explain why unjust and unsustainable systems like capitalism endure (Gourgé, 2001).

Yet, as we have briefly seen, the flaws of capitalism have been problematised by psychoanalytic authors in a variety of directions that go much beyond this introjective/projective model. How to bring together this wealth of contributions? How to grasp what has been done so far, and where gaps and tensions reside? Before I go into more detail about this, I would like to start by suggesting a 'roadmap' that will help organise the various psychoanalytic contributions to the critique of capitalism. I propose a typology consisting of four key 'thematic streams' symbolised by four mythological figures: Eros, Thanatos, Ahriman, and Lucifer. The Greek gods Eros and Thanatos are well-known to the psychoanalytic literature: Eros represents the life force ('libido') linked to sex, love, and creativity, while Thanatos represents the death force ('mortido') linked to destruction and aggression (e.g., Laplanche, 1970). The repression of Eros leads to forms of alienation while the enactment of Thanatos leads to self-harm and repetition compulsion.

In contrast, the figures of Ahriman and Lucifer are not commonly used by psychoanalysts. These two 'higher beings' of, respectively, ancient Persian and Semitic religions were sometimes mentioned by Jung, but it is Rudolf Steiner (1919/1984) who conceptualised this couple as the two key 'adversaries' of humanity, one representing materialism, commercialism, and technological misuses (Ahriman) and the other one intellectualism, abstraction, and hubris (Lucifer). Psychoanalytically, Ahrimanic impulses are, in broad terms, about prioritising one's basic drive for bodily pleasures and amalgamating it with a will to power; Luciferic inclinations, for their part, are about narcissistically overestimating one's conscious ego, denying material constraints, and being prone to grandiosity. Both tendencies denote an incapacity to love and can be understood as overcompensations against existential fears.

As we see, these four streams can capture wide tendencies in the psychoanalytic critique of capitalism. Each one can be associated with specific authors and works (although it is not rare that authors write on several of those directions at the same time). The critique of Gross, Reich, and Marcuse, for example, can be associated with the repression of the libido ('Eros'); the Lacanians are especially interested in repetition compulsion ('Thanatos'); the early Freudians on money were concerned with accumulation, greed, and their association with bodily pleasure ('Ahriman'); Jung and Fromm wrote about the danger of the overconfident intellect ('Lucifer'). Yet things are of course always more complicated, and these four

directions should mostly be taken as an invitation to stimulate discussion and knowledge integration.

Eros: Capitalist Repression and Resulting Alienation

This line of critique is without a doubt the most well-known and it is at times erroneously seen as the only one psychoanalysis has ever produced. In short, it argues that capitalism creates 'false needs' and directs the libido (Eros) to the advantage of capital in ways that are existentially harmful for the subject.

Herbert Marcuse (1955, 1964) claimed that capitalism forces upon the subject the one-dimensional world of commodities, including 'one-dimensional sex', instead of encouraging the full sensual and playful potential of Eros. He showed how the competitive 'performance principle' of capitalism prevents the subject from sublimating its libidinal energy in creative ways—a phenomenon he famously called 'repressive desublimation'. Later on, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972, 1980) similarly argued that capitalism succeeded in separating labour-power from life energy more than any previous modes of production. Capitalist society is unique in human history, they wrote, because it tends to de-invest in everything that has intrinsic value and to replace it with quantitative monetary value.

For both Marcuse and Deleuze and Guattari, Freud had failed to develop the emancipatory possibility of his own theory. Marcuse thus tried to show that human drives are not just biologically fixed, but also socially and historically constructed, which opens the possibility for emancipatory arrangements. What is needed, he argued, is to reconnect the body and the passions (Eros) with reason (Logos). Marcuse never intended to subjugate Logos to Eros, as some critics have suggested. He wanted to have Eros and Logos on equal terms, and unlike Freud, he saw the resources of the unconscious as a potential support for progressive social change. In the same vein, Deleuze and Guattari argued that processes of commodification not only contribute to exploitation, but also to free (or dis-embed) desire from capture in 'social codes', thereby releasing large amounts of 'free-flowing energy' that capital cannot always re-capture for the sake of private accumulation. For them, therefore, desire is unrelated—as for Lacan—to any primordial loss and it can be subversive.

Freud had always argued that societies need to impose some wise amount of repression on the individuals' instincts: this may cause collective neuroses, but it also ensures socioeconomic reproduction and allows constructive sublimation to take place. For Marcuse too, some form of 'basic repression' is probably necessary for social life, but 'surplus repression' taking various forms of coercion is not, and this is where things can be changed. For the past four decades, Christophe Dejours (2006, 2013) has been clinically investigating processes of repression and sublimation in the workplace in France. He argues that socially organised work could be the 'royal road' to express or sublimate libidinal energy. However, Dejours laments that neoliberal restructurings have undermined the possibility of nurturing

this process and he sees far-reaching socioeconomic consequences. In a similar vein, but beyond the workplace, Hartmut Rosa (2019) proposed the concept of 'resonance' as a way of encountering the world, namely people, things, nature, and life as such. Resonance has a quasi-physical quality ('vibration') and engages the body, the heart, and the mind—it is for him the true opposite of 'alienation' and a refining of Marcuse's focus on libidinal repression. Rosa argues that the growth-addiction of capitalism prevents resonance to take place because of its constant acceleration and the chronic exhaustion is generates.

This first line of critique ranging from Reich to Rosa has generated a wealth of influential ideas. Yet this line of thinking has also triggered criticism. Jean-François Lyotard (1974) launched the attack by disagreeing with Marcuse (and with many humanists and Marxists in general) that capitalism 'alienates' its subjects and represses their 'healthy' Eros because, he argued, there cannot be any standard for defining a healthy Eros since our libidinal investments have an ineradicable ambiguity that will always suffuse the social. As we see next, a focus on such libidinal investment may shed light on aspects of capitalist dynamics that were previously unexplained.

Thanatos: Capitalism's Endless Motion

The Lacanian critique of capitalism argues that the death drive—especially in its form of repetition compulsion—has a greater explanatory power of capitalist dynamics than Eros and its repression. In contrast to Marcuse and Deleuze, Todd McGowan wrote that 'many critics of capitalism have failed to see that desire itself … is the problem rather than the solution' (2016, p. 48).

In the late 1960s, Lacan had occasionally commented—besides his well-known 'four discourses'—on a fifth one, the 'capitalist discourse', which seeks to explain the proverbial endless motion of the capitalist economy (Tomšič, 2015; Vanheule, 2016). In it, he provided a non-Marxian account of capitalist dynamics that de-emphasises class struggle and stresses the logic of consumption rather than production. For him, in short, it is the subject's primordial loss that capitalism exploits to its own advantage. Essentially, capitalism postulates that there is a solution for this loss because the resulting desire can be fulfilled by commodities. However, even if the final satisfaction is an illusion, the object-cause of desire is no less real in the subject's psyche. It therefore makes no sense to say—as some critics of consumerism do—that capitalism 'creates' desires or false needs (Stavrakakis, 2006). Rather, capitalism organises, as any economic system, a particular way of channelling desires which already exist. From this perspective, the notion of 'alienation' becomes problematic when it is based on a purported healthy 'human essence' to be recovered since we are all universally alienated from the very beginning.

For the Lacanians, the capitalist ideology is rooted in the promise of a future of full satisfaction based on consumption. In reality, however, the capitalist subject endlessly

oscillates 'between success and failure, satisfaction and emptiness, limitless credit and limitless debt' (Mura, 2015, p. 170). What remains unconscious in this process—and this is the central Lacanian hypothesis—is that the repetition of the failure to find full satisfaction is a hidden source of enjoyment. The consumer knows rationally that consumption will not make them happier, yet at the same time they are unconsciously attracted by their own failure which revives their desires. In contrast to Freud, who saw pleasure as reducing tension and responding to a drive derived from a biological need, Lacan 'de-biologises' drives, disconnects them from bodily needs, and links them with *jouissance*—which can simply be defined as the enjoyment of drives. While desires seek the 'lost object', the drives are attracted by the primordial loss itself and they can therefore only endlessly circulate around it without ever finding it. This repetition compulsion has a masochistic dimension in that suffering and failure sustain desire, which is in itself enjoyable, and all the more so when desire breaks routines with excessive, transgressive, and irrational elements. On top of this, since desire is always the desire of the (m)Other, the subject's main issue is not 'what do I desire' but 'what *should* I desire'. Ideologies thus animate and manage desire and teach us how to desire (Žižek, 1989). This Lacanian take on ideology is not always at odds with Freudo-Marxist understandings, as for example when Marcuse noted that the modern subject 'desires what he is supposed to desire' (1955, p. 46). From these perspectives, commodities will not be preferred for their intrinsic value, but in terms of how they are evaluated by others.

McGowan (2016, p. 26) argues that the 'genius' of capitalism is to have incorporated the primordial loss at its core, in the very notion of commodity which becomes fetishised. Accordingly, the contemporary capitalist superego does not repress desires but commands to satisfy them; it is thus very different from Freud's or Reich's puritan version. The new superegoic injunction—'enjoy!'—applies to all classes and explains why Lacan suggested that in capitalism 'each individual is really a proletarian' (1975, p. 187). From this perspective, 'the feeling that capitalism fits our mode of desiring is not wholly ideological', writes McGowan, as 'capitalism's emergence and its psychic appeal are related to the nature of human subjectivity' (2016, p. 22). While there was nothing inevitable in the development of capitalism, 'we are, one might say, psychically disposed to invest ourselves in the capitalist system' (McGowan, 2016, p. 22) and this explains capitalism's extraordinary grip on so many of us. Consumption both exalts and exhausts the individual, and there seems to be no easy way out.

Much contemporary Lacanian social criticism displays a pessimistic tone, yet Lacan had himself suggested a way out, rarely discussed by the Lacanians; namely, what he called the posture of the 'saint'. The 'saint', for Lacan, seems to be associated with the ancient spiritual idea of non-attachment: 'the saint is the refuse of *jouissance*' (Lacan, 1974, p. 20; see also Vanheule, 2016). Contrast this quote with Slavoj Žižek's observation that 'the lesson of drive is that we are condemned to *jouissance*: whatever we do, *jouissance* will stick to it; we shall never get rid of it; even in our most thorough endeavor to renounce it, it will contaminate the

very effort to get rid of it' (Žižek, 2000, p. 293). However, Pieter de Vries (2007) and Ceren Özselçuk and Yahya Madra (2010), among others, could be seen as exceptions among Lacanians since they see *jouissance*/desire as potentially constructive in post-capitalist politics. Additionally, Yannis Stavrakakis, building on the possible management of *jouissance*, pointed out that 'only the articulation of another ethical type of relation with *jouissance* beyond fantasies of fullness' would be able to transcend the logic of capitalism: 'Only a (productive) mourning of fullness permitting a genuine embrace of partial jouissance … would open the road for real change' (Stavrakakis, 2012, p. 2305; see also Byrne & Healy, 2006; Fletcher, 2018).

Before closing this second line of psychoanalytic critique, I would like to add that not every author in it has worked with a Lacanian understanding of the death drive. Some non-Lacanian authors have also emphasised capitalism's affinity with destruction (e.g., Dostaler & Maris, 2009), and while their works may represent useful wake-up calls, they are often weaker in analysing the psychological mechanisms at stake. However, Benjamin Fong (2016) has offered a sophisticated non-Lacanian study of the death drive in capitalism. He argued that the death drives (Freud often used the plural) should be differentiated into three interrelated but distinct forces that are at play in the infant's psyche. First, the death drive of the Nirvana-principle can be understood as a longing for the care structure of early life when the boundaries of mind/body/others were fluid (see above). Second, aggressivity and power are different from this as they are originally a violent reaction *against* the death drive itself and the caretaker's omnipotence. Finally, the 'drive to mastery', frequently mentioned by Freud, should not be confused with the 'will to power', often amalgamated with the death drive. In fact, and this is relevant to our present discussion, the drive to mastery also represents a counter-impulse to the death drive, directed at self-protection from the loss of oneself and from the caretaker. Its effects may remain societally visible, Fong explains, in the desire to have and develop technology. However, this positive, self-protective side of technology can also have deleterious effects, especially when coupled with the will to power, as we see next.

Ahriman: Capitalism's Hedonistic Will to Power

This third line of critique links the subjectivity of capitalist modernity to a form of hedonism that is particularly visible in the centrality of technology and money. Dany-Robert Dufour (2008) argues that the novelty of capitalist modernity is its profound reshaping of our psyches: capitalism has, for him, 'desymbolised' the world, largely erased transcendental values, and minimised superegoic injunctions besides *jouir* without hindrance, which leaves subjectivities largely free-floating and easily carried away in the constant flow of commodities. The boom of addictions under capitalism—from internet pornography to technology—is a prime consequence of this (Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2016).

Under capitalism, prioritising materialistic hedonism requires money, and hence socioeconomic power. Psychoanalysts have had a lot to say about money, greed, and the will to power, and it is worth briefly going back to some of the basic ideas. Wolfgang Harsch (1994), for example, explored the idea that the commodity–money relationship is a primordial version of the milk–faeces exchange between the mother and the child. The baby's faeces are indeed the first 'money' to be exchanged against the caregiver's milk, and by receiving the baby's faeces, the caregiver confirms the baby's fantasy. Harsh argues that capitalism can at times be interpreted as a regression to this infantile economy: just like the child was able to obtain more than what they had to 'pay', so does the successful investor under capitalism. Money and property rights enable parasitic arrangements where rentier capitalists live from the work of others, like babies living off their mother, or off 'Mother Earth', where natural resources are seen as inextinguishable (Steppacher, 1993). In a similar vein, Nick Haslam (2011) showed that the old Freudian idea of the possessive 'anal character' has resurfaced in the literature under different names and with smaller ambitions, but its research potential is yet to be fully explored. Anecdotally, the anxiety around toilet training in capitalist societies was made obvious at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when people rushed to supermarkets to stock up on toilet paper.

Working at a societal level, Bernard Lietaer (2013) suggested an original Jungian take on money and power. He argued that different economic systems—specifically different monetary systems—can be associated with particular dominant archetypes. Centralised systems involving coins made with precious metals, interest-bearing loans, and money as a store of value are associated with warrior and sovereign archetypes common in patriarchal societies, while decentralised systems of mutual credit, without interest and storing, are linked with relational and nurturing archetypes common in societies where women have a higher status. For Lietaer, both types of monetary systems have advantages, and in the few historical examples he could document where they coexisted, such as the European central middle ages (1000–1300 CE), surprisingly positive socioeconomic outcomes were generated, including for women, before the return of the patriarchal order in the following century, the beginning of witch hunting, and the birth of capitalism.

Does this mean that the return of a 'feminine principle' could be a way out of the materialism–power complex of capitalism? Several psychoanalysts have been open to the idea, from different perspectives. Jean-Joseph Goux (1990), for example, saw the 'feminine' as a departure from the three key, structurally similar oppressors of Western modernity: patriarchy, logocentrism, and capitalism. Jungians, for their part, have sometimes advocated for a return of the 'anima' in an economic system currently dominated by the 'animus' archetype (Steppacher, 1993). However, for Juliet Mitchell (1974/2000), femininity is an ideological construct rooted in the Oedipus complex. She argued that the latter offers a blueprint for understanding how girls and boys unconsciously form themselves in unequal ways within patriarchal contexts. Yet Mitchell's approach and Jungian takes are not

necessarily incompatible as they may look at different parts of the unconscious: while Mitchell focuses on the superego, the Jungians are interested in deeper 'wirings' that are nonetheless expressed in socially constructed ways (Samuels, 1989).

Lucifer: Capitalism's Rationalising Hubris

While the Ahrimanic tendency in capitalism is about inviting the subject to believe that there is nothing more to it than wealth and technology for material gratification, the 'Luciferic' dimension represents an opposite force (even if at times complementary): it maintains that the rational intellect is almighty, above the material, and that it has the power to transcend any limits, including death, which is easily denied. Psychoanalytically, this Luciferic tendency is obvious whenever unconscious forces are disavowed.

How capitalism conceptualises itself is nowhere more evident than in the academic discipline of economics. The first and so far, perhaps, only systematic psychoanalytic study of mostly neoclassical economics was provided by Walter Weisskopf (1955). He argued that neoclassical economics—the main theoretical support to capitalism—is a clear case of 'rationalisation' in the Freudian sense: it functions as a defence mechanism against the ego's fears of a world full of irrationalities, uncertainties, and imbalances. The concepts of 'equilibrium', 'invisible hand', or 'perfect information' generate a reassuring picture of economic reality. Mathematical abstraction favours elegance and harmony, away from history and power struggles, and away from the messiness of sociocultural and ecological contexts. While neoclassical economics acts as a kind of Valium on inner conflicts, its self-confidence and ambitions are at the same time boundless as it claims universality and seeks to reorganise the world in its own image.

Erich Fromm's character analyses provide a neat continuation of this theme. For him, the anal character of Freud's time is slowly being replaced by a new and ultimate variant of the capitalist character, the (Luciferic) 'monocerebral man'. The latter 'is almost exclusively cerebrally oriented [and] wants to know what things are, how they function and how they can be constructed or manipulated'. For this character, 'feelings have withered, rather than [being] repressed; inasmuch as they are alive they are not cultivated, and are relatively crude; they take the form of passions, such as the passion to win [or] to prove superior to others' (Fromm, 1973, pp. 351–353). The monocerebral character tends to show narcissistic features, often compensating for an unconscious sense of powerlessness (Lasch, 1979). Fromm thought that the monocerebral orientation applies to a vast part of the population in modern economies, not only to scientists and intellectuals. Its main flaw is its overconfidence in the intellect and its disconnection with the feeling function, the 'heart'.

How did we get there? Theodor Abt (1988) used Jungian insights to analyse the transition to capitalist modernity in the Swiss Alps over the last century. He argued that with industrialisation—together with the introduction of schools, media, and state laws—a new

ego-oriented way of life appeared, community bonds eroded, and nature became disenchanted. Without idealising pre-capitalist cosmologies, he wrote that they were better able to deal with unconscious forces, something that may also apply to contemporary indigenous cultures. 'So long as we … believe that, thanks to our cleverness, we can get a grip on the growing [existential and ecological] imbalances [of capitalist modernity], we will also remain unable to understand the moderating spirit of nature' found in the unconscious and expressed in myths, rituals, and in living symbols of the Self (Abt, 1988, p. 357). While the Lacanians would agree with the foolishness of overemphasising rationality, most would deny the existence of any regulating resources in the unconscious.

That capitalism is replete with unconscious dynamics is clear to any psychoanalytically minded researcher. Maureen Sioh (2014) studied an East Asian corporation and showed that the managers responded to the anxieties triggered by the unequal global financial system by showing a tendency toward (i) denying the inequity of the rules, (ii) splitting subjectivities into 'good' and 'evil' with 'good' being identified with rich countries, (iii) identifying with the idealised aggressor (predatory capitalism) to protect themselves against feelings of helplessness, and (iv) projecting failure onto poorer citizens, neighbouring countries, or ethnic minorities. All these defences enabled them, she contended, to provisionally contain their fears. Similar observations can be made at a macro level. As Ilan Kapoor (2014) put it, economic development is full of disavowed memories (e.g., colonialism), traumatic prohibitions (e.g., recession), fantasies (e.g., structural adjustments), obsessions (e.g., economic growth), and stereotypes (e.g., infantilisation of 'underdeveloped' regions). We are here very far from the rationalistic dreams of neoclassical economists. Rather, as Tomáš Sedláček (2013) argued using a Jungian lens, economics is the product of Western civilisation and as such it is closely tied to its cultural unconscious.

Against the Luciferic tendency of the monocerebral subject, all these works call for more humility and for the precautionary principle, for more grounding in ecology and the body, and most of all, for more 'inner work' in order to come to terms with unconscious attachments, including, possibly, with our own disturbing forms of unconscious attachments to neoliberalism, sexism, or racism (Kapoor, 2014). This also applies to radical scholars who should not too quickly believe that it is enough to rationally criticise capitalism without investigating deeper irrational forces within themselves.

CONCLUSION

This article provided elements, necessarily partially, for an overview of the psychoanalytic critique of capitalism. It started by identifying the main historical approaches to such a critique (Table 1) and then presented a number of representative contributions along four complementary directions: libidinal repression and alienation ('Eros'), repetition compulsion and *jouissance* ('Thanatos'), hedonistic materialism and will to power ('Ahriman'), and

narcissism and rationalising hubris ('Lucifer'). Each one of these directions may apply to different social classes and groups within capitalist societies, but they have their preferred targets: the first one fits well with the conditions of the working class; the second with consumers of any class; the third with the well-off classes; and the fourth with the managerial class and its economists. While these four thematic streams are at times complementary, they also have important points of tension.

There is disagreement on the content of the contemporary capitalist superego: is the latter repressing creative libidinal energy or is it compelling us to 'enjoy' at any cost? There is disagreement on capitalist subjectivity: is it tainted by 'head-shrinking' (apathy) or by 'monocerebralness' (hubris)? There is disagreement on the idea of alienation: is alienation part of our human condition or is it specific to certain social conditions that contaminate our innermost 'core'? There is also disagreement on post-capitalist praxis: are desires to be freed/cultivated or reduced/managed? Finally, what is to be politically reclaimed from the 'feminine'?

Despite these disagreements, the article tried to show that the various schools of psychoanalytic thought do not have unsurmountable differences when it comes to the study of capitalism. This article is therefore also a call for more dialogues and collaborations between approaches and traditions. More integrative research in the spirit of 'and/and' rather than 'either/or' is needed, as well as more empirical investigations, whether clinical or social. Freudo-Marxists and Lacanian Marxists, for instance, may have similar political aims, but their premises can be profoundly dissimilar, although not necessarily forever incompatible (see, for example, the works of Juliet Mitchell, Ian Parker, or Dany-Robert Dufour). The Lacanian and Jungian critiques are also not inevitably at odds with one another if one considers that the former focuses on the implications of the primordial lack and the (ideological) superego while the latter explores how deeper structures are socially constructed and how they influence us. Still, the precise way these different orientations articulate is yet to be clarified and an exciting task for the future.

Among the most influential psychoanalysts, authors like Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson, Otto Rank, Melanie Klein, or Donald Winnicott have remained underused in the critique of capitalism. This will hopefully change as the field consolidates. Also, that Jung's ideas can be helpful for the radical left will still come as a surprise to some, but examples of a Jungian critique have recently multiplied (e.g., Gerber, 2021; Kiehl et al., 2016). Additionally, if Jung was 'too fundamental, in a sense, to be modern' (von Franz, 1975, p. 11), the same could be said of Wilhelm Reich, whose subversive work on subtle energies may echo ancient East and South Asian traditions but is possibly still ahead of its time in the West. It would be a profound mistake to hastily dismiss Reich as passé for the radical left (e.g., Totton & Edmondson, 2009).

In any case, capitalism has never been a monolithic totality, nor has it been the 'capitalist subject'. Nuanced differentiation and attention to class, gender, racial, and cultural diversity

will have to be central in an integrated psychoanalysis of capitalism. As much as economic notions will need to be 'decolonised', so will psychoanalytic concepts. Childrearing, superegoic injunctions, repression, sublimation, the Symbolic, the images of archetypes—to name just a few—all have economic implications, and they are all eminently context-specific. How to adapt or transform the psychoanalytic critique of capitalism in non-Western settings remains a challenge, and much can be learned from the pioneer works of Frantz Fanon (e.g., 1952/2008) or Ashis Nandy (e.g., 1983), or from recent works in Latin America (e.g., Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017).

Finally, this article showed that psychoanalysis can nourish post-capitalist politics. We saw that the psychoanalytic study of, say, alienation, ideology, possessive individualism, or 'depressive pleasure-seeking on credit'—as Paul Verhaeghe (2014, p. 106) characterises neoliberal modernity—cannot be limited to the healing of the capitalist subject. Individual healing can only succeed hand-in-hand with the transformation of broader political, economic, and ecological relations. However, for such transformative goals to bear fruits, activism must include along the way a clearer understanding of inner dynamics within anti-capitalist subjectivities and movements. Whoever wants to change the structures of power, values, enjoyment, and agency has also to work on understanding these structures interiorly. Without such 'revolutionary groundwork' (Gross, 1913, p. 384), exterior targets alone will be of limited success and the same historical mistakes of the anti-capitalist left are likely to be repeated again and again.

REFERENCES

Abt, T. (1988). *Progress without loss of soul*. Chiron Publications.

Balbus, I.D. (2005). *Mourning and modernity*. Other Press.

Bennett, D. (2016). *The currency of desire*. Lawrence and Wishart.

Bernays, E. (1955). *The engineering of consent*. University of Oklahoma Press.

Birken, L. (1999). Freud's 'economic hypothesis': From *Homo oeconomicus* to *Homo sexualis*. *American Imago*, *56*(4), 311–330. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304482

Bjerg, O. (2016). *Parallax of growth*. Polity Press.

Boadella, D. (1973). *Wilhelm Reich: The evolution of his work*. Vision Press.

Borneman, E. (Ed.). (1976). *The psychoanalysis of money*. Urizen Books.

Brown, N.O. (1959). *Life against death*. Wesleyan University Press.

Byrne, K., & Healy, S. (2006). Cooperative subjects: Toward a post-fantasmatic enjoyment of the economy. *Rethinking Marxism*, *18*(2), 241–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/08935690600578919

Castoriadis, C. (1987). *The imaginary institution of society*. Polity Press. (Original work published 1975)

de Vries, P. (2007). Don't compromise your desire for development! A Lacanian/Deleuzian rethinking of the anti-politics machine. *Third World Quarterly*, *28*(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590601081765

Dejours, C. (2006). Subjectivity, work, and action. *Critical Horizons*, *7*(1), 45–62. https://doi.org/10.1163/156851606779308161

Dejours, C. (2013). *Travail vivant* [*Living labour*] (Vols. 1–2). Payot.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1972). *L'anti-Œdipe* [*Anti-Oedipus*]. Éditions de Minuit.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1980). *Mille plateaux* [*A thousand plateaus*]. Éditions de Minuit.

Dichter, E. (1960). *The strategy of desire*. Doubleday.

Dostaler, G., & Maris, B. (2009). *Capitalisme et pulsion de mort* [*Capitalism and the death drive*]. Albin Michel.

Dufour, D.-R. (2008). *The art of shrinking heads*. Polity Press.

Elliott, A., & Prager, J. (Eds.). (2016). *The Routledge handbook of psychoanalysis in the social sciences and humanities*. Routledge.

Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks.* Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)

Fenichel, O. (1938). The drive to amass wealth. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, *7*(1), 69–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/21674086.1938.11925342

Ferenczi, S. (1952). *First contributions to psycho-analysis*. Hogarth. (Original work published 1914)

Fletcher, R. (2018). Beyond the end of the world: Breaking attachment to a dying planet. In I. Kapoor (Ed.), *Psychoanalysis and the global* (pp. 48–69). University of Nebraska Press.

Fong, B.Y. (2016). *Death and mastery*. Columbia University Press.

Freud, S. (1964). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 9). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1908)

Freud, S. (1964). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 22). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1933)

Fromm, E. (1955). *The sane society*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Fromm, E. (1973). *The anatomy of human destructiveness*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Gabriel, Y. (2016). Psychoanalysis and the study of organization. In R. Mir, H. Willmott, & M. Greenwood (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to philosophy in organization studies* (pp. 212–224). Routledge.

Gerber, J.-F. (2021). Karl with Carl: Marxism and the Jungian path to the soul. *International Journal of Jungian Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1163/19409060-bja10021

Gourgé, K. (2001). *Ökonomie und psychoanalyse* [*Economics and psychoanalysis*]. Campus Verlag.

Goux, J.-J. (1990). *Symbolic economies*. Cornell University Press.

Graeber, D. (2004). *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology*. Prickly Paradigm Press.

Gross, O. (1913). Zur Überwindung der kulturellen Krise [On overcoming the cultural crisis]. *Die Aktion*, *14*, 384–387.

Harsch, W. (1994). *Die Psychoanalytische Geldtheorie* [*The psychoanalytic theory of money*]. Fischer.

Haslam, N. (2011). The return of the anal character. *Review of General Psychology*, *15*(4), 351–360. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025251

Heuer, G. (2016). *Freud's 'outstanding' colleague/Jung's 'twin brother': The suppressed psychoanalytic and political significance of Otto Gross*. Routledge.

Jacoby, R. (1975). *Social amnesia*. Beacon Press.

Jappe, A. (2017). *La société autophage: Capitalisme, démesure et autodestruction* [*The autophagic society: Capitalism, excess and self-destruction*]. La Découverte.

Kapoor, I. (2014). Psychoanalysis and development: An introduction. *Third World Quarterly*, *35*(7), 1117–1119. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.926099

Keynes, J.M. (1980). Essays in persuasion. In *The collected writings*, Vol. 9. Macmillan. (Original work published 1931)

Kiehl, E., Saban, M., & Samuels, A. (Eds.). (2016). *Analysis and activism: Social and political contributions of Jungian psychology*. Routledge.

Knafo, D., & Lo Bosco, R. (2016). *The age of perversion: Desire and technology in psychoanalysis and culture*. Routledge.

Kovel, J. (1989). *The radical spirit*. Free Association Books.

Lacan, J. (1974). *Télévision*. Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1975). La troisième [The third]. *Lettres de l'École Freudienne*, 16, 177–203.

Laclau, E. (1987). Psychoanalysis and Marxism. *Critical Inquiry*, *13*(2), 330–333. https://doi.org/10.1086/448393

Laplanche, J. (1970). *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* [*Life and death in psychoanalysis*]. Flammarion.

Lasch, C. (1979). *The culture of narcissism*. Norton.

Lietaer, B. (2013). *Au cœur de la monnaie: Systèmes monétaires, inconscient collectif, archétypes et tabous* [*At the heart of money: Monetary systems, collective unconscious, archetypes and taboos*]. Éditions Yves Michel.

Lyotard, J.-F. (1974). *Économie libidinale* [*Libidinal economy*]. Éditions de Minuit.

Marcuse, H. (1955). *Eros and civilization*. Beacon Press.

Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-dimensional man*. Routledge.

McGowan, T. (2016). *Capitalism and desire*. Columbia University Press.

Mitchell, J. (2000). *Psychoanalysis and feminism*. Basic Books. (Original work published 1974)

Mura, A. (2015). Lacan and debt: The discourse of the capitalist in times of austerity. *Philosophy Today*, *59*(2), 154–177. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday201521958

Nandy, A. (1983). *The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. Oxford University Press.

Özselçuk, C., & Madra, Y.M. (2010). Enjoyment as an economic factor: Reading Marx with Lacan. *Subjectivity*, *3*, 323–347. https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2010.13

Pavón-Cuéllar, D. (Ed.). (2017). *Capitalismo y psicología crítica en Latinoamérica* [*Capitalism and critical psychology in Latin America*]. Kanankil Editorial.

Reich, W. (1930). *The sexual revolution*. Vision Press.

Richards, B. (Ed.). (1984). *Capitalism and infancy*. Free Association Books.

Riesman, D. (1950). *The lonely crowd*. Yale University Press.

Róheim, G. (1923). Heiliges Geld in Melanesien [Sacred money in Melanesia]. *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, 9, 384–401.

Rosa, H. (2019). *Resonance: A sociology of our relationship to the world*. Polity Press.

Rustin, M. (2015). Work in contemporary capitalism. In D. Loewenthal (Ed.), *Critical psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and counselling* (pp. 138–155). Palgrave Macmillan.

Samuel, L.R. (2010). *Freud on Madison Avenue*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Samuels, A. (1989). *The plural psyche*. Routledge.

Samuels, A. (2007). *Politics on the couch*. Profile Books.

Schumpeter, J.A. (1954). *History of economic analysis*. Harvard University Press.

Sedláček, T. (2013). *Die Ökonomie von Gut und Böse* [*The economics of good and evil*]. Goldmann Verlag.

Sievers, B. (2012). Towards a socioanalysis of the current financial crisis. In S. Long & B. Sievers (Eds.), *Towards a socioanalysis of money, finance and capitalism* (pp. 91–104). Routledge.

Sioh, M. (2014). Manicheism delirium: Desire and disavowal in the libidinal economy of an emerging economy. *Third World Quarterly*, *35*(7), 1162–1178. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.926106

Smelser, N.J. (1998). *The social edges of psychoanalysis*. University of California Press.

Stavrakakis, Y. (2012). Beyond the spirit of capitalism? Prohibition, enjoyment, and social change. *Cardozo Law Review*, *33*, 2289–2306.

Stavrakakis, Y. (Ed.). (2019). *Routledge handbook of psychoanalytic political theory*. Routledge.

Steiner, R. (1984). *The influences of Lucifer and Ahriman*. Steiner Book Centre. (Original work published 1919)

Steppacher, R. (1993). Le féminin et le masculin, les femmes et les hommes: Une perspective élargie sur les problèmes de développement [The feminine and the masculine, women and men: A broader perspective on development issues]. *Itinéraires*, *41*, 29–43.

Tomšič, S. (2015). *The capitalist unconscious: Marx and Lacan*. Verso.

Totton, N., & Edmondson, E. (2009). *Reichian growth work: Melting the blocks to life and love* (2nd ed.). PCCS Books.

Tuckett, D. (2011). *Minding the markets*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Vanheule, S. (2016). Capitalist discourse, subjectivity and Lacanian psychoanalysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01948

Verhaeghe, P. (2014). *What about me? The struggle for identity in a market-based society*. Scribe Publications.

von Franz, M.-L. (1975). *C.G. Jung: His myth in our time*. Putnam.

Weisskopf, W.A. (1955). *The psychology of economics*. University of Chicago Press.

Winslow, E.G. (1986). Keynes and Freud: Psychoanalysis and Keynes's account of the 'animal spirits' of capitalism. *Social Research*, *53*(4), 549–578. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970433

Zaltman, G., & L. Zaltman (2008). *Marketing metaphoria*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Žižek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso.

Žižek, S. (2000). *The ticklish subject*. Verso.

Zoja, L. (1995). *Growth and guilt: Psychology and the limits of development*. Routledge.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Shivani Kaul for sharing with me so many of her insights on this topic. This article would not have been possible without her. Gottfried Heuer, Robert Fletcher, Rolf Steppacher, and Katherine Tetlow are also gratefully acknowledged for all our conversations on depth psychology and capitalism. I thank the Independent Social Research Foundation for allowing me to work on these questions while visiting at the Department of Anthropology of the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2018–2019. The late and dearly missed David Graeber made this stay possible.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Julien-François Gerber is Assistant Professor at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, The Netherlands. He is broadly interested in the political economy of development and in its ecological, anthropological, and psychoanalytic dimensions. His research has explored the relationships between the economic and the conditions for sustainability, flourishing, alienation, and resistance. This concern led him to study debt and ownership systems, agrarian change, social movements, and alternative economies, with a particular geographical focus on South Asia. Besides this, Julien-François is also interested in bridging activism, healing, and research for building more viable systems. Here, his work has been in the degrowth movement and on the application of psychoanalysis to the understanding and transformation of 'capitalist modernity'. Prior to joining the ISS, Julien-François has been based at universities in Bhutan, India, and the United States, including Jawaharlal Nehru University and Harvard University. He has a PhD in political ecology from the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–22
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.06

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

'Listen with love': Exploring anti-racism dialogue in psychotherapy and counselling training

Tom Denyer,[*1] Kat Wade,[1] Matthew Whitney,[1] Dr Divine Charura,[2] and Dr Gillian Proctor[3]

[1]British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, UK
[2]Professor of Counselling Psychology, York St John University, UK
[3]Lecturer in Counselling and Psychotherapy, University of Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT

The research reported in this article analysed letters written by a cohort of psychotherapy and counselling students, in response to an anti-racism letter by Professor George Yancy entitled 'Dear White America'. Fifteen responses were written by students who don't experience racism, with one written by a student who does experience racism. A thematic analysis was conducted that produced five themes: connection with participants willing to challenge their racism; disconnection from participants unwilling to challenge their racism; anger; disappointment; and empathy. This article offers a discussion of these themes and also reflections on the interracial group processes that took place during the analysis. It concludes by considering the difficulties and challenges of speaking about racism, as well as exploring how this exercise could be better implemented in future.

KEYWORDS: racism; anti-racism; seminar; training; Yancy; counselling; psychotherapy; students

[*]Contact details: tomdenyer01@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, George Yancy, an African American philosophy professor, wrote an open letter entitled 'Dear White America'; it was published by *The New York Times* and in it he beseeches white Americans to examine the ways in which they are racist, and benefit from a racist society (Yancy, 2015; Appendix A, pp. 17-21 below, and reproduced with permission). He frames this introspection and acceptance of one's racism as a gift, and in return asks white readers to 'listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror' (Yancy, 2015, para. 1). This research analyses letters responding to Yancy, written by second-year students at the University of Leeds Psychotherapy and Counselling MA, with 15 responses from students who don't experience racism and one from a student who does experience racism. A thematic analysis of the letters was conducted, which produced five major themes: connection with participants willing to challenge their racism; disconnection from participants unwilling to challenge their racism; anger; disappointment; and empathy. The initial intent for this research was based on solely analysing the letters, but through that analysis it quickly became apparent that the research team were unable to disentangle their own feelings from the authors' expressions. Every letter, perhaps even every sentence, revealed a wealth of complex and often contrasting feelings. Thus, in addition to using the letter responses as raw data for a thematic analysis, the group discussions conducted throughout the analysis and the underlying interracial group processes are also explored. Analysing these processes is particularly important in current times when psychotherapy is dominated by middle class women who don't experience racism, for how can the profession cater for all if we are not ready to acknowledge and talk about difference, privilege, and racism? The exercise of responding to Yancy's letter was done in preparation for an anti-racism session, and there are forthcoming articles that will explore that session and reflect further upon the process of conducting anti-racism research.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

Within this article, the chosen terms for denoting race are those 'who do experience racism' and those 'who don't experience racism'. These were chosen over various language descriptors found within the literature, such as 'people of colour (POC)', 'black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME)', 'minority groups', and 'diverse communities'. The aim of this choice is to avoid a binary paradigm that can be reduced to individuals being 'white' or 'non-white'. Such descriptors risk presenting white people as normal and those who experience racism as an alternative that isn't normal. Also, such terms present those who experience racism as a homogenous group, which reduces the differences between those with a wide range of ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds, who happen to share experiences of being discriminated against due to racism. A number of terms that describe the actions of those who don't experience racism, such as 'white privilege', 'white fragility', and 'white guilt', have

been included in their original form to better link to existing literature and also to improve relatability for readers who may recognise such behaviour. Thus, within this chosen terminology, the aim is to convey a reflective depth whilst also using language sensitively, and appropriately, to avoid repetition of othering. Inappropriate language will also be acknowledged and named, with a particular example being the word 'coloured' when making reference to direct quotes from the data.

COMMENTARY ON SOME CURRENT LITERATURE

The literature on discussions of racism is vast and complicated, and it appears that discussions of racism can very quickly become segregating. Various aspects of such discussions create a dichotomy between the experiences of those who don't experience racism, the 'white experience', and the experience of those who do experience racism, which is dominated by the 'black experience'. While being somewhat reductive, it seems the 'white experience' literature explores white guilt, ignorance, shame, and a need for education. For example, DiAngelo's (2018) *White Fragility* explores these experiences in detail. Alternatively, the perspectives of those from minority ethnic groups or 'the lived black experience' are more often educational and instructive. They express the pain, frustration, anger, desires, and hopes of the author, as characterised within popular anti-racism books such as *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (Eddo-Lodge, 2017) and *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of an Empire* (Akala, 2019).

Racism-based literature within the psychotherapeutic community has largely focussed on how individuals of different races can more fruitfully work together, with a basis on psychotherapeutic training and eventual sessions with clients (Altman, 2000; Ellis, 2021). A familiar dichotomy between the 'white experience' and 'black experience' is maintained (Altman, 2006; Ellis, 2013), although there is a far greater emphasis on the experiences of psychotherapists who don't experience racism, and how they can work through their white privilege, white fragility, and white shame (Fu, 2015; Morgan, 2020). The white supremacy within psychotherapy is well documented (Turner, 2018), and while there are efforts to decolonise curriculums and offer effective spaces to discuss difference (Ellis, 2015; Simon et al., 2022), the literature gives the impression that the biggest challenge is opening the hearts and minds of psychotherapists who don't experience racism. There is extensive writing about how to bring racism into psychotherapy training in ways that prioritise the students who don't experience racism, by tackling the potential for them to exclude themselves from the conversation or offer only silence when students who do experience racism make them feel uncomfortable (Bartoli et al., 2015; Case, 2015; Fu, 2015; McIntosh, 2015). The literature does consider some minority groups, most often to share their experiences (Ellis, 2015; Turner, 2018), but also increasingly within the context of critiquing psychotherapy training (Ellis, 2015). In a new text entitled *Black Identities + White Therapies: Race, respect + diversity*,

Charura and Lago (2021) edited a collection of papers by over 20 authors writing about the importance of addressing the shortcomings of racial competency in psychotherapeutic training and professional practice. Many of the authors are from communities who experience racism and have the lived experience of discrimination. They are unapologetic in their call for accountability, challenging colour-blindness, and highlight implications for therapists, trainers, trainees, supervisors, and also society as a whole (Charura & Lago, 2021). While reviewing the current literature on anti-racist practice in counselling, it has been recognised that all accounts are perfectly valid in their exploration of racism discussions and the subsequent difficulties that arise. However, it seems there is a lack of literature that acknowledges the various overlaps in experience demonstrated within this research, where complex feelings of hope, disappointment, and even apathy were shared between all members.

METHODS

Participants

The participants were students in the second year of the University of Leeds Master of Arts in Psychotherapy and Counselling. Sixteen students out of the overall cohort of 22 provided a letter. Fifteen were written by students who don't experience racism, with one written by a student who does experience racism.

Researchers

The researchers were volunteers from the same cohort as the participants, who had also taken part in the data collection prior to knowing about the research opportunity. There were six initial researchers who were present for data collection and analysis: four who don't experience racism, and two who do experience racism (four white, one black/mixed heritage, and one South Asian).

Procedure

As an exercise in the week before an anti-racism session, all the students in the cohort were asked to write a letter in response to an open letter entitled 'Dear White America', which was written by George Yancy, an African American philosophy professor (Yancy, 2015). The students were asked to post their letters to an online Padlet forum where they could be read by the whole cohort (see Appendix A). After a week, the available letters were downloaded for analysis, and one researcher anonymised any identifying information. This researcher had no further participation in the analysis process.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, undertaken by following the steps according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) overview of the method. This was an inductive method whereby themes were drawn out of the letter responses, separate to existing models or expected results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step of the process was to take turns reading the letters aloud, and afterwards each researcher would individually give their thoughts and express their emotional responses. Once each researcher had spoken, there would then be a group discussion to discuss and elaborate upon the individual responses. During these individual and group processes each emotional reaction to the letters was coded and it was noted if some responses came up repeatedly. Once all the letters had been read though, each researcher independently went through the noted responses and chose themes that felt significant and descriptive of the data. These themes were not strictly based on the frequency of a given response, but what the researchers felt were the overarching themes the codes could be grouped into. These felt themes were then shared and there was a final group process of arranging them into the major thematic results.

Ethical considerations

The main ethical consideration for this research was the dual role of the researchers, as they were both researchers and members of the participating cohort. This was a particular issue due to the small size of the cohort, with the researchers making up over a quarter of the total number. To help maintain anonymity and confidentiality, a single researcher anonymised the letters by removing any identifying information, and this researcher did not take further part in the analysis. In the eventuality that an author of a given letter was still recognised, it was agreed beforehand that this information would not be shared. Some of the letters were written by members of the research team, and in those cases, it was agreed that they would not disclose this until the group discussion, after the individual responses had been given. There was also a potential issue for the researchers, in that publication of this research meant revealing some of their subjective responses to letters written by their peers. To remediate this, it was decided that responses to the letters would be presented as a group opinion as much as possible.

With this research involving discussions about racism, there were potential emotional impacts for the researchers. For the researchers who experience racism it can be easily acknowledged that for them the topic of racism comes with traumatic elements, as they relive their past and current experiences. Within the research process there was also the potential for the researchers who experience racism to be faced with the often documented dynamic where their experiences of racism are met with silence or defensiveness from their peers who don't experience racism (Ellis, 2015). This dynamic is traumatising, and most likely retraumatising of previous occurrences where their experiences of racism were met with

similar dismissal. Responses like these play into the denial of truth poignantly described as the 'white mirror', which describes an unconscious defence mechanism to prevent group members who don't experience racism from having to face their links with historical or personal racism (Aiyegbusi, 2021). For all members of the research team, regardless of race, there was also the possibility of experiencing recognition trauma, which encompasses the strong emotional response to becoming aware of being a victim of racism or of belonging to a perpetrator group (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2016). To counter these potential emotional risks, the researchers were confident of being able to enter the necessary discussions of racism with sufficient openness and compassion for everyone to find value and fulfilment. If these efforts were unsuccessful, there was a risk of deeply distressing the researchers, for which they had the support of the research lead, personal tutors, and personal therapists.

Reflexivity

Although this article focuses on data drawn from the participants' responses to Yancy's letter (2015), it feels important to acknowledge that the research was conducted after the subsequent anti-racism seminar had taken place. While this study deliberately only references the responses to Yancy's letter, the session influenced the research team and therefore also the analysis. Prior to the anti-racism session, the responses to Yancy (2015) gave the researchers hope that the members of the cohort (participants) who don't experience racism were ready to open up (and indeed challenge themselves about their whiteness, racism, responses to discrimination, and their positioning in society and the counselling/psychotherapy profession, etc.). However, as researchers, we concurred that disappointingly, in the end, when it came to engaging face-to-face in the group to explore these matters and their reactions, the exercise was met with overall limited engagement and holding back. The unsatisfying nature of the session led most of the research team to want to sign up for the research opportunity, in an attempt to get more out of the anti-racism topic before moving on. This disappointment is significant as it was still felt when we conducted the analysis for this article, and the interpretative nature of this research leaves it based on our subjective, emotional experiences. We are aware that our own motivation to explore racism and feelings of disappointment in the engagement with this topic during the seminar may have an influence on our responses to the Yancy letters.

FINDINGS

Analysis of Responses to Yancy's 'Dear White America' Letter

A topic as sensitive and deeply personal as racism cannot be explored without subjectivity. The research team was immersed in this aspect of the research, pulling focus away from objective truth to explore interpretations and emotional responses to each of the letters. Therefore, any quotes used in demonstration of a particular theme are examples from letters

that aroused particularly powerful emotional responses or deep discussion. It quickly became apparent that such emotional reactions are rooted in defensiveness, highlighting the difficulty of engaging with the topic of racism. This also raised the question of whether it is possible or necessary to have such a discussion without emotional and defensive reactions. The complex nature of this work and the research team's dual relationships as peers to the authors of the letters meant there was much overlap in many of the themes. Some represented a spectrum of emotion, often with an edge of guilt and discomfort at casting judgement on fellow classmates. Nevertheless, responses have been unravelled into overarching themes that most strongly represent the researchers' experience of the letters, some of which present a juxtaposition of emotion. In doing so, the themes highlight the complicated nature of approaching conversations about racism and the tangled web of emotions that arise.

Connection vs. Disconnection

Connection and disconnection are disparate emotions which can be viewed as an amalgamation of other, smaller factors such as empathy or disappointment. They resemble instinctual responses that mark an overall reaction to a given letter, which is shown often as a researcher's first emotional response, which could be 'I felt really connected to this letter' or vice versa. When examining this response closely, the critical element was whether a letter's author seemed either willing or unwilling to challenge their racism.

Connection with participants willing to challenge their racism

With the vast majority of the letters having been written by members of the group who don't experience racism, a major factor that influenced felt connection with a letter's author was the authenticity and genuineness with which they approached the process of challenging racism. For example, if they were perceived to be genuinely engaged with their self-exploration, such as the writer below:

> 'I need to look at every attitude I hold, every reaction and response to every situation, every thought about another I have.'

In this quote, the participant demonstrates their desire to invest more time and attention to racism, implicit and explicit, on both an internal and external level. It seems by sharing their wish to engage more actively with the process, they in turn allowed the researchers to feel more open to them. There is this sense of hope in the participant showing a strong investment in their desire to change, which in turn caused the research team to feel connected with their process.

Interlaced with the notion that the participants' levels of engagement are an important factor in felt connectedness is the depth of acknowledgment the writer demonstrates in their letter. This includes acknowledgement of privilege, of the implicit benefits that whiteness provides, and of the part each individual plays in the maintenance of a systemically racist society. One participant's response below demonstrates this:

> 'To accept that I have been complicit in racist systems is easy but within my heart I know that my previously fervent "white innocence" is a masquerade for more direct participation.'

This quote is from a letter which elicited a positive response from all group members. The way in which the participant acknowledges their 'white innocence' demonstrates an awareness that is in itself engaging due to their willingness to look at their position from another's perspective. This quote is representative of some of the other participants whose similar responses suggested they were engaged in developing their racial awareness.

Disconnection from participants unwilling to challenge their racism

For the researchers, disconnection from a given letter felt like an act of self-preservation; to switch off feelings and recoil from hurtful or painful words. The most obvious example of this disconnection defence is when faced with the use of inappropriate language, such as the word 'coloured' in the quote below:

> 'how does this manifest itself in the UK? Is this easily transferable, like every coloured or black person experiences the same situations cross-nationally.'

This participant's use of offensive language instantly made some researchers uncomfortable and defensive, meaning there was a sense of feeling unable to connect to what had been written. In addition to the specific language used, the question posed in this quote was poorly received within the group. The question itself came across as 'othering', with the inference that all people who experience racism do so in the same way, and that all people who experience racism are the same. It demonstrates how a perceived lack of understanding from the participant forced a wedge between the letter and the research group, increasing feelings of disconnection. This was exacerbated in those that felt hurt or offended by what was written, and who were unable or unwilling to push through their defences to understand the participant or to see any innocence in the question asked.

While honesty was an important factor in felt empathy and connection, there were instances where honesty caused disconnection. For example, the quote below was perceived as the participant being honest about their experiences, but resulted in the research group feeling as though they were displacing the burden of the topic:

> 'But you need to bring your hurt to me so gently so I don't get angry and defensive because I would rather not hear what you need to say.'

This participant expressing their difficulty in confronting racism was perceived as a lack of engagement. Though some members of the research group who don't experience racism could empathise with the participant's angry defensiveness, the insistence that people who experience racism need to bring up racism 'gently' was seen as an example of white fragility. There were a few letters that shared this notion, which felt particularly disconnecting for the researchers who experience racism and do not share the 'privilege' of experiencing racism gently. Participants that posed such dilemmas or a reluctance to engage with the topic were generally met with a negative gut reaction and rejection of their letter.

Anger

The anger experienced by the researchers encapsulates a spectrum of emotions, of largely feeling offended, frustrated, disappointed, or hurt. While anger was experienced differently and at different times for each researcher, there was an overall response of anger and frustration when participants failed to acknowledge their privilege, such as in this quote:

> 'Due to my lack of knowledge and understanding, I feel it isn't appropriate for me to become involved in discussions regarding race. As what do I have to offer?'

This unrecognised white privilege of having the option to turn away from the problem is an example of a time when feelings of anger were triggered in the researchers. For the group members who experience racism, there was anger at the burden of responsibility being placed solely on their shoulders. There was a shared feeling of exasperation at the need to justify or explain the necessity for people who don't experience racism, who are not a 'non-race', to engage with this topic.

There were times where the members of the group who experience racism were angered by something that was not necessarily recognised by the members who don't experience racism. The quote below best demonstrates this divide:

> 'In these instances, I see how racism is improving significantly, as action is being taken against racist individuals.'

This is an example of a quote that left the researchers who experience racism feeling personally hurt and angered. They sensed the participant was dismissing the severity of racism and in response felt their experiences of racism were being invalidated. Inversely,

some researchers who don't experience racism, without the same experiences of racism, expressed empathic responses with having thought the same point the participant was making. These different responses highlight how feeling guilty in response to anger can be equally silencing for both those who don't experience racism and those who do experience racism. Some researchers who don't experience racism felt guilty for not realising the impact of this letter on the researchers who do experience racism, and expressed regret for giving what had been their authentic responses. The researchers who experience racism subsequently found this white guilt to be yet another barrier when trying to authentically express their responses to racism.

Disappointment

Overall, the research team's feelings of disappointment came from a desire to have seen more engagement and openness from their classmates. There were various forms of disengagement in the letters, which seemed as though the authors were avoiding an active, head-on approach to tackling their racism. A frequent cause for disappointment was feeling defensiveness within the authors, such as from this quote:

> 'I feel it is unfair to say that if you are born into 'white privilege', you are a racist. Maybe this is down to the derogatory connotations associated with the word 'Racist' and that people should better educate themselves around the term.'

This participant felt defensive, as if they were shrugging off the accountability that comes with seeing that one's own privileged position in society is the result of structural racism. They are othering the responsibility of education onto other people and in doing so distancing themselves from personal liability.

Avoiding responsibility was common among the letters, as some participants did not own their personal role within a racist society and others simply avoided or denied personal racism. Others distanced themselves from racist behaviour by labelling themselves as a 'white innocent', such as in this quote:

> 'Who are these systems, processes, countries that perpetuate racism? They're white, but not my innocent liberal white, the bad oppressive white.'

The research group found this stance to be disappointing because it felt like the participant was trying to condemn systematically racist systems as something that happens far away, while they are benefitting from being a person who doesn't experience racism in a systematically racist society that is very much happening right here, right now. No matter how

innocent people who don't experience racism may feel, they are unwitting accomplices and beneficiaries of white domination of society.

Hopelessness was another response that felt like a disappointing way of avoiding engagement. It is easy to do nothing under the guise of actions being pointless, and this is shown in the following quote:

> 'And I know that it is quite little I can do. But I can be aware, I can just take notice. I can notice for example being served first when a person of colour stands in front of me in a coffee shop.'

This participant's hopelessness has pushed them into a state of apathy, and disappointment was particularly felt with their desire to only engage with blatant manifestations of racism, and even then, only engaging by 'noticing'. The researchers who don't experience racism were disappointed as they themselves were working hard to overcome their own defences in order to approach the topic of racism, and therefore it was disappointing to see some of their fellow classmates be less willing to do the same.

Empathy

Empathy was an interesting facet of the research group's experience. It differed from 'connection' in that felt connectedness depended on a participant being ready to engage with their racism, whereas empathy was typically experienced towards those at the more fragile beginnings of their journey and whose statements the researchers did not necessarily agree with. At times the research group became split as the researchers who don't experience racism felt empathy towards certain letters that expressed a struggle to come to terms with racism, while the researchers who do experience racism found the same letters frustrating. More unanimous responses of empathy were felt when the letter seemed genuine and without defensiveness when faced with racism or white privilege, such as the following quote:

> 'It is hard... it is still hard to admit I can be racist...I am however finding it easier to acknowledge that my white heritage has put me in a privileged and lucky position, something I would have strongly denied before your letter.'

It was appreciable to all members of the group that suddenly becoming aware of having benefited from ingrained societal racism is a difficult process, even if at the same time it is frustrating that people who don't experience racism may not have had to realise this before. It seemed easier to feel empathy towards someone going through this process if it was perceived that they were doing so without attempting to dodge or minimise their personal role within such a system.

Due to the white majority within the cohort, most of the letters were the responses of people who don't experience racism being challenged to face their own racism, and the openness with which the participants engaged with this heavily influenced any feelings of empathy towards them. The researchers who don't experience racism were also aware of having felt some personal shame when confronted with the overall impact that white domination and racism has had on people who do experience racism, and similar shame was also expressed in the letters, such as in the following quote:

> 'This created a serious conflict in me, I found myself not wanting to be us white people and felt ashamed to be white.'

This is an example of an occasion where felt empathy was more divided among the group. The members of the research group who don't experience racism felt empathy because they could relate to the feeling of wanting to escape and distance themselves from the stigma of being the 'bad white people'. Prior to this letter writing exercise, it had been possible to try and escape personal responsibility for societal racism with the perception of being a 'white innocent', but Yancy's letter showed that this isn't possible. The researchers who don't experience racism could relate to the feelings of conflict and fear that this self-awareness brought upon them, whereas the researchers who do experience racism felt less moved.

There was a shared sense of empathy towards letters that showed consideration for people who do experience racism, such as in the following quote:

> 'I can only imagine how boring and frustrating and emotionally draining it is to have to witness white people talking about how hard it is to acknowledge their privilege.'

This acknowledgement gave a shared feeling of empathy because the author had been able to accurately encapsulate the experience of people who experience racism. The researchers who experience racism felt seen by this letter, and the researchers who don't experience racism could see similarities with their own realisations of what it might be like to be a person who experiences racism witnessing people who don't experience racism struggle to accept their privilege.

DISCUSSION

This has been a multifaceted research project. What began as a rough analysis of the difficulty in approaching the topic of racism in educational establishments transformed into a deeply emotional exploration of the nuances and complexity of emotions that arise during discussions of racism. This research has been an experience that is unique to each individual

member of the research group. It has birthed the question: how do we approach the complex and emotional topic of racism? Through the thematic analysis of the responses to Yancy's letter it became evident that the highly emotive nature of this topic acts as both a helper and hindrance to such conversations. The defensiveness experienced in response to certain letters silenced individuals from feeling able to engage in the conversation, whereas feelings of empathy provoked a hopeful and encouraging response. In reality, none of the emotional responses were felt in isolation; the themes described in the results section of this article, though written about individually, were often felt all at once and sometimes upon reading the same sentence. Everything was entangled messily, and it was hard, if not impossible, to separate what the researchers were feeling in response to the letters themselves or in response to their own experiences and history.

In a way, the focus of this research shifted from the responses to Yancy's letter to instead examine the group and interracial process that it took to conduct this research. Although there were many letters which the research team were left feeling positive about, it was the discussions around the letters that left them feeling negative which seemed the most worthwhile. The letters that left members of the research team hurting, in turn, provided a degree of challenge that was otherwise distant in a group of individuals whose conversation may otherwise have consisted largely of agreement. Through a group process, the team were able to soothe some of the wounds that a letter caused, and, in that, any disappointment caused was at least to the smallest degree able to be softened. In turn, it could be seen that the process of conducting the research was able to partially make up for disappointment felt in direct response to the letters. The team's responses and discussions have not been shared with the participants, and it would be interesting to see how some of them would respond to reading their letter now over two years later. Would they be proud or ashamed of their words and how they were later received and dissected?

Negative responses such as disconnection, disappointment, and anger were all frequently experienced and often they went beyond the concept of racism or the society in which racism has been created, but were also felt towards the author. As these were the researchers' peers, friends, and future colleagues, it felt personal. As a result of this, at certain points the research team began to question whether it was necessary or even possible to detach emotions in order to have a productive conversation about racism. The accusatory and silencing nature of negative responses seemed paralysing at times, particularly when defensive and protective reactions, namely anger, made it more difficult to thoroughly explore the intent of the participants. It was realised, however, that to ask this of anyone would be an exhausting and burdensome task. In actuality, this research has shown just how necessary and possible it is to meaningfully engage in such discourse even with a vast array of emotions that often differ from person to person. There were many times during this process that the researcher team was in disagreement, had differing interpretations of letters, and differing emotional reactions. Yet rather than silence each other, the team was able to persevere, and the

resulting conversations encouraged awareness of the sensitivity and delicate handling this topic needs. Throughout this research, despite the undeniable differences in the research team's life experiences, there was a sense of consolidation as a group that allowed each person to be authentic with their experience. After much reflection, this can only be described as what Rogers would call prizing one another (Rogers, 1957). This prizing of one another, having genuine curiosity and acceptance of each other's experience, despite challenge and negativity, enabled the conversations and the research itself to continue.

Limitations

When considering the limitations of this research, it can first be noted that the research group wasn't representative of the student cohort. It included two out of the three people who experience racism, and both men from the cohort as researchers. This means that the most common demographic, white women, were underrepresented as there was one white female researcher in the group, compared to white females being 77% of the cohort. The researchers also all volunteered to take part, which could mean that they were more comfortable or willing to engage with talking about racism. This means that the analysis most likely only represents a small slice of society, and the applicability is limited when considering how the results could be used to prepare for racism seminars in general. The data were also arguably compromised, as only 16 out of the 22 students in the cohort wrote a response to Yancy's letter. It could be argued that those students that did not write a letter were less engaged in confronting their own racism and therefore may be the most critical to hear from if the intention of such research is to suggest how future sessions could promote conversations about racism. The nature of the data collection also means that all the students were put into the same category, regardless of their race or gender. As most of the student cohort don't experience racism, the voices of the few students who do experience racism have effectively been drowned out and silenced. It is clear that race is a significant factor, as throughout this research the responses of the researchers who experience racism were very different to those of the researchers who don't experience racism, and the process of responding to a letter entitled 'Dear White America' would be different depending on the race of the author.

Implications for future anti-racism exercises

Yancy is an evocative, powerful writer and reading his honest admissions about himself it is hard to not feel touched and in turn be primed to be honest about oneself once he turns the spotlight onto his white readers. The members of the research group who don't experience racism all felt a desire to meet Yancy with his requests for them to bear their racism and their place in a racist society. This is a compelling experience and with the participants safely at home, maybe alone, it is understandable that this is a situation where it is probably easier for them to explore their racism than in a group setting that includes people who experience racism, who they may be admitting biases against. While many of the participants' letters

were reflected upon negatively, they are still evidence that individuals were inspired to respond at least somewhat honestly. There is a great spatial divide between challenging oneself at home and in a group session, and while responding to Yancy's letter at home may be an effective preparatory exercise to open the door to being honest about racism, it begs the question of whether it is a sufficient exercise to bridge the divide and allow an equally honest environment within a seminar setting.

A significant question that remains is whether there could be an effective way to reach the students who did not write a response to Yancy. There are obviously reasons beyond lack of engagement with racism for why they may not have written a reply, but having a quarter of the cohort not participating is a significant omission. Making responding to Yancy's letter a compulsory assignment could change the dynamic of the exercise, but at least then everyone would be included and prompted in some way to begin thinking about racism. Additionally, it can also be acknowledged that while responding to a letter entitled 'Dear White America' puts the focus on the students who don't experience racism, and they are who such an exercise is intended for, this means that students who do experience racism are relatively separated from the process. There is potential for those who experience racism to be more explicitly included in the process of examining their own racial biases.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to point to racism as being exclusive to the likes of extreme nationalist groups, but the aim of Yancy's letter is to show that racism exists within all of us and society as a whole. It is possible to simply conclude that talking about our racism is hard, and while that is undeniably true, it is the research team's hope that this study shows the conversation does not have to stop there. Yes, talking about racism is scary when it's easy to cause offence, and yes, at times you might have to hold your hands up and say you made a mistake; but the research team's responses to the letters show that such mistakes are not conclusive and with engagement it is possible to work through them while acknowledging any offence caused. This exercise of responding to Yancy's letter was avoided by some, and the fact that this was intended as an exercise for trainee counsellors to begin to explore and tackle their own racism makes it doubly disappointing that this opportunity for self-reflection was avoided by so many. Yancy's letter asks those who don't experience racism to listen with 'a form of love that enables you to see the role that you play (even despite your anti-racist actions) in a system that continues to value black lives on the cheap' (Yancy, 2015, para. 21). The lack of several responses shows that some struggled to offer this love at all, and this study has shown that even for those who did respond it was often a particular challenge to engage with the personal responsibility that Yancy wanted to inspire.

REFERENCES

Aiyegbusi, A. (2021). The white mirror: Face to face with racism in group analysis part 1—mainly theory. *Group Analysis*, *54*(3), 402–420. https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316421992315

Akala. (2019). *Natives: Race and class in the ruins of empire.* Two Roads.

Altman, N. (2000). Black and white thinking: A psychoanalyst reconsiders race. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 10*(4), 589–605. https://doi.org/10.1080/10481881009348569

Altman, N. (2006). Whiteness. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 75*(1), 45–72. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2006.tb00032.x

Bartoli, E., Bentley-Edwards, K.L., Michael, A., & Ervin, A. (2015). What do white counselors and psychotherapists need to know about race? White racial socialization in counseling and psychotherapy training programs. *Women & Therapy*, *38*(3-4), 246–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2015.1059206

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Case, K.A. (2015). White practitioners in therapeutic ally-ance: An intersectional privilege awareness training model. *Women & Therapy*, *38*(3-4), 263–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2015.1059209

Charura, D. & Lago, C. (2021). Towards a decolonised, psychotherapy research and practice. In D. Charura & C. Lago (Eds.), *Black identities + white therapies: Race, respect + diversity* (pp. 185–198). PCCS Books.

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.

Eddo-Lodge, R. (2017). *Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ellis, E. (2013). Silenced: The black student experience. *Therapy Today, 24*(10), 15–19. https://www.baatn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Silenced-the-Black-Student-Experience.pdf

Ellis, E. (2015). Updating psychotherapy training: Equality and diversity issues in psychotherapy training. *The Psychotherapist*, (61), 11–13. https://www.baatn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Updating-Psychotherapy-Training.pdf

Ellis, E. (2021, May 24). *What do we need to have fruitful race conversations?* Place2Be. https://www.place2be.org.uk/about-us/news-and-blogs/2021/may/what-do-we-need-to-know-to-have-fruitful-race-conversations

Fu, M. (2015). I don't see color, all people are the same: Whiteness and color-blindness as training and supervisory issues. *Women & Therapy, 38*(3-4), 279–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2015.1059212

McKenzie-Mavinga, I. (2016). *The challenge of racism in therapeutic practice: Engaging with oppression in practice and supervision.* Palgrave.

McIntosh, P. (2015) Extending the knapsack: Using the white privilege analysis to examine conferred advantage and disadvantage. *Women & Therapy*, *38*(3-4), 232–245. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2015.1059195

Morgan, H. (2020). Whiteness: A problem for our times. *British Journal of Psychotherapy, 37*(3), 469–483. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjp.12648

Rogers, C.R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology, 21*(2), 95–103. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045357

Simon, J.D., Boyd, R., & Subica, A.M. (2022). Refocusing intersectionality in social work education: Creating a brave space to discuss oppression and privilege. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *58*(1), 34–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1883492

Turner, D.D.L. (2018). 'You Shall Not Replace Us!' White supremacy, psychotherapy and decolonisation. *The Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy, 18*(1), 1–12. https://cris.brighton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/495044/JCPCP+18-1+-+Turner+article.pdf

Yancy, G. (2015, December 24). Dear white America. *The New York Times.* https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/dear-white-america/

APPENDIX

Appendix A: 'Dear White America' by Professor George Yancy

Dear White America,

I have a weighty request. As you read this letter, I want you to listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror, as James Baldwin would say. Did you hear that? You may have missed it. I repeat: *I want you to listen with love*. Well, at least try.

We don't talk much about the urgency of love these days, especially within the public sphere. Much of our discourse these days is about revenge, name calling, hate, and divisiveness. I have yet to hear it from our presidential hopefuls, or our political pundits. I don't mean the Hollywood type of love, but the scary kind, the kind that risks not being reciprocated, the kind that refuses to flee in the face of danger. To make it a bit easier for you, I've decided to model, as best as I can, what I'm asking of you. Let me demonstrate the vulnerability that I wish you to show. As a child of Socrates, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, let me speak the truth, refuse to err on the side of caution.

This letter is a gift for you. Bear in mind, though, that some gifts can be heavy to bear. You don't have to accept it; there is no obligation. I give it freely, believing that many of you will throw the gift back in my face, saying that I wrongly accuse you, that I am too sensitive, that I'm a race hustler, and that I blame white people (you) for everything.

I have read many of your comments. I have even received some hate mail. In this letter, I ask you to look deep, to look into your souls with silence, to quiet that voice that will speak

to you of your white 'innocence.' So, as you read this letter, take a deep breath. Make a space for my voice in the deepest part of your psyche. Try to listen, to practice being silent. There are times when you must quiet your own voice to hear from or about those who suffer in ways that you do not.

What if I told you that I'm sexist? Well, I am. Yes. I said it and I mean just that. I have watched my male students squirm in their seats when I've asked them to identify and talk about their sexism. There are few men, I suspect, who would say that they are sexists, and even fewer would admit that their sexism actually oppresses women. Certainly not publicly, as I've just done. No taking it back now.

To make things worse, I'm an academic, a philosopher. I'm supposed to be one of the 'enlightened' ones. Surely, we are beyond being sexists. Some, who may genuinely care about my career, will say that I'm being too risky, that I am jeopardizing my academic livelihood. Some might even say that as a black male, who has already been stereotyped as a 'crotch-grabbing, sexual fiend,' that I'm at risk of reinforcing that stereotype. (Let's be real, that racist stereotype has been around for centuries; it is already part of white America's imaginary landscape.)

Yet, I refuse to remain a prisoner of the lies that we men like to tell ourselves — that we are beyond the messiness of sexism and male patriarchy, that we don't oppress women. Let me clarify. This doesn't mean that I intentionally hate women or that I desire to oppress them. It means that despite my best intentions, I perpetuate sexism every day of my life. Please don't take this as a confession for which I'm seeking forgiveness. Confessions can be easy, especially when we know that forgiveness is immediately forthcoming.

As a sexist, I have failed women. I have failed to speak out when I should have. I have failed to engage critically and extensively their pain and suffering in my writing. I have failed to transcend the rigidity of gender roles in my own life. I have failed to challenge those poisonous assumptions that women are 'inferior' to men or to speak out loudly in the company of male philosophers who believe that feminist philosophy is just a nonphilosophical fad. I have been complicit with, and have allowed myself to be seduced by, a country that makes billions of dollars from sexually objectifying women, from pornography, commercials, video games, to Hollywood movies. I am not innocent.

I have been fed a poisonous diet of images that fragment women into mere body parts. I have also been complicit with a dominant male narrative that says that women enjoy being treated like sexual toys. In our collective male imagination, women are 'things' to be used for our visual and physical titillation. And even as I know how poisonous and false these sexist assumptions are, I am often ambushed by my own hidden sexism. I continue to see women through the male gaze that belies my best intentions not to sexually objectify them. Our collective male erotic feelings and fantasies are complicit in the degradation of women. And we must be mindful that not all women endure sexual degradation in the same way.

I recognize how my being a sexist has a differential impact on black women and women of color who are not only victims of racism, but also sexism, *my sexism*. For example, black women and women of color not only suffer from sexual objectification, but the ways in which they are objectified is linked to how they are racially depicted, some as 'exotic' and others as 'hyper-sexual.' You see, the complicity, the responsibility, the pain that I cause runs deep.

And, get this. I refuse to seek shelter; I refuse to live a lie. So, every day of my life I fight against the dominant male narrative, choosing to see women as subjects, not objects. But even as I fight, there are moments of failure. Just because I fight against sexism does not give me clean hands, as it were, at the end of the day; I continue to falter, and I continue to oppress. And even though the ways in which I oppress women is unintentional, this does not free me of being responsible.

If you are white, and you are reading this letter, I ask that you don't run to seek shelter from your own racism. Don't hide from your responsibility. Rather, begin, right now, to practice being vulnerable. Being neither a 'good' white person nor a liberal white person will get you off the proverbial hook. I consider myself to be a decent human being. Yet, I'm sexist. Take another deep breath. I ask that you try to be 'un-sutured.' If that term brings to mind a state of pain, open flesh, it is meant to do so. After all, it is painful to let go of your 'white innocence,' to use this letter as a mirror, one that refuses to show you what you want to see, one that demands that you look at the lies that you tell yourself so that you don't feel the weight of responsibility for those who live under the yoke of whiteness, your whiteness.

I can see your anger. I can see that this letter is being misunderstood. This letter is not asking you to feel bad about yourself, to wallow in guilt. That is too easy. I'm asking for you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you are racist. I'm now daring you to face a racist history which, paraphrasing Baldwin, has placed you where you are and that has formed your own racism. Again, in the spirit of Baldwin, I am asking you to enter into battle with your white self. I'm asking that you open yourself up; to speak to, to admit to, the racist poison that is inside of you.

Again, take a deep breath. Don't tell me about how many black friends you have. Don't tell me that you are married to someone of color. Don't tell me that you voted for Obama. Don't tell me that *I'm* the racist. Don't tell me that you don't see color. Don't tell me that I'm blaming whites for everything. To do so is to hide yet again. You may have never used the N-word in your life, you may hate the K.K.K., but that does not mean that you don't harbor racism and benefit from racism. After all, you are part of a system that allows you to walk into stores where you are not followed, where you get to go for a bank loan and your skin does not count against you, where you don't need to engage in 'the talk' that black people and people of color must tell their children when they are confronted by white police officers.

As you reap comfort from being white, we suffer for being black and people of color. But your comfort is linked to our pain and suffering. Just as my comfort in being male is linked to the suffering of women, which makes me sexist, so, too, you are racist. That is the gift that I want you to accept, to embrace. It is a form of knowledge that is taboo. Imagine the impact that the acceptance of this gift might have on you and the world.

Take another deep breath. I know that there are those who will write to me in the comment section with boiling anger, sarcasm, disbelief, denial. There are those who will say, 'Yancy is just an angry black man.' There are others who will say, 'Why isn't Yancy telling black people to be honest about the violence in their own black neighborhoods?' Or, 'How can Yancy say that all white people are racists?' If you are saying these things, then you've already failed to listen. I come with a gift. You're already rejecting the gift that I have to offer. This letter is about *you*. Don't change the conversation. I assure you that so many black people suffering from poverty and joblessness, which is linked to high levels of crime, are painfully

aware of the existential toll that they have had to face because they are black and, as Baldwin adds, '*for no other reason*.'

Some of your white brothers and sisters have made this leap. The legal scholar Stephanie M. Wildman, has written, 'I simply believe that no matter how hard I work at not being racist, I still am. Because part of racism is systemic, I benefit from the privilege that I am struggling to see.' And the journalism professor Robert Jensen: 'I like to think I have changed, even though I routinely trip over the lingering effects of that internalized racism and the institutional racism around me. Every time I walk into a store at the same time as a black man and the security guard follows him and leaves me alone to shop, I am benefiting from white privilege.'

What I'm asking is that you first accept the racism within yourself, accept all of the truth about what it means for you to be white in a society that was created for you. I'm asking for you to trace the binds that tie you to forms of domination that you would rather not see. When you walk into the world, you can walk with assurance; you have already signed a contract, so to speak, that guarantees you a certain form of social safety.

Baldwin argues for a form of love that is 'a state of being, or state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.' Most of my days, I'm engaged in a personal and societal battle against sexism. So many times, I fail. And so many times, I'm complicit. But I refuse to hide behind that mirror that lies to me about my 'non-sexist nobility.' Baldwin says, 'Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.' In my heart, I'm done with the mask of sexism, though I'm tempted every day to wear it. And, there are times when it still gets the better of me.

White America, are you prepared to be at war with yourself, your white identity, your white power, your white privilege? Are you prepared to show me a white self that love has unmasked? I'm asking for love in return for a gift; in fact, I'm hoping that this gift might help you to see yourself in ways that you have not seen before. Of course, the history of white supremacy in America belies this gesture of black gift-giving, this gesture of non-sentimental love. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered even as he loved.

Perhaps the language of this letter will encourage a split — not a split between black and white, but a fissure in your understanding, a space for loving a Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Jones, Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald and others. I'm suggesting a form of love that enables you to see the role that you play (even despite your anti-racist actions) in a *system* that continues to value black lives on the cheap.

Take one more deep breath. I have another gift.

If you have young children, before you fall off to sleep tonight, I want you to hold your child. Touch your child's face. Smell your child's hair. Count the fingers on your child's hand. See the miracle that is your child. And then, with as much vision as you can muster, I want you to imagine that your child is black.

In peace,

George Yancy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge and give thanks to our colleagues Milly Douglas, Anisa Zaheer, and Sarah Laycock for their assistance during this article's analysis.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Tom Denyer is a psychotherapist and counsellor with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Tom has recently completed his diploma in psychotherapy and counselling and is currently completing his master's degree, conducting research exploring student experiences of transitioning to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tom currently works as a psychotherapist in private practice.

Kat Wade is a psychotherapist and counsellor with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Coming from a background working in mental health crisis, they have recently completed their master's degree in psychotherapy and counselling with the University of Leeds. Kat currently works as a psychotherapist in private practice and at a children and young person's charity. As a black, mixed-heritage individual, they have a particular passion for racial trauma, a topic which provided the basis for their master's thesis.

Matthew Whitney is an integrative counsellor registered with the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy. Having graduated with distinction from the postgraduate diploma in counselling and psychotherapy at the University of Leeds, he now lives and works in Mid Wales. He also works as a facilitator and mediator for individuals and groups in conflict.

Dr Divine Charura is a Professor of Counselling Psychology at York St John University (England). He is a Practitioner Psychologist and Counselling Psychologist and is registered with the Health and Care Professions Council in England. Divine is also an Honorary Fellow of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy and an Adult Psychotherapist. Divine's research and therapeutic interest is in psychological trauma and mental wellbeing across the lifespan. He has worked in different international contexts. He has co-authored and edited numerous books in counselling, psychology, and psychotherapy. As a psychologist and educator, Divine's pedagogical interests are in integrative, reflective, and inquiry-based learning, and constructivist and decolonial pedagogy. Divine has co-authored and edited a number of books in counselling, psychology, and psychotherapy. These include *Love and Therapy: In relationship* (co-edited with Stephen Paul, Routledge, 2015) and with Colin Lago has co-edited the following books: *The Person-Centred Counselling and Psychotherapy Handbook: Origins, Developments and Current Applications* (Open University Press, 2016) and *Black Identities + White Therapies: Race, respect + diversity* (PCCS Books, 2021). https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/profile/2104

Dr Gillian Proctor is a lecturer in counselling and psychotherapy at the University of Leeds, UK. She is also an independent clinical psychologist and person-centred psychotherapist. She worked with clients in the NHS for 22 years before entering academia. She has written and edited numerous books, chapters, and articles particularly on the themes of ethics, politics, and power in counselling. She is passionate about negotiating complexity without reduction, dialogue with others, and among the spheres of internal psyches, the social, and the political.

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–21
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.07

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

The politics of humanitarian aid: A case study of EMDR in Cambodia

Dr Lorien S. Jordan,[*1] Dr Desiree M. Seponski,[2] Amber Kelley,[3] and Nea Krpo[4]

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Rehabilitation, Human Resources, and Communication Disorders, University of Arkansas, USA
[2]Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Georgia, USA
[3]Doctoral Candidate, Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Georgia, USA
[4]Marriage and Family Therapist, Rock Springs Positive Coaching, Caring, and Counseling, Georgia, USA

ABSTRACT

The global expansion of psychotherapy through humanitarian aid is a political act. International aid organizations assert power over resource-scarce countries, make critical decisions about who receives care, who provides care, and what modalities are delivered. Once embedded in a country, programs exert influence between international interests, local governance, and the targeted population. This study adds to the limited information on how the humanitarian aid phenomenon is experienced by the practitioners who must navigate these conflicts through a case study of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) in Cambodia. As a non-Western nation with a colonial and autogenocidal history, Cambodia offers a unique perspective for those interested in the concerns and challenges of globalized psychotherapy. As found in this case study, EMDR as humanitarian aid and a mental health movement pushes traumatology while simultaneously necessitating the need for EMDR. Findings suggest that Cambodians working as psychologists become dependent upon and caught between competing aid organizations.

KEYWORDS: humanitarian aid; Cambodia; EMDR; global mental health; responsive evaluation

[*]Contact details: lsjordan@uark.edu

The global expansion of mental health through humanitarian aid is a political act associated with conflicts between international organizations, local governance, and the clinicians and clients in the targeted country. International aid organizations assert power over resource-poor countries in making decisions about who can practice clinical services, who can receive these services, and what types of services are delivered (Kienzler, 2019). Similarly, the therapies promoted through aid organizations can be influenced by people who have developed and who seek to advance particular forms and modalities of therapeutic practice. Such top-down approaches occur when organizations act in lieu of governance rather than with it (Abramowitz, 2015). Tensions at the local level arise as concerns over what treatment is most needed and whose culture is privileged are juxtaposed to a backdrop of low funding and a desire for mental health (Harper Shehadeh et al., 2020).

Humanitarian mental health aid is connected to particular conceptualizations of mental health and treatment, and particular standpoints (Kienzler, 2020). Global endeavors to ameliorate social problems stem from Western academic groups that have eclipsed the World Health Organization's (WHO) goal of multilateralism (Saraceno, 2020). When these attempts come from a non-local context, the representation of human problems, and thus suffering, risk being disconnected from local meanings and ways of being (Saraceno, 2020). Treatments developed in other locations may be incommensurate with the local intended recipients while mechanistically normalizing a Westernized perspective of mental health (Jordan, Anderson, & Hall, 2021). The entrée of humanitarian mental health aid into a culture is guided by the idea that human suffering is universal and requires solutions outside of the culture's abilities (Kienzler, 2019, 2020). In this article, it is suggested that the appearance of humanitarian aid programs creates lasting effects in countries that are complex, risking the loss of local ways of healing while promoting dependence on other nations. Through a case study of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing's (EMDR) international humanitarian mental health response in Cambodia, we explore the nested layers of power and influence on clinicians and clinical services in that country.

THE GLOBALISATION OF MENTAL HEALTH AND THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

While humanitarian actors are beginning to recognise the importance of localized responses to mental health (Kienzler, 2019), many aid programs continue to provide treatments developed in Anglo-European and Anglo-American contexts (Abramowitz & Panter-Brick, 2015). This monocultural lens produces potentially ineffective treatments for the needs of a broader population by neglecting culturally relevant community outcomes (Jordan, Seponski, et al., 2021). Internationally, mental health providers diagnose problems with psychometric assessments and utilize treatment modalities that have been tested and validated in the West, which assumes that the experience of mental health is a universal condition (Jordan,

Seponski, et al., 2021). Such assumptions promote the idea that mental health treatments can be globally applied, in all contexts, and are universally effective. While many argue against hierarchical expansion in the broader sense (Bemme & Kirmayer, 2020), one area of mental health where it is encouraged is within humanitarian aid programs (WHO, 2013b).

Increased globalized responses to mental health stem from growing recognition of the economic burden of mental health disorders that disproportionately affect low- and middle-income countries (LMICs; Becker & Kleinman, 2013). The WHO (2013b) and other international organizations have described humanitarian crises as 'unparalleled opportunities' (p. 9) to expand mental health in resource-scarce countries (Kienzler, 2019). Whereas mental health might not be on the agenda in these countries, crises caused by natural and human-caused disasters are thought to simultaneously contribute to, and be a path out of, the global mental health burden by making space for an influx of international aid (Kienzler, 2019). Following an acute crisis, such as war or a natural disaster, to respond to the urgent needs of localities, mental healthcare is enfolded in other medical humanitarian aid rather than delivered as long-term interventions in economic, political, or governmental reforms (Abramowitz & Panter-Brick, 2015). It is assumed that short-term services can be transitioned into ongoing support programs once the acute crisis is resolved (Patel et al., 2018). Given the interest in expanding mental health resources, the rapidly expanding trauma field within crisis response has found commonality with the global mental health and humanitarian aid movements.

TRAUMA AND HUMANITARIAN CRISES

Since the latter part of the 20th century, the terms *stress* and *trauma* have become part of contemporary Western culture in such a way that they are viewed as both natural responses to distressing events and indicative of the need for professional help (Tarvydas et al., 2017). Increased focus on the impact of traumatic events and resulting symptomology has created the belief that victims of humanitarian crises, including human-caused (e.g., war, genocide) and natural (e.g., hurricane, tsunami, wildfire) disasters, should have similar trauma responses regardless of culture, context, or geolocation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Bemme & Kirmayer, 2020; Micale, 2017). Painting disasters as mental health emergencies capable of causing long-term and intergenerational psychopathology on a community invites aid organizations into these populations that are presumed to be unprepared to treat such issues (Wilson, 2014). Previously, there was an assumption that survivors of a disaster would heal using their indigenous (to the population) coping mechanisms (Beneduce, 2019). However, due to the assumed universality of acute and post-traumatic stress responses across varying cultures and populations (Lee, 2017), there has been a push to deliver Western-based humanitarian aid as the vehicle for trauma healing (Summerfield 2013; WHO, 2013b).

HUMANITARIANISM AND EMDR

Humanitarian programs are often funded by individual donations, corporations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and are implemented to ameliorate the costs in human resources that often follow natural and human-caused disasters (Wood & Sullivan, 2015). With support from the WHO (Van Ommeren et al., 2015), humanitarian programs began to deliver psychological assistance to respond to community-wide trauma responses in times of crisis. Simultaneously, arguments emerged for and against the need for, or effectiveness of, mental health interventions in times of crisis, when what appears to be most important is the securement of resources, such as shelter, food, and water (Anderson et al., 2012; Seponski et al., 2014).

EMDR, an increasingly common yet disputed Western mental health treatment (Cuijpers et al., 2020) is one such mental health treatment that foreign aid employs in response to a disaster (Shapiro, 2017). The popularity of EMDR services has been attributed, in part, to ongoing media coverage of EMDR (Shapiro & Forrest, 2016) and its promises of significant results in as little as one session (Kutz et al., 2008). The American Psychiatric Association (2004), Department of Veteran Affairs and Department of Defense (2010), and the WHO (2013a) have endorsed EMDR as a *possibly efficacious* treatment for individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The roots of EMDR's humanitarian assistance programs took shape when, in 1995, a crisis team responded to the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City (Shapiro, 2014). This incident, and the subsequent response, led to the formation of the EMDR Humanitarian Assistance Program (HAP). During times of crisis, the EMDR HAP would approach disasters in the United States of America (USA) with the intention of training local clinicians on how to use EMDR and providing direct clinical care to survivors of acute and post-traumatic stress (Shapiro, 2014). EMDR HAP then began branching into countries that had experienced long-term conflict, war, poverty, and scarcity of resources (Gelbach, 2014). The EMDR HAP created the Trauma Recovery Network to connect local volunteers to community needs as well as to form strong connections to emergency services and educate the public about trauma and its treatability (Alter-Reid et al., 2014). EMDR HAP's international work has slowly reduced as country- or region-specific EMDR humanitarian aid programs have grown (Gelbach, 2014). Due to its humanitarian work, EMDR's global reach has been prolific, especially in Southeast Asian countries (Mehrotra, 2014). In Cambodia, the mental health landscape is centered around trauma and EMDR, as an influx of humanitarian-led EMDR trainings, associations, aid groups, and NGOs have been instituted over the past decade.

MENTAL HEALTH AND THE CAMBODIAN CONTEXT

Cambodia entered the landscape of humanitarian aid recipients most prominently due to the Khmer Rouge autogenocide (1975–1979) that resulted in the loss of approximately 1.8 million lives through mass killings, starvation, and severe torture (Seponski et al., 2019). Thus, Cambodians are presumed to be inherently at a high risk of trauma, anxiety, depression, and PTSD exceeding the 'normal' range (Seponski et al., 2019). While Cambodians express that socioeconomic factors pose the biggest challenge to wellbeing, due to pervasive rates of poverty (Seponski et al., 2014), expatriate practitioners have suggested that the experiences of the Khmer Rouge created a 'culture of silence' that thwarted Cambodians' natural expression of painful memories, maintaining past trauma into the present day (Summerfield, 1998, p. 1580).

Given concerns of the risk of mental health challenges in Cambodia and the unavailability of standardized mental healthcare in the years following the Pol Pot regime and genocide, humanitarian efforts have provided a steady stream of psychotherapists, trainings, and intervention methods from the West (Chhim, 2017). These early and continued humanitarian efforts were driven by expatriate practitioners, who suggested that the events and legacy of the Pol Pot regime were, and continue to be, universally traumatic for the Cambodian population (Eichfeld et al., 2019).

In 2008, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) developed the first Master's of Psychology and Psychotherapy program delivered through a prominent, public university. RUPP has graduated approximately 1,000 bachelor's and master's students to work as psychologists throughout the nation (Sonyka, 2016); and approximately one third of the graduated master's students are working as therapists or are directly involved in mental health treatment (Stackhouse, 2016). The disparity between graduates and employed practitioners is due, in part, to the continued lack of government support for mental health services, as the Ministry of Health spends about 0.02% of the national health fund on mental health services annually (Chhim, 2017; McLaughlin & Wickeri, 2012).

Persons who deliver mental health treatments are typically employed through humanitarian-funded mental health groups and international organizations (Stackhouse, 2016). The modalities used in these practices are often dependent on the mental health models delivered and promoted by the specific needs and interests of the aid groups. It is against this backdrop that EMDR came to Cambodia (Mattheß & Sodemann, 2014). From the years 2010 to 2014, the Trauma-Aid Germany group initiated the Mekong Project to train Cambodian professional and lay counsellors in the basics of trauma and stabilization by providing basic EMDR skills (Mehrotra, 2014).

The purpose of this article is not to critique the whole of humanitarian aid and, more specifically, humanitarian mental health programs. We acknowledge the good that has come out of assistance delivered around the world in times of crisis, in resettlement camps, and

after disasters. However, we do critique the long-term effects of humanitarian programs which create a permanent internationalized presence, as is seen in Cambodia. Our critique is meant to further the conversation about the consequences of framing an entire population as potentially traumatized while living in a 'post-conflict' society (Hughes & Pupavac, 2005). Some suggest that such moves pathologise the country as dysfunctional while positioning international aid as functional. In a way, the Cambodian government becomes absolved from solving the country's issues as NGOs occupy mental health's temporal landscape (Hughes & Pupavac, 2005), which sets up a competitive field with limited resources and dependence for the organization's longevity.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

As a non-Westernized nation with a colonial history and period of autogenocide, Cambodia offers an important lens for researchers and clinicians interested in pulling apart the concerns and challenges of creating a global mental health field. In 2010, as EMDR was being integrated into Cambodian mental healthcare, Seponski spent a year living, studying, and working in Phnom Penh while on a Fulbright award. During this time, she witnessed massive changes in the political and social climate of Cambodia. In response to RUPP's request, Seponski broadly explored the effectiveness and cultural responsivity of therapeutic modalities developed in the USA and adopted within the Cambodian context. As the university was the first to incorporate EMDR, the modality became a focus of her responsive evaluation. The current case is a part of our larger study (Seponski et al., 2014, 2020) and presents an analysis of data obtained through interviews and participant observation, which provide a unique look at the effects of introducing EMDR through humanitarian means on a developing psychological field in an LMIC. Minimal research exists on how Cambodians who have been trained as psychologists perceive the practical effects of humanitarian aid. This study adds to the limited information on the humanitarian aid phenomenon and was guided by the following research question: *How do Cambodian psychologists, teachers, and supervisors experience the political landscape of EMDR as a humanitarian mental health program?*

METHOD: RESPONSIVE EVALUATION

Responsive evaluation (Seponski et al., 2013; Stake, 2004) was employed to generate information and suggestions for the improvement of the training, implementation, and adoption of EMDR (see Seponski et al., 2013 for a detailed description of responsive evaluation methodology). The research process began by engaging with multiple stakeholders to identify the scope of services provided, conceptualize the stakeholders' concerns, and winnow out issues through this engagement. In this process, it became clear that the stakeholders were interested in the implementation of EMDR and its appropriateness for Cambodian therapists and a Cambodian clinical population. A core component of responsive

evaluation is focusing on the unique needs of a unique population and amplifying silenced and marginalized voices. Thus, when conducting an evaluation of a therapeutic approach, the focus is not on assessing whether the therapy is inherently valuable as a model but whether it is valuable to a given population. In the original study (Seponski et al., 2020), common themes emerged relating to the political influence of EMDR—the focus of the current analysis. Thus, in this article, we do not describe how Cambodian clients and therapist students feel about the treatment but how the providers experience the political landscape of humanitarian mental health programs, and EMDR specifically.

DATA COLLECTION AND PARTICIPANTS

As is common in responsive evaluation, Seponski collected data through multiple qualitative methods including focus groups (*n* = 5), semi-structured interviews (*n* = 21), surveys (*n* = 68), case illustrations (*n* = 10), and case presentations (*n* = 16). She also conducted 11 months of observations, which included observations of EMDR supervision and an EMDR disaster response intervention that occurred during the deadly Koh Pich bridge stampede (Eisenbruch, 2020). The responsive evaluation method encourages data from multiple perspectives. For the current case, stakeholders (*n* = 95) included master's students (*n* = 16) who were enrolled in Cambodia's only public university program in psychology and who trained in EMDR level 1 (as a minimum requirement of their program, some were trained in level 2 optionally); peer supervisors (*n* = 11); therapy workshop participants (*n* = 54); and Koh Pich stampede EMDR crisis response therapists (*n* = 14). We also developed a two-tier cultural advisory board (*n* = 11) of native Cambodians (*n* = 5; level 1) and non-native clinical supervisors (*n* = 6; level 2) from five different countries. Two levels were used for the advisory board to amplify local knowledge (level 1) and decrease the chances of replicating a power structure privileging an external way of knowing (level 2). While all advisory board members were familiar with EMDR, only one level 2 supervisor was formally trained.

For the semi-structured interviews, criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was employed to obtain a sample of participants that represented a range of experiences and perspectives. Interviews occurred in locations that were convenient for participants, including cafes and classrooms. Interviews were digitally recorded, followed informed consent, and lasted 1–3 hours. Following the individual interviews, five interviewees participated in a focus group (2.5 hours). Throughout this case study, Seponski engaged in participant observation and taught at the university, taking extensive field notes of observations and informal interviews with students and the cultural advisory board. The field notes provided rich field data to triangulate formally gathered data. For further details on participants, supervisors, and methods, see Seponski et al. (2014).

As all authors are US citizens and mental health practitioners, it is important that we situate ourselves in relation to Cambodia and EMDR. Jordan is a critical international health

researcher, who works to unravel the colonizing effects of Westernized mental health practices in indigenous contexts. For the past six years, after an extended research trip to Cambodia, she has continued to collaborate on projects evaluating Cambodia's mental health system. Seponski has been teaching, researching, and collaborating in Cambodia for 13 years, lived in Cambodia for one year, and is EMDR trained. The department of psychology at a university in Cambodia requested her assistance in evaluating the use of EMDR in Cambodia, suggesting she was neutral/unbiased in whether it 'worked' because she was not the one teaching, implementing, or funding it. Kelley lived in Cambodia for three months, has been conducting research on Cambodian mental health for two-and-a-half years, and is EMDR trained. Krpo is new to working with Cambodians and mental health practice but focuses her scholarship and clinical work on improving mental health with refugee populations in the USA.

ANALYSIS

Consistent with responsive evaluation, data analysis followed the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through open coding, we reviewed data line by line to identify relevant initial codes. During this phase, we grouped together conceptually similar ideas to condense and connect codes in the creation of tentative categories. As categories were identified, we moved to axial coding, positioning topics that were related by similarities in contexts and consequences under main categories to create subcategories. During selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the categories and subcategories were unified into a core category with a central theme that responded to the central phenomenon of interest.

FINDINGS: A COMPLEX POLITICAL CONTEXT

Through our analysis, it became clear that the political context surrounding EMDR directly impacted the implementation and acceptance of modalities in Cambodia. This context was multifactorial in that it intersected with the foreign influence of EMDR at the local level and the interplay between the interests of two competing EMDR organizations (EMDR Institute and EMDR International Association). Our participants described feeling the external pressures associated with these factors, which caused them to question the origins of outside interest in Cambodia. Statements gave accounts of the delicate balance needed to meet the requirements of funders, trainers, and project managers, while simultaneously obtaining the needed education and therapeutic treatments. From tensions highlighted in the data emerged two categories: (1) *the foreign push* and (2) *caught in between EMDR associations*. Throughout this article, pseudonyms are used for participants based on their role (e.g., S: student therapists; CA: cultural advisors). To protect participants' identities and maintain confidentiality, results are often presented in summaries or paraphrased quotes (Pickering & Kara, 2017).

THE FOREIGN PUSH

The first theme was centered around concerns over why and how EMDR was introduced to Cambodia. Many participants felt this introduction to be a foreign push at the expense of the local wisdom within Cambodia or as an attempt to culturally adapt the method. For a country that has experienced a long history of colonialism, this is a particularly poignant theme expressed from a variety of perspectives.

The overarching concern was evidenced in statements from participants who worried about being used for others' gains. They shared that, as Cambodians, they were at risk of manipulation by foreigners who could profit off them, while their own financial stability and that of Cambodia did not improve. This was especially true when considering how money generated could return to foreign lands. In part, this financing was accrued by the requirements of an EMDR trainer's certification and obtaining grant funding to provide services in the country through NGOs and other entities. They also expressed a fear that Cambodians would be exploited for research and publication purposes. As S9 stated, 'To be honest, the supervisor also runs a business; I think she wants to help, but she asks us to go along'—indicating concern that while the supervisor may care about the needs of Cambodians, her primary interest is her business. Similarly, participants were concerned that the push for EMDR appeared more focused on the model rather than the health of the country.

Participants criticized the foreign push to use EMDR, stating that it was 'foreigners pushing their pet projects.' At the same time, faculty members recognized a sense of desperation for funding and education in Cambodia—a need that made administrators unable to say 'no' to outside support and instead comply with the use of EMDR in their program. To some participants, EMDR appeared to be little more than an integrative and derivative therapy packaged with eye movements. These participants expressed concern about the usefulness of EMDR for the Cambodian population, when students could be learning different modes of therapy that required less funding and had fewer implementation challenges, as expressed by participant CA3:

> If EMDR is going to improve their quality of life in any way, that's great, but the time, energy, and money spent to implement EMDR could be used in better ways with a longer lasting effect. If EMDR is someone's project, that's good, but other stuff should be focused on now, especially with the education level and understanding where it is now.

As noted in CA3's statement, many participants questioned the relevance of EMDR for Cambodians over the relevance for stakeholders. In part, the questioning related to concerns over the hard push for implementation without the foreign implementers having first conducted an evaluation or empirical validation.

The frustration with the push for EMDR was best summarized by a participant who noted that while foreigners bring the model, they are insensitive to criticism about it and ultimately

unwilling to make cultural adjustments. Participants expressed concern about the foreigners interested in 'helping Cambodians', who did not listen to the locals when they suggested changes relevant for the population; for instance, refusal to translate manuals or adapt scaling and other questions. Participants desired for foreigners to actively engage with persons familiar with Cambodia as cultural brokers. They felt it was important to discuss the methods of integrating EMDR into the curriculum rather than simply insisting on its inclusion. Focus group participants described how EMDR had been demonstrated as successful in other Asian contexts (e.g., China, Indonesia, India), where the protocols were adapted, and technical terms were localized. That locally appropriate measures had been developed in other Asian countries left some participants wondering 'Why not here?' and overlooks the between—and within—group differences across Asian cultures and within the Cambodian context.

Similarly, participants questioned the creation of a specifically Cambodian EMDR association. Participant S2 asked, 'What does it mean to make an EMDR association? Does that mean something to Cambodian people or does that mean something to EMDR?' The consensus in the focus group was that an EMDR association may be beneficial. Ultimately, however, these participants were concerned that its creation before the development of a general Cambodian Psychological Association would exclude rather than unite. Such an organization might induce therapists to become trained in EMDR simply to belong to an organizing body.

CAUGHT IN BETWEEN EMDR ASSOCIATIONS

Throughout the interviews, participants shared the tensions felt regarding the international political push for EMDR, which was magnified by the disconnection between the EMDR Institute and EMDR International Association (EMDRIA). Per participants' reports, the politicized conflicts between the two groups and their desire for viability directly impacted the experiences of Cambodian therapists. Participants felt that political tensions revolved around the power associated with grant funding and EMDR accreditation standards, which spilled over into ideas about who should be trained (nurses, students, counsellors, or laypeople).

There was also a general concern about how and who could receive supervision. The certification of the Cambodia-based supervisor as an EMDRIA-recognized trainer, facilitator, and supervisor influenced whether they could also supervise therapists and students of the Trauma-Aid Germany EMDR project (TAG)—the major employers in the area. Neither organization would accept the other's standards. Participant CA7 described that TAG did not allow EMDRIA supervisors because they were dissatisfied with the training. Concerns included students not having enough theoretical knowledge, a lack of live supervision, and issues arising when personally observing the students' use of EMDR.

The faculty was equally divided on how they perceived TAG, but most agreed that they were playing with a strong hand and questioned their interests. A few cultural advocates felt strongly that Cambodians were already being trained by EMDRIA, and the introduction of TAG confused matters. Further, they remained concerned about the responsivity of training therapists without a TAG-specific in-country supervisor. The EMDRIA in-country supervisor suggested that they would offer services but was not invited, and often overlooked, for Trauma-Aid Germany/HAP EMDR meetings.

The Cambodian-based supervisor expressed disappointment with the two organizations, citing that their conflict was short-sighted and unfortunate. Attempts to create collaboration between the two groups failed as the groups were non-responsive to attempts, emails, and phone calls. The supervisor worried that TAG's inability to provide an in-country supervisor would mean that the TAG supervisees would contact them, and they could not refuse. However, this supervisor felt that while they wanted to help, they could not manage the additional responsibility of more supervisees.

In response to questions about the tension, CA2 stated, 'Trauma-Aid Germany is going to do what Trauma-Aid Germany wants to do. They've got their minds set on Southeast Asia.' This individual shared that they felt TAG's goal was to expand and become the recognized EMDR provider, rather than to genuinely integrate services. At the same time, almost all participants agreed that the trainings offered by TAG were in-depth and addressed ongoing needs for additional training.

Regardless of the interest group and funders (e.g., EMDRIA and TAG), participants overwhelmingly agreed with focus group members that 'EMDR is trying to show the world that it is the best' and that it was implemented not just for the sake of the locals but for promoting EMDR itself. Students and faculty members expressed concern over the students being put in the middle of EMDR politics. Students noted extreme awkwardness when working with each of the EMDR groups and when talking about one group to the other, as reported on numerous occasions by several students and faculty members. One faculty member noted that students continually expressed discomfort, both directly and indirectly, about being caught in the crossfire between the groups. Being caught in between was highlighted when several of the expatriate clinicians who were working as supervisors reported that they felt forced to leave the country due to the conflict between the associations. The students and teachers felt loyalty to their supervisors and did not know with whom to discuss future projects and translation and whom to involve in the future of EMDR in Cambodia. At the same time, TAG, as the largest employer of mental health projects at the time, offered stable positions and opportunities to work as psychologists. Many participants noted feeling excited about the opportunity to work with TAG and have funding for employment. Yet, they were also very sad to see their supervisors leave and worried about the future of EMDR in Cambodia and the safety of their clients without weekly live supervision.

DISCUSSION

Throughout this case study, participants depicted how the political influences of therapeutic humanitarian aid occurring at the international level affect local operations and operators. Humanitarian mental health assistance in Cambodia, as in other countries, functions within a dynamic and complex social, political, and economic context (McKinney, 2007). In our study, it became clear that competing aid organizations that received funding from external sources designated the type of therapy utilized and promoted their own needs at the exclusion of others. These actions were taken to the economic benefit of the organization, including inducing therapists to pay for training and ongoing supervision, and for the exposure that occurs when a type of therapy enters a community where it was previously unavailable.

NGOs and other humanitarian aid organizations have their own political agendas (Kienzler & Pedersen, 2012; Mercer, 2002). As seen in our study, the interviewed students and faculty members felt that there were blurred boundaries between the humanitarian mission and economic objectives of the organizations' design and implementation of mental health interventions. These blurred boundaries existed within the organizations themselves, the intersections between the organizations' mission and the country's political climate, and the cultural understandings of both home and host country, and were further blurred by the political agendas of the organizations.

THE BLURRING OF EMDR'S EFFECTIVENESS

EMDR associations refer to their research as providing evidence of EMDR's effectiveness, citing the WHO's support for its use in humanitarian situations (Van Bennekum, 2013). However, this evidence is frequently contested as having high rates of bias in research design and publishing (Cuijpers et al., 2020). According to the WHO's (2013a) report on treatment, there is no clinical consensus on EMDR's effectiveness. However, the report did suggest that EMDR could possibly be efficacious for persons with PTSD, if provided by trained and supervised therapists with adequate access to resources, including ongoing supervision (WHO, 2013a). Furthermore, it stated that evidence is lacking for EMDR's use by non-specialized persons, who do not have the capacity to make differential diagnoses, and the EMDR training manual requires a master's degree and licensure to practice (WHO, 2013a). From our study, it appears that EMDR's international push into Cambodia has disregarded the WHO's recommendations and EMDR's own training. It was clear throughout the study that the EMDR associations within Cambodia frequently trained non-master's level clinicians, that there was a lack of consistent supervision, and a significant lack of available resources.

THE PROBLEMATICS OF EMDR'S PUSH

For any aid organization to thrive and survive, the services that is provides must be accepted in the local context and show evidence of positive results (Kienzler, 2019, 2020). In our study, the need for credibility created a dynamic wherein the programs appeared to compete for providers and resources. Students were trained in traumatology and in the use of EMDR, often in conjunction with the organizations. Depending on which aid organization trained the students, they had the possibility of being hired. On the one hand, this provided needed employment to Cambodians; on the other hand, as community members became staff members, it appeared to create local receptivity to the aid interventions simply because of the possibility of gaining employment. Thus, there was a broader local acceptance of the program, which then could signal the success of the program to funders and government organizations. According to similar studies on humanitarian aid and mental health, simply the appearance of support for one approach over another provides legitimacy and interest in that approach (Kienzler, 2019, 2020; Pupavac, 2002). Another problem is that once funding is depleted, there is no method of continued sustainability, and aid organizations may leave to their home countries without infrastructure in place in the host country (Kienzler, 2019).

In the USA and other countries, it is becoming increasingly common for professional ethics to imply that providers should leave a small cultural footprint, adapt to the local culture, and not force their own culture on the communities (Jordan, Anderson, & Hall, 2021; Jordan, Seponski, et al., 2021; Seponski et al., 2013). Yet, when humanitarian programs come to host countries, the interventions run the risk of being culturally inappropriate while increasing the focus on decontextualized suffering (Pupavac, 2002). It is postulated that when aid programs treat mental health problems, they assign an overarching mental health diagnosis to a community that is experiencing normal distress responses during disasters (Pupavac, 2002; Summerfield, 2008, 2013).

Many in the field of EMDR see global trauma as an issue of historic proportions and suggest that EMDR can cure a variety of manifestations of trauma, such as interpersonal violence, while promoting increases in a community's economic, social, and cultural productivity (Gelbach, 2014; Shapiro, 2014). Authors have suggested that millions of people are exposed to traumatic events every year and have no access to treatment (Benjet et al., 2016). Kienzler (2020) described the challenges of mental health humanitarian aid when treatment depends on the clinical population 'fitting' into a diagnostic category—in Cambodia's case, post-traumatic stress. She found that in Kosovo, when international mental health was imported to a resource-scarce context, practitioners reduced complex responses to distress to produce 'diagnosable and treatable patients' (Kienzler, 2020, p. 60). As clients were created, the treatments were necessitated.

In our study, it was clear that the aid programs were aimed at training the providers in EMDR with a focus on trauma, and many interviewees felt that there was no real

consideration of Cambodia's unique context. Instead, they were expected to treat their clients with treatments designed for post-traumatic stress, which required having traumatized clients. As our participants shared, they felt it would be better to have a broader training experience that could enable them to work with multiple clinical issues. Participants routinely expressed concerns that EMDR was not being specifically adapted or evaluated for Cambodians. Consequently, the aid programs risked pathologizing community response to possible trauma, and overlooked the resiliency and traditional methods of healing indigenous to Cambodia (Kienzler, 2020).

Our results align with the WHO (2013a), which suggested that the use of EMDR in diverse situations must proceed with caution, as cultures may interpret the method as inappropriate. Authors have emphasized the importance of cultural consideration of individualistic Western ideals, in which diagnoses such as PTSD are based, as well as treatments that coincide that might not be applicable in collectivist cultures (Jordan et al., 2019; Seponski et al., 2014). In our observations, it did not appear that the EMDR implementers took a culturally informed approach to clinical training and service implementation. Instead, participants described how the aid organizations replicated the dominant power structures that are disempowering to Cambodian therapists.

According to participants, the focus on EMDR specifically was less appealing; rather, what was considered most beneficial would be continued support for, and training of, multiple modalities of mental health treatment. However, there was also clear recognition that with a lack of infrastructure and funding, they were at the mercy of aid organizations. All the participants felt that an important step for all of Cambodia would be the creation of a general psychology association, with a possible EMDR special interest group. Less clear was what the existence of such an association would look like and who the leaders would be, but they desired to help take on that role. If an EMDR association was formed, S8 suggested that doing so in a culturally responsive manner would assist in creating genuine engagement with the modality. Participants' suggestions included engaging students of RUPP as members, providing additional training, offering EMDR workshops led by experts and experienced clinicians, and developing an EMDR research project to investigate applied clinical services in Cambodia.

CONCLUSION

Humanitarian efforts are determined by many factors, including local and national resources. The availability of trained professionals (O'Hanlon & Budosan, 2015) combined with a lack of a coordinated plan of intervention can reduce the impact of aid provided (Dickson & Bangpan, 2018). The global mental health movement promotes the dependence of LMICs on foreign diagnoses for understanding distress and, thus, foreign aid and practices to promote healing (Titchkosky & Aubrecht, 2015). This cycle of distress, diagnosis, and aid furthers the

colonization of LMICs, as the medical movement spreads with the globalization of mental health, often at the expense of considering the impacts and complexities of social inequalities that affect the human condition and the problems that mental healthcare attempts to solve (Titchkosky & Aubrecht, 2015). The conceptualization of what encapsulates a mental health issue as well as a health concern is not singular in nature but is dependent on social and local concepts. When interventions are blindly adopted from one culture to another, we risk neglecting the unique problem-solving and coping skills of the community. Attempts to intervene can devalue the cultural knowledge and resources of a population and impede the normal processing of events that occur. This engages a system whereby distress is medicalized and pathologized without attempting to uncover how such distress might be growth inducing, healing, and community building. As seen in the case study of Cambodia, EMDR, and humanitarian aid, global mental health movements are pushing ideas of PTSD and trauma while simultaneously pushing the application of EMDR. For the country to truly heal from its history of colonization and autogenocide, it must be supported in developing and studying therapies specific to Cambodia. Aid organizations can support these efforts through assisting in training, developing, and evaluating multiple modalities and their ability to culturally respond to social problems.

REFERENCES

Abramowitz, S. (2015). What happens when MSF leaves? Humanitarian departure and medical sovereignty in postconflict Liberia. In S. A. Abramowitz & C. Panter-Brick (Eds.), *Medical humanitarianism. Ethnographies of practice* (pp. 137–154). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Abramowitz, S., & Panter-Brick, C. (2015). Bringing life into relief: Comparative ethnographies of humanitarian practice. In S. A. Abramowitz & C. Panter-Brick (Eds.), *Medical humanitarianism. Ethnographies of practice* (pp. 1–19). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Alter-Reid, K., Colelli, G., & Simons, N. (2014). When disaster strikes our local communities: US EMDR trauma recovery network coordinators reflect on lessons learned. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, *8*(4), 205–214. https://doi.org/10.1891/1933-3196.8.4.205

American Psychiatric Association. (2004). *Practice guideline for the treatment of patients with acute stress disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder.* https://psychiatryonline.org/pb/assets/raw/sitewide/practice_guidelines/guidelines/acutestressdisorderptsd.pdf

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596

Anderson, M. B., Brown, D., & Jean, I. (2012). *Time to listen: Hearing people on the receiving end of international aid*. CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

Becker, A. E., & Kleinman, A. (2013). Mental health and the global agenda. *New England Journal of Medicine*, *369*(1), 66–73. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMra1110827

Bemme, D., & Kirmayer, L. J. (2020). Global mental health: Interdisciplinary challenges for a field in motion. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *57*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461519898035

Beneduce, R. (2019). 'Madness and despair are a force': Global mental health, and how people and cultures challenge the hegemony of Western psychiatry. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry,* 43, 710–723. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-019-09658-1

Benjet, C., Bromet, E., Karam, E. G., Kessler, R. C., McLaughlin, K. A., Ruscio, A. M., Shahly, V., Stein, D. J., Petukhova, M., Hill, E., Alonso, J., Atwoli, L., Bunting, B., Bruffaerts, R., Caldas-de-Almeida, J. M., de Girolamo, G., Florescu, S., Gureje, O., Huang, Y.... & Koenen, K. C. (2016). The epidemiology of traumatic event exposure worldwide: Results from the World Mental Health Survey Consortium. *Psychological Medicine*, *46*(2), 327–343. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291715001981

Chhim, S. (2017). Mental health in Cambodia. In H. Minas, & M. Lewis (Eds.), *Mental health in Asia and the Pacific: Historical and cultural perspectives* (135–144). Springer Science + Business Media.

Cuijpers, P., Veen, S. C., V., Sijbrandij, M., Yoder, W., & Cristea, I. A. (2020). Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing for mental health problems: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*, *49*(3), 165–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/16506073.2019.1703801

Department of Veterans Affairs & Department of Defense. (2010). *VA/DoD clinical practice guideline for the management of PTSD and acute stress reaction.*

Dickson, K., & Bangpan, M. (2018). What are the barriers to, and facilitators of, implementing and receiving MHPSS programmes delivered to populations affected by humanitarian emergencies? A qualitative evidence synthesis. *Global Mental Health*, *5*(21). https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2018.12

Eichfeld, C., Farrell, D., Mattheß, M., Bumke, P., Sodemann, U., Ean, N., Phoen, B., Direzkia, Y., Firmansyah, F., Sumampouw, N., & Mattheß, H. (2019). Trauma stabilisation as a sole treatment intervention for post-traumatic stress disorder in Southeast Asia. *The Psychiatric Quarterly,* 90, 63–88. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-018-9598-z

Eisenbruch, M. (2020). Why disasters happen: Cultural framings from the Diamond Island stampede in Cambodia. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, *44*, 101423. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2019.101423

Gelbach, R. (2014). EMDR humanitarian assistance programs: 20 years and counting. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, *8*(4), 196–204. https://doi.org/10.1891/1933-3196.8.4.196

Harper Shehadeh, M., van't Hof, E., Schafer, A., van Ommeren, M., Farooq, S., Hamdani, S. U., Koyiet, P., Akhtar, P., Masood, A., Nazir, H., Dawson, K., & Albanese, E. (2020). Using a person-generated mental health outcome measure in large clinical trials in Kenya and Pakistan: Self-perceived problem responses in diverse communities. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *57*(1), 108–123. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461519854831

Hughes, C., & Pupavac, V. (2005). Framing post-conflict societies: International pathologisation of Cambodia and the post-Yugoslav states. *Third World Quarterly, 26*(6), 873–889. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590500089232

Jordan, L. S., Anderson, L. A., & Hall, J. N. (2021). Sowing the seeds: Sociocultural resistance in the psychological sciences. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000462

Jordan, L. S., Seponski, D. M., & Armes, S. (2019). 'Oh, it is a special gift you give to me…': A phenomenological analysis of counsellors in Cambodia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 10*(2), 146–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/21507686.2019.1629470

Jordan, L. S., Seponski, D. M., Hall, J. N., & Bermúdez, J. M. (2021). 'Hopefully you've landed the waka on the shore': Negotiated spaces in New Zealand's bicultural mental health system. *Transcultural Psychiatry*. Advanced online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F13634615211014347

Kienzler, H. (2019). Mental health system reform in contexts of humanitarian emergencies: toward a theory of 'practice-based evidence'. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry, 43*, 636–662. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-019-09641-w

Kienzler, H. (2020). 'Making patients' in postwar and resource-scarce settings. Diagnosing and treating mental illness in postwar Kosovo. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, *34*(1), 59–76. https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12554

Kienzler, H., & Pedersen, D. (2012). Strange but common bedfellows: The relationship between humanitarians and the military in developing psychosocial interventions for civilian populations affected by armed conflict. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 49*(3-4), 492–518. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461512447927

Kutz, I., Resnik, V., & Dekel, R. (2008). The effect of single-session modified EMDR on acute stress syndromes. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research, 2*(3), 190–200. https://doi.org/10.1891/1933-3196.2.3.190

Lee, D. A. (2017). A person-centered political critique of current discourses in post-traumatic stress disorder and post-traumatic growth. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, *15*(2), e1411. https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1411

Mattheß, H., & Sodemann, U. (2014). Trauma-Aid, humanitarian assistance programme Germany. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, *8*(4), 225–232. https://doi.org/10.1891/1933-3196.8.4.225

McKinney, K. (2007). Culture, power, and practice in a psychosocial program for survivors of torture and refugee trauma. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *44*(3), 482–503. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461507081643

McLaughlin, D., & Wickeri, E. (2012). Special report: Mental health and human rights in Cambodia. *Fordham International Law Journal*, *35*(4), 895–967. https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2590&context=ilj

Mehrotra, S. (2014). Humanitarian projects and growth of EMDR therapy in Asia. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, *8*(4), 252–259. https://doi.org/10.1891/1933-3196.8.4.252

Mercer, C. (2002). NGOs, civil society and democratization: A critical review of the literature. *Progress in Development Studies, 2*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1191/1464993402ps027ra

Micale, M. S. (2017). Toward a global history of trauma. In J. Crouthamel & P. Leese (Eds.), *Psychological trauma and the legacies of the first world war* (pp. 289–310). Palgrave Macmillan.

O'Hanlon, K. P., & Budosan, B. (2015). Access to community-based mental healthcare and psychosocial support within a disaster context. *BJPsych International*, *12*(2), 44–47. https://doi.org/10.1192/s2056474000000295

Patel, V., Saxena, S., Lund, C., Thornicroft, G., Baingana, F., Bolton, P., Chisholm, D., Collins, P. Y., Cooper, J. L., Eaton, J., Herrman, H., Herzallah, M. M., Huang, Y., Jordans, M. J. D., Kleinman, A., Medina-Mora, M. E., Morgan, E., Niaz, U., Omigbodun, O., … UnÜtzer, J. (2018). The Lancet Commission on global mental health and sustainable development. *The Lancet*, *392*(10157), 1553–1598. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(18)31612-x

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Pickering, L., & Kara, H. (2017). Presenting and representing others: Towards an ethics of engagement. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 20*(3), 299–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2017.1287875

Pupavac, V. (2002). Pathologizing populations and colonizing minds: International psychosocial programs in Kosovo. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, *27*(4), 489–511. https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540202700404

Saraceno, B. (2020). Rethinking global mental health and its priorities. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences, 29,* e64. https://doi.org/10.1017/S204579601900060X

Seponski, D. M., Bermudez, J. M., & Lewis, D. C. (2013). Creating culturally responsive family therapy models and research: Introducing the use of responsive evaluation as a method. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 39*(1), 28–42. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00282.x

Seponski, D. M., Lahar, C. J., Khann, S., Kao, S., & Schunert, T. (2019). Four decades following the Khmer rouge: Sociodemographic factors impacting depression, anxiety and PTSD in Cambodia. *Journal of Mental Health, 28*(2), 175–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2018.1466039

Seponski, D. M., Lewis, D. C., Bermudez, J. M., & Sotelo, J. M. (2020). Cambodian therapists' perspectives of Western-based psychotherapy models: Addressing the challenges for service providers. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, *31*(1-2) 36–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/08975353.2020.1759018

Seponski, D. M., Lewis, D. C., & Megginson, M. C. (2014). A responsive evaluation of mental health treatment in Cambodia: Intentionally addressing poverty to increase cultural responsiveness in therapy. *Global Public Health, 9*(10), 1211–1224. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2014.947302

Shapiro, F. (2014). EMDR therapy humanitarian assistance programs: Treating the psychological, physical, and societal effects of adverse experiences worldwide. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research, 8*(4), 181–186. https://doi.org/10.1891/1933-3196.8.4.181

Shapiro, F. (2017). *Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy: Basic principles, protocols, and procedures*. The Guilford Press.

Shapiro, F., & Forrest, M. S. (2016). *EMDR: The breakthrough therapy for overcoming anxiety, stress, and trauma.* Basic Books.

Sonyka, V. (2016, January 13). Psychologist profession remains short: Experts warn. *Khmer Times*. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/34502/psychologist-profession-remains-short-experts-warn/

Stackhouse, R. (2016, October 1). Program looks to keep psychologists sane. *The Cambodia Daily*. https://english.cambodiadaily.com/editors-choice/program-looks-keep-psychologists-sane-118722/

Stake, R. E. (2004). *Standards-based & responsive evaluation*. Sage.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (Vol. 15). Sage.

Summerfield, D. (1998). 'Trauma' and the experience of war: A reply. *The Lancet*, *351*(9115), 1580–1581. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(05)60057-8

Summerfield, D. (2008). How scientifically valid is the knowledge base of global mental health? *British Medical Journal*, *336*(7651), 992–994. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39513.441030.ad

Summerfield, D. (2013). 'Global mental health' is an oxymoron and medical imperialism. *British Medical Journal, 346*, f3509. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.f3509

Tarvydas, V. M., Levers, L. L., & Teahen, P. R. (2017). Ethical guidelines for mass trauma and complex humanitarian emergencies. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *95*(3), 260–268. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12140

Titchkosky, T., & Aubrecht, K. (2015). WHO's MIND, whose future? Mental health projects as colonial logics. *Social Identities*, *21*(1), 69–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2014.996994

Van Bennekum, H. (2013, November 8). *World Health Organization (WHO) recommends EMDR in new guidelines*. https://emdrcanada.org/world-health-organization-news/

Van Ommeren, M., Hanna, F., Weissbecker, I. & Ventevogel, P. (2015). Mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian emergencies. *EMHJ-Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, *21*(7), 498–502. https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/255243

Wilson, J. P. (2014). *Trauma, transformation, and healing: An integrated approach to theory research & post traumatic therapy*. Routledge.

Wood, R. M., & Sullivan, C. (2015). Doing harm by doing good? The negative externalities of humanitarian aid provision during civil conflict. *The Journal of Politics*, *77*(3), 736–748. https://doi.org/10.1086/681239

World Health Organization. (2013a). *Guidelines for the management of conditions that are specifically related to stress*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241505406

World Health Organization. (2013b). *Building back better: Sustainable mental health care after emergencies.* https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/building-back-better-sustainable-mental-health-care-after-emergencies

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by a Fulbright Program grant sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State and administered by the Institute of International Education; the University of Georgia Graduate School Deans Award, Social Sciences; and University of Houston—Clear Lake Faculty Support Research Funds.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Lorien Jordan, PhD, LMFT, is an Assistant Professor of Educational Statistics and Research Methods, in the University of Arkansas's College of Education and Health Professions. As a critical qualitative methodologist, Lorien's research focuses on the development of multisystemic and rigorous methodologies, data collection, and analysis. Her current work includes the application of critical theory to investigate the institutional discourses, policies, and practices that constrain social participation in healthcare, with a specific focus on critical whiteness, settler colonialism, and global mental health.

Desiree M. Seponski, PhD, LMFT, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Science, Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Georgia; visiting faculty at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia; and President-elect of the International Family Therapy Association. Her research focuses globally on culturally responsive therapeutic intervention with immigrant and historically marginalized families. Her current work explores the implementation of Western-based therapy models in

Southeast Asia, mental and relational health in Cambodian families (USA and abroad), complex trauma, and the use of photovoice and mixed methods.

Amber Kelley, M.MFT, is a PhD candidate in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at the University of Georgia, with an emphasis on marriage and family therapy. Her research explores the mental health outcomes, behaviors, and services of populations historically impacted by systemic trauma. Currently, her work examines the cross-cultural implementation of Western psychology and psychotherapy models in non-Western populations and the mental and physical health of Cambodian elder refugees, as well as an emphasis on theoretical conceptualizations of systemic and intergenerational traumatic stress.

Nea Krpo, MFT, is in Mercer Universities' Master of Family Therapy program. In her clinical practice, Nea provides services to a diverse population based in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Her research focuses on inclusion and diversity and the experiences of LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized populations within higher education and therapy. Her work explores the importance of language, and effects of microaggressions using qualitative methods.

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–29
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.08

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Therapeutic reflections on the 'pandemic'

Bert Olivier,* Honorary Professor of Philosophy, University of the Free State, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to think through the many, often contradictory aspects of the present 'pandemic', with a view to arriving at a cogent notion of what 'psychotherapy' would mean under these circumstances. It begins with a note on the hermeneutic meaning of 'prejudice' and how this applies to the present article, and then proceeds to a consideration of the relevance of the idea of 'mass psychosis', informed by Leonard Shlain's characterisation of the 16th century witch hunts in western Europe, in the course of which more than half a million women were executed as supposed 'witches'. This suggests a parallel with today's manifestation of what is arguably a mass psychosis, induced by endemic fear of lethal contamination, fed by global governmental responses (prescribed by the World Health Organization) to the alleged 'pandemic' caused by this pathogen. Aspects of what might be called the current 'vaccine tyranny' are investigated, as well as the nature of a 'mass psychosis', which is explored from various perspectives (including Lacanian psychoanalysis), before attention shifts to the issue of appropriate psychotherapy, with recourse to the thinking of Julia Kristeva on 'revolt' and Lacan on the 'revolutionary's choice'.

KEYWORDS: group behaviour; mass psychosis; 'pandemic'; psychoanalysis; revolt; 'vaccines'; witch craze

*Contact details: OlivierG1@ufs.ac.za

> '…if you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you' (From *If*, by Rudyard Kipling, 1895).

INTRODUCTION: A NOTE ON 'PREJUDICE'

In his major work on hermeneutics (the art of interpretation), *Truth and Method* (2004), Hans-Georg Gadamer, offering a clarification of Martin Heidegger's notions of 'fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception', famously wrote about the unavoidability of 'pre-judgement' or 'prejudice', and of the structure of a 'hermeneutic circle' in the process of understanding and interpretation. Here—in order to come to interpretive grips with the matter or thing at hand—one faces the task of repeatedly modifying one's initial understanding as more aspects of this 'thing' come into view. The latter could be a literary, scientific, or philosophical text, or texts, or it could be a series of events unfolding around one (which, for interpretive purposes, display the structure of a 'text', metaphorically speaking). Gadamer elaborates as follows:

> A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 269)

This description is, of course, a rough abbreviation of the whole. The process that Heidegger describes is that every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side-by-side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation.

Such repeated fore-projection, on the basis of 'fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception' occurs all the time in human beings' lives—if there is one thing we are as humans, it is constantly interpreting beings. The present circumstances, under which the world has witnessed the emergence of what has been dubbed a 'pandemic' (a contestable term, given the relatively low mortality rate associated with it; see Worldometer Coronavirus https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries), are no exception. Hence, in Gadamerian terms, as these events unfolded one was incrementally subjected to more news and information concerning the spread of what was called a 'novel coronavirus' (SARS-Cov-2), and the illness that it gave rise to was given a name, to wit, COVID-19. Attempts to understand its origin were published in news media, with an initial (apparent) agreement that it probably came from an animal like a bat, through an intermediary animal like a pangolin, and that it was probably transferred to a human being at a so-called 'wet-market' in Wuhan, China. Guided by the fore-conception that a micro-biotic entity such as a virus originates somewhere, possibly in natural surroundings, and having read several articles on this

supposed scenario—'supposed', because no one could be certain of the accuracy of this reconstruction of the virus's provenance—it appeared to me to be (provisionally) confirmed that this pathogen was of natural origin, and that it had, through 'zoonotic' transfer, infected humans. Hence, the fore-projection in my early writings on the matter affirmed COVID-19's natural origin, as in for example, the introduction of my book *Why Nothing Seems to Matter any More* (Olivier, 2020).

As Gadamer indicates, however, the interpretive phase of understanding the world is an ongoing process, and this applies to understanding the 'pandemic' as well. My initial fore-projection of the coronavirus's origin being natural was soon challenged by emerging claims in the media, that it was in fact not natural (or wholly natural), and that evidence existed suggesting its provenance to have been a laboratory for viral research in Wuhan—according to some claims it was accidentally released from the laboratory, and according to others, this was done deliberately (for an overview of this, see Mercola, 2022a, reference available from the present author). Needless to say, all these 'projects' competed with one another for credence, and the interpretive task was to weigh them up against one another in terms of available evidence.

Similarly, regarding other aspects of the 'pandemic' such as lockdowns, social distancing, and mask wearing, the process of understanding followed the pattern of fore-conception, fore-projection, revision of the latter in light of new claims and evidence, and so on. The most contested aspect of these developments was undoubtedly the eagerly anticipated 'vaccines'—a word which I put in scare quotes because to this day it is contested, given the claims and counter-claims regarding its medical status and vaunted efficacy. When President Donald Trump announced Operation Warp-Speed for the speedy development of these 'vaccines', no one expected them to arrive on the scene within a mere few months—previously it had taken years to develop vaccines against pathogens. This was already a factor that modified my initial assumption—or fore-projection—that vaccines would indeed be the desired antidote to COVID-19. Add to this the controversy surrounding hydroxychloroquine as a putatively effective treatment of COVID-19, and later a repeat of this controversy regarding ivermectin for effective early treatment (Kennedy, 2021), and it should be clear how one's fore-projections have been intermittently subjected to reassessment in the light of new claims, accompanied by supposed evidence. Crucial evidence regarding the status of the 'vaccines'—as far as my own stance towards them is concerned—came from a host of medical doctors worldwide (Olivier, 2021), to the effect that, once the 'vaccines' had been administered to a significant number of people globally, apparently incontrovertible indications started emerging that they were not safe and that they were causing serious adverse effects, including death. Needless to say, I investigated this evidence as carefully as possible in the light of counter-claims, with the result that I arrived at the interpretive (but still in principle revisable) position put forward in this article. I should add that the appearance of Robert Kennedy's thoroughly researched book (2021) on Dr Fauci and Bill Gates confirmed

to me that my understanding of all these matters related to the 'pandemic' was indeed defensible.

The point I am making is that, for someone *who has constantly examined all the various claims regarding COVID-19 and the factors surrounding it*, at no point could it be said that the position one has arrived at is 'mere prejudice' in the colloquial sense of the term. Of course, *unless* one examines all available evidence regarding matters such as 'vaccine'-efficacy, for instance, adopting a stance, pro or contra, would indeed be prejudice or bias in the ordinary sense. To be sure, in Gadamerian terms, one never, in principle, reaches a point where one's understanding of a certain phenomenon is final, and in this sense, it remains a revisable 'prejudice' or pre-judgement to be reassessed in light of new evidence (although at present the accumulating evidence supporting my own stance has the effect of strengthening and nuancing it). However, that does not preclude one from coming to certain insights which seem, at that time of their articulation, to be supported by available evidence. This is the case regarding the topic of the present article.

AN HISTORICAL PARALLEL

In his wide-ranging study of the conflict between 'word' and 'image'—or more specifically between the social values attached to abstraction and concreteness, respectively (the functions of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, respectively)—Leonard Shlain (1998) elaborates on the astonishing ebullition of violent misogyny in the guise of relentless witch hunting and executions from the late 15th century CE until the early 17th century. His argument is that the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the late 15th century, and the consequent, rapid increase in literacy, explains this singular historical phenomenon: under the pressure of the sudden reinforcement of left-brain activity, which had for centuries been associated with masculine values such as objectivity, logicality, and abstraction, a vehement rejection of feminine, right-brain oriented values, and concomitantly a merciless persecution of women as the bearers of these, occurred. He writes:

> While the idea that typography played a sinister role in Western culture might seem counterintuitive, I submit one final piece of evidence: one last, breathtaking horror story—the torture, mutilation, and incineration of untold numbers of women during the European witch craze that flared from the late fifteenth through the early seventeenth centuries.
>
> Witch hunting was *woman* hunting. A chronicler in 1600 wrote, 'Demons take no account of males… and among a hundred witches, there's scarcely a man to be seen.' Over 80 percent of accused 'witches' were female; in German-speaking lands the percentage often was close to 100 percent. Historians have been at a loss to explain this bizarre episode. (Shlain, 1998, pp. 363–364)

In this excerpt Shlain uses the phrase 'witch craze', and it is meant literally. From his account, it is clear that the almost incomprehensible extermination of women during this era was the expression of something that cannot be associated with reason, at least in its everyday, benign form of 'common sense'. Here he drives the point home:

> 'Hysteria' is an unmanageable fear expressed by emotional excess. It is a type of behavior many men associate with women; the word itself derives from the Greek *hystera*, meaning womb. But no superstition that any group of women has ever believed has come close to the level of credulity and psychosis that seized the most educated male elite during the witch craze. As if in a deep hypnotic spell, men accepted as fact a phantasmagoria that defies comprehension—that little girls in pigtails, pregnant women, and weak, elderly widows posed a mortal danger to society. The witch craze was an example of masculine hysteria and gullibility without a parallel in any other culture. In the light of such evidence, lexicographers might well consider coining a new word to accompany 'hysteria'—'testicularia' would be appropriate. (Shlain, 1998, pp. 370–371)

The crucial term in the passage, above, is 'psychosis'. The theoretical basis of Shlain's argument regarding the correspondence between a (rapid) increase in literacy, on the one hand, and an upsurge in psychotic woman-hate, on the other, is painstakingly established and tested in various historical and cultural settings in *The Alphabet versus The Goddess* (Shlain, 1998; see also Olivier, 2005, 2008), always with astonishing confirmation of his thesis. For example, in illiterate Sparta, women had a social status virtually equal to men, while in (partially) democratic, literate Athens they ranked decidedly below men who were not slaves. Similarly, in ancient non-alphabetic Egypt, with its non-abstract, hieroglyphic, ideographic system of communication, free women enjoyed the same privileges as men. It is to be noted that Shlain is not positing a causal link between alphabet literacy and patriarchy; he does not claim causality, only correlation because of *association* and (often violent) social reinforcement of abstract masculine values, to the detriment of concrete feminine interests.

In the light of Shlain's perspicacious observations about this correlation, I want to posit another correspondence, although it has nothing to do with the right-brain and left-brain values he points to. Rather, the correspondence I have in mind seems to me to be related to an age-old correlation—that between irrational fear of 'contagious' nature and irrational, virtually psychotic hatred, as well as aggression, towards anyone perceived as embodying such contagion. I am referring to the current, excessive, collective fear of a viral pathogen that has been dubbed the 'novel coronavirus', and concomitantly the collective suspicion towards, and in some cases exclusion, if not persecution, of those people in societies across the globe who refuse to be 'vaccinated' against the virus, on the (illogical) pretext that the latter pose a threat against the 'vaccinated'. (I put 'vaccinated' in inverted commas because, arguably, the 'vaccines' in question are not really vaccines; the latter prevents infection by the intended pathogen as well as the capacity to infect others; these COVID-19 'vaccines' do neither—see Kennedy, 2021; Richardson, 2021.) Additionally, as in the case of the witch craze, where Shlain posits the brain-based, value-altering role of (previously unknown) printing technology as an

ineradicable factor in the genesis of the mass psychosis, today, too, one can discern the role of a commensurate technology—that of the pharmaceutical creation of novel (mRNA), 'leaky' 'vaccines', created by 'experts', as the preferred, if not the only, cure for the illness caused by the virus (Kennedy, 2021). This resonates with the belief in 'experts' who could identify witches during the persecution of women that Shlain (1998) writes about. What has to be added is that today this is occurring at a time when technology has become so pervasive that it is no exaggeration to claim that we live in an era of technocracy—the 'rule' of technology, which Martin Heidegger (1977) already perceived in the early 20th century.

The fear of something in nature that is infectious (and potentially lethal) goes back a long way; recall, for example, the Black Death (bubonic plague) of the 14th century CE, when people were infected when they came into contact with rodents and the plague-carrying fleas on them. Thomas Berry (1996) points out that an historical break with an older, more nature-friendly tradition in Christianity (St Thomas, St Francis) occurred around this time, when the world, specifically nature, was experienced as evil. 'This deep aversion to the natural world', he writes (1996, p. 3), 'has profoundly conditioned the entire western tradition ever since'. Is it far-fetched to see in the current, widespread fear of the coronavirus that allegedly causes the illness COVID-19, a recrudescence of this lingering fear of nature?

It is instructive in this regard to note Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's elaboration on nature as it was represented in the work of the French author Céline:

> *It is interesting in Céline's* Journey *that the disease of colonial territories is a sign not really of death, but of an overabundance of life. The narrator, Louis-Ferdinand, finds that not only the population but moreover the African terrain itself is 'monstrous' (p. 140). The disease of the jungle is that life springs up everywhere, everything grows, without bounds… The disease that the colony lets loose is the lack of boundaries on life, an unlimited contagion.* (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 135; italics in original)

Their subsequent expansion on the link between globalisation and contagion resonates unmistakably (and uncomfortably) with the current global preoccupation with, and obsessive fear of infection under 'pandemic' circumstances:

> *The contemporary processes of globalization have torn down many of the boundaries of the colonial world…The dark side of the consciousness of globalization is the fear of contagion. If we break down global boundaries and open universal contact in our global village, how will we prevent the spread of disease and corruption? This anxiety is most clearly revealed with respect to the AIDS pandemic. The lightning speed of the spread of AIDS in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia demonstrated the new dangers of global contagion… the dominant discourses of AIDS prevention have been all about hygiene: We must avoid contact and use protection… International and supranational projects to stop the spread of AIDS have tried to establish protective boundaries at another level by requiring HIV tests in order to cross national boundaries.* (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 136; italics in original)

Does this not sound eerily familiar? Limit contact ('social distancing'), use protection ('wear masks'), and control international boundaries ('vaccine passports')—except that these conditions under the current 'pandemic' have been exacerbated immeasurably. It is therefore understandable that, given these circumstances, something deserving the name of 'mass psychosis' appears to be afflicting societies globally today—similar to the one that prevailed during the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries, to which one might add the period immediately preceding, and during, the Second World War in Nazi Germany, when Germans seemed mesmerised by Nazi ideology and largely condoned, if not participated in, its concomitant persecution of Jews (Shlain, 1998).

GROUP BEHAVIOUR, VACCINE EFFICACY, AND SAFETY

So, what is mass psychosis? Before focusing exclusively on it, one can already gain insight into its character as a collective psychic affliction from the discussion of Shlain's work, above, and Sigmund Freud's (2011; see also Olivier, 2019a) work on group psychology also casts light on it, in so far as several of his observations on the behaviour of groups resonate with the irrational behaviour one witnesses across the globe today regarding responses to the 'pandemic'. Where Freud distinguishes between 'unorganised' (or random) and 'organised' groups, we are clearly not dealing with the latter here, among the members of which he posits 'libidinal ties' because of 'identification' with 'leaders'. There is little evidence that such libidinal ties to a leader operate in the context of the 'pandemic', and therefore I believe it is sufficient to enlist Freud's (2011) approving reference to the work of Le Bon on the 'group mind', where the latter observes that a group's collective behaviour is completely distinct from that of the individuals making it up.

Usually, according to Le Bon, individuals in groups lose their 'higher', rational modes of functioning in favour of regressive behaviour. Contrary to individual behaviour (where rationality arguably plays a role most, if not all, of the time), groups are, as Freud (2011) reminds us, 'impulsive, changeable and irritable', are 'led… by the unconscious' (p. 3774), behave in ways that are un-premeditated, are uncritical and credulous, feel omnipotent, do not doubt themselves and tend to extremes, lack the inhibitions that individuals have, and show signs of regression to mental primitivity (e.g., tolerating contradictions, similar to the unconscious). Furthermore, he observes, they are susceptible to the 'magical power of words' (Freud, 2011) instead of reason, and *importantly for the present theme, desire illusions (like neurotics do) instead of truth*. Although it is not only the irrational behaviour of actual groups gathered in a geographical location that is considered here (although this also sometimes occurs), but mainly that of the extremely large, pro-'vaccination' 'group' of people spread across the globe, the question of illusion is particularly relevant here, in so far as it seems to apply to the readiness of the vast majority of people to accept prescriptive statements from 'experts' (as was the case with the witch hunts of the 16th century) like the arguably compromised Dr Fauci, American President Biden's chief medical adviser (as detailed in

Kennedy, 2021). The following approving comment by Freud on Le Bon's findings is just as relevant: '….in the mental operations of a group the function of testing the reality of things falls into the background in comparison with the strength of wishful impulses with their affective cathexis' (2011, p. 3775). Is this observation on Freud's part not highly pertinent to instances of ignoring incontrovertible evidence that contradicts the claims of mainstream media regarding the effects of lockdowns and particularly of the vaccines on people's health (Breaking News-CA. 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Edeling, 2021; Kennedy, 2021)? Clearly, this phenomenon is a manifestation of the 'wishful impulses', and the resistance to 'testing the reality of things' that Freud talks about.

It is unnecessary to provide dozens of examples where evidence of the harm done by 'vaccines', for instance, reflect such wilful, irrational avoidance of 'testing reality' and 'wishful impulses'; to anyone interested in finding them, it is quite easy, as long as one does not avail oneself of mainstream media, which *themselves embody such avoidance*—instead of which reassuring falsehoods are routinely dished up to the masses. Take this report on proceedings in the South African parliament during a question-and-answer session with the president, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, for example (Philips, 2021). Here is an excerpt from the article:

> The leader of the African Christian Democratic Party, Reverend Kenneth Meshoe, told the president that mandatory vaccinations for Covid-19 were unconstitutional and a breach of the rights of citizens to decline medical experimentation without their consent.
>
> 'Will you help prevent a new form of apartheid where unvaccinated people are being discriminated against and excluded from some places and will you defend their constitutional rights of those South Africans who choose not to get vaccinated?' he asked.
>
> Ramaphosa said, 'Nobody in the end should be forced to take the vaccine,' but added that constitutional rights were not absolute.
>
> He said that influential people like Meshoe were contributing to vaccine hesitancy through their public comments and undermining efforts to bring Covid-19 under control.
>
> 'For me it is bizarre, it's absolutely bizarre that when we are dealing with a pandemic that is killing people more directly in our eyes and faces, that we encourage people not to take the vaccine when it has been proven to save lives.' (paras. 4–5)

In this excerpt already, it is evident that more attention is given to the president's response to Meshoe than to the latter's own statement, which—from a discourse-analytical perspective—is revealing about the *Mail & Guardian*'s own position on this. Despite the contrary impression being created by the article's title, it actually pays more attention to statements that promote the taking of 'vaccines'. Apart from Ramaphosa's undisguised pro-'vaccine' stance, take this, for example:

> Last month, Business Leadership South Africa warned that more businesses were going to introduce mandatory vaccinations for employees.

> 'Those who refuse to be vaccinated may well proclaim that is their right, but it is also the right of the rest of us to protect ourselves from the risks posed by unvaccinated people and to do whatever we can to reach the overall vaccination rates necessary for life to go back to normal,' chief executive Busi Mavuso said in the organisation's weekly letter. (Philips, 2021, paras. 10–11)

To anyone who is routinely dependent on mainstream media for news and comment on the 'pandemic', this is certain to come across as unambiguous reinforcement of the putative safety of the 'vaccines'. Virtually without exception, other mainstream media echo this stance. Here is CNN—note the element of fearmongering, combined with pressure to be 'vaccinated' and implicit reassurance that the 'vaccines' are safe:

> Despite recent upticks in vaccination doses being administered, the reality that most countries will not hit that 80-90% [total vaccination] goal while the Delta variant spreads presents a serious threat. Not only does it affect the speed at which these specific countries can wave goodbye to Covid but, on a global level, it also creates an opportunity for the virus to spread, mutate and break their borders to countries with lower vaccination rates. In other words, it could incubate the next disaster in this pandemic. (McGee, 2021, para. 6)

In addition to 'vaccine' safety concerns, there is the matter of their vaunted efficacy in protecting recipients against COVID-19, which is, to say the least, dubious (Kennedy, 2021), despite numerous assurances to that effect from the World Health Organization (WHO) and governments. In a recent article (Richardson, 2021), for example, an account is given of a 'double-jabbed' woman who became one of many 'breakthrough' cases ('vaccinated' people who nevertheless get ill with COVID-19). Nevertheless, the article informs one that:

> Over 48 million people in the UK have received their first jab, with more than 75 per cent of adults now being double jabbed. Contrary to some popular misconceptions, Covid vaccines do not totally prevent you from catching the virus. They are important because they reduce your risk of getting seriously ill or dying, according to the NHS, and they do reduce your risk of catching or spreading it. As well as protecting against variants, such as the Delta variant. (Richardson, 2021, para. 4)

Evidently they are less effective (and safe) than the 'authorities' would want one to believe. In fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the assurance that they are effective, as recent reports indicate. In an article tellingly titled 'How many double-jabbed people are dying from COVID' (Speare-Cole, 2021; see also Moss, 2021 for similar information), for instance, one finds this explanation (which is hardly reassuring, considering the unpredictability of the [side-]effects of being 'vaccinated'):

> More than 1,000 fully vaccinated people in England have died from the Delta variant between 1 February and 29 August, according to the latest data from Public Health England.
>
> In this time period, 37 people under the age of 50 who had been double jabbed and 1,054 over-50s have died after testing positive for the Delta variant – now the dominant strain of the virus in the UK.

> This compares to a total of 536 COVID deaths of unvaccinated people from all age grounds [sic] during that time.
>
> However, the higher number of fully vaccinated people dying does not mean that the vaccine is not working, but instead reflects the large majority of people in England who have now been jabbed. (Speare-Cole, 2021, paras. 1–4)

With the possibility in mind that one may die of COVID-19 despite having been 'fully vaccinated', as suggested by this report, the reassurance, that it 'does not mean that the vaccine is not working', rings hollow to say the least. Furthermore, regarding both those providing this information, and the vast majority of those consuming it (the 'vaccinated'), the message it gets across speaks volumes as far as 'wishful impulses', the (neurotic) desire for illusions, and the resistance to 'testing the reality of things', noted by Freud, are concerned. These tendencies are themselves already symptomatic of a collective condition that reflects anything but psychic equilibrium or a sober, rational appraisal of extant circumstances.

However, the instances, above, of ambivalent mainstream media reporting on COVID-19 deaths of 'fully vaccinated' people do not nearly convey the undeniably deleterious, if not lethal, effects of the COVID-19 vaccines on their recipients. For this one has to delve into alternative publications (Kennedy, 2021; Mercola & Cummins, 2021) and media. Looking at the website of journalist Chris Waldburger (Waldburger, 2021), for example, an article with the telling title and subtitle, 'Bombshell UK data destroys entire premise for vaccine push. The media can read just as well as me (maybe), but somehow it is left to me to report this', reports as follows on the contrast between the deaths of 'vaccinated' as opposed to 'unvaccinated' people:

> This is an absolute game-changer.
>
> The UK government just reported the following data, tucked away in their report on variants of concern:
>
> **Less than a third of delta variant deaths are in the unvaccinated.**
>
> Let me say that another way - **two-thirds of Delta deaths in the UK are in the jabbed**.
>
> To be specific:
>
> From the 1st of February to the 2nd of August, the UK recorded 742 Delta deaths (yes, the dreaded Delta has not taken that much life).
>
> Out of the 742 deaths, 402 were fully vaccinated. 79 had received one shot. Only 253 were unvaccinated…
>
> Again, 402 deaths out of 47 008 cases in vaccinated; 253 deaths out of 151 054 cases in unvaccinated. If you get covid having been vaccinated, according to this data, you are much more likely to die than if you were not vaccinated! (Waldburger, 2021, paras. 1–10; emphasis in original)

Waldburger also provides a link to the actual report, so that anyone can peruse it, the point being that the mainstream media ignore these revealing data scrupulously, lest it undermine their (shameful and unjustifiable) promotion of potentially lethal 'vaccines'. These deaths pertain to people who had received the 'vaccine' and subsequently died when they contracted COVID-19. There is even more disturbing information available in non-mainstream media on the deleterious effects of the 'vaccines' themselves, something carefully hidden by mainstream media, and/or scrubbed by armies of so-called 'fact-checkers' ('so-called' because they have been debunked as fraudulently working for companies whose interests they promote; Mercola, 2022b; reference available from the present author)—the COVID-19 era-counterpart of Orwell's 'thought police' in *1984* (Olivier, 2019b). On the alternative website of the (in Big Pharma-circles notorious) 'Health Ranger', Mike Adams, for instance, one finds an eloquent explanation, by Dr David Martin (2021), of the potentially lethal consequences of taking the COVID-19-'vaccines', titled 'Dr. David Martin – Covid vaccine mRNA code is a BIOWEAPON developed via a digital SIMULATION'. Similarly, Dr Vladimir Zelenko warns in no uncertain terms against the COVID-19 'vaccines'. On her (alternative) website, Dr Ariyana Love (2021) informs us that:

> A Nobel Prize nominee, Dr. Zelenko was censored and de-platformed across big tech for… affirming that Covid-19 is a 'bioweapon for mass Genocide'.
>
> 'The Covid-19 poison death shots create killer antibodies and killer antibodies are time bombs that get triggered by exposure to matching viral infections' says Dr. Zelenko. (paras. 4–5)

Nor are these two courageous doctors the only two speaking out against what they understand to be lethal injections, which, moreover, do not deserve to be called 'vaccines' (because they do not prevent one from being infected with the virus they are supposed to protect one against, nor do they prevent an infected person from infecting others). There are many such individuals who risk their reputations and jobs by taking a stance against the administering of these 'jabs'. Two more who should be mentioned are Dr Herman Edeling and Dr Peter McCullough (for more information on the thousands of doctors worldwide rejecting the 'vaccines' as being unsafe, if not lethal, see Olivier, 2021; see also Breaking-News CA 2021c). In a paper co-authored by Dr McCullough (Bruno et al., 2021; see also McCullough, 2021a for an explicit warning, that the COVID-19 'vaccines' are 'killing people'), the authors express the following misgivings about the COVID-19 'vaccines':

> COVID-19 encompasses a wide clinical spectrum, ranging from very mild to severe pulmonary pathology and fatal multi-organ disease with inflammatory, cardiovascular, and blood coagulation dysregulation…. In this sense, cases of vaccine-related ADE or immunopathology would be clinically-indistinguishable from severe COVID-19…. Furthermore, even in the absence of SARS-CoV-2 virus, Spike glycoprotein alone causes endothelial damage and hypertension in vitro and in vivo in Syrian hamsters by down-regulating angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) and impairing mitochondrial function…. Although these findings need to be confirmed in humans, the implications of this finding are staggering, as all vaccines authorized for emergency

> use are based on the delivery or induction of Spike glycoprotein synthesis. (Bruno et al., 2021, p. 5)

One does not have to be a scientist to grasp the seriousness of these scientists' warning against the use of the 'vaccines' in humans, given the observed deleterious effects of the spike glycoprotein that they contain in hamsters. It is astonishing, if not downright incomprehensible, that 'emergency use' was granted for them—on the supposition that the developers of these 'vaccines' had human recipients' health and welfare in mind.

South African Dr Herman Edeling also counts among those doctors who bravely challenge their government to face the demonstrable fact that the 'vaccines' are dangerous, and in many cases lethal. Among other things, Dr Edeling charges that 'vaccine' deaths are being suppressed, as highlighted by Nadya Swart (2021) in a BizNews article linked to his open letter and to an interview she conducted with him—which was quickly removed from YouTube when it was posted there (it can still be viewed via a link in the article by Swart). In his open letter to the South African president, Dr Edeling courageously writes (2021):

> 1.1. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the people of South Africa have suffered a major health crisis as well as a major economic crisis. The harmful effects of these crises, which have included widespread fear, confusion, feelings of helplessness, loss of freedoms, overwhelmed healthcare practitioners, insufficient hospital beds and equipment, loss of employment, financial ruin, severe physical and mental illness, disability and death, are massive and incalculable.
>
> 1.2. These harmful effects have been aggravated by official South African COVID-19 narratives, which seem in blind faith to echo the official narratives of the WHO, FDA, CDC as well as European, American, Canadian and Australian governments, inter alia.
>
> 1.3. The official South African COVID-19 narratives are strongly and repeatedly communicated by yourself and members of your national and provincial executives, as well as by representatives of institutions such as public health departments, universities, etc. that are directly or indirectly under your control or influence.
>
> 1.4. The mainstream media have jumped onto the bandwagon and continue to amplify these official narratives.
>
> 1.5. The mRNA 'vaccines' in current use are now scientifically linked to rising breakthrough infections, hospitalizations and deaths...In effect, the cure may become worse than the illness. Despite being denied by officials and mainstream media this news has spread via social media, and is one of the leading reasons for 'vaccine hesitancy'… (paras. 3–7)

Given the published work of these brave individuals (only some among many; for more on this see Olivier, 2021, 2022) who, risking their reputations, incomes, and more, draw attention to the dangers of the 'vaccines' and the manner in which these are covered up, one is faced with the obvious question: why have so many people complied, and still do, when told to 'get the shot'? Which brings one back to the question of 'mass psychosis', and whether one might

legitimately describe current beliefs and behaviour (under 'pandemic' conditions) in those terms.

MASS PSYCHOSIS

A concise and perspicacious account of the phenomenon of mass psychosis is encountered in a 20-minute video titled 'MASS PSYCHOSIS — How an Entire Population Becomes MENTALLY ILL', produced by After Skool and Academy of Ideas (2021; see also Neil Oliver, 2021). Confirming what was argued at the outset in this article about the parallel between the current state of affairs and the European 'witch craze' of the 16th and 17th centuries, the makers of this video actually note the same resemblance, also adding the other parallel, namely the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century (think of the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany). They characterise 'mass psychosis' as an 'epidemic of madness' that emerges when a large percentage of a society somehow 'loses touch with reality' and develops a delusional outlook. They also note the moral and spiritual degeneration on the part of people who are drawn into the vortex of such a mass psychosis, which is accompanied by increasing unreasonableness, irresponsibility, emotional instability, and unreliability. Echoing the views of Le Bon and Freud on group behaviour (discussed earlier), it is pointed out that a psychotic group is likely to commit atrocities that individuals would normally refrain from. (This resonates with some of the video material circulating globally, not on mainstream media, but on social platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, of unbelievable, quasi-psychotic—and morally speaking, unforgivable—behaviour of Australian police officers towards 'unvaccinated' people.)

The video voiceover also discusses the psychogenesis of the collective craze in question, noting the 'panic phase' on the part of individuals that are scared by inexplicable events. This is a clear reference to the quick succession of events that followed the outbreak of a virus epidemic in Wuhan, China, towards the end of 2019. In the wake of this, the 'novel coronavirus' rapidly spread around the world, accompanied by what was fear-inspiring pronouncements by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other health organisations, as well as governments, which resulted in national lockdowns of different degrees of severity (Olivier, 2021). Understandably this gave rise to what quickly became endemic fear of contagion and panic in the face of a deadly pathogen.

Moreover, in the development of mass psychosis, the video informs one, the initial panic typically makes way for a stage of 'psychotic insight', where fear-inducing experience is alleviated by the invention of an illogical, (quasi-)magical, and reassuring explanation of the (frightening) state of affairs. Under present 'pandemic' conditions this seems to apply to at least two things: the initial account of a natural, zoonotic origin of the virus, and the later, competing account of an accidental (but possibly deliberate), leak of a genetically engineered coronavirus, and secondly (more significantly), the present tendency, globally (on the part of

government representatives and the mainstream media), to play the 'vaccinated' off against the 'unvaccinated' with statements such as that we are witnessing 'a pandemic of the unvaccinated' (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] Director Rochelle Walensky on NBC News, 2021). Someone who makes such statements ignores those virologists who point out that the 'unvaccinated' are not the ones who are causally responsible for the emerging so-called 'variants', but that these are attributable to the fact that the virus mutates in 'vaccinated' people, in response to the 'vaccines'. As stated by well-known virologist Geert Vanden Bossche (2021), 'Mass vaccination with imperfect vaccines is prone to promoting propagation of naturally selected, spike(S)-directed immune escape variants in the population, and ongoing campaigns are causing the population to place even more pressure on viral infectiousness.' (para. 5).

Nevertheless, to those who have fallen prey to the mass psychosis in question, putting the blame on the 'unvaccinated' seems like a stroke of genius that explains the fear-inducing situation. Addressing this situation by attempting to force the 'unvaccinated' to 'take the shot' seems to be a magical antidote to their own fears, but does not alleviate the mass psychosis; in fact, it exacerbates this condition.

In the video under consideration the concept of 'menticide'—the killing of the mind—is introduced to explain how large numbers of people are subjected to control. In the discussion it becomes clear that menticide amounts to the systematic destruction of the human spirit and of free, uncensored thought. The prior stage of fearmongering and social division or isolation prepares the way for menticide. This enables the ruling elite to impose its own (delusional) ideology on society, which functions to exacerbate the mass psychosis in question in so far as it offers a (misleading) framework for understanding the dystopian events that are occurring. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find that, where menticide happens, totalitarianism is easily established; in fact, menticide is a constituent of totalitarian rule, in so far as a society constructed on delusions lends itself to totalitarianism.

The creators of the 'Mass Psychosis' video further discuss the highly relevant work of Joost Meerloo, who wrote *The Rape of the Mind* (2009). The pertinence of his work becomes apparent where they note that: 'Confusion heightens the susceptibility of a descent into the delusions of totalitarianism' (After Skool and Academy of Ideas, 2021, 11:53). Referring to the historical example of Adolf Hitler, Meerloo states that:

> There is another important weapon the totalitarians use in their campaign to frighten the world into submission. This is the weapon of psychological shock. Hitler kept his enemies in a state of constant confusion and diplomatic upheaval…Hitler was never logical, because he knew that that was what he was expected to be. Logic can be met with logic, while illogic cannot – it confuses those who think straight. The Big Lie and monotonously repeated nonsense have more emotional appeal in a cold war than logic and reason. While the enemy is still searching for a reasonable counter-argument to the first lie, the totalitarians can assault him with another. (2009, p. 70)

One might argue that we are not currently witnessing anything comparable to the fascist totalitarianism under Hitler that was responsible for the extermination of approximately 6 million Jews, and at present this may seem reasonable because no one knows with certainty how what I here argue is the 'mass psychosis' of the present will develop further. Yet, several things in Meerloo's observation strike one as being applicable to the present situation globally, specifically the use of 'psychological shock', or the periodic frightening of people with news of a 'new variant' of the coronavirus (ridiculed as 'scariants' by people who tend to be sceptical of such announcements), as well as 'monotonously repeated nonsense', such as that the wearing of masks and of 'social distancing' are essential (Mercola, 2022c; reference available from the present author). Any logically thinking person can grasp the nonsensical status of these when the same 'authorities' who insist on these measures allow one to remove one's mask as soon as one sits down in a restaurant, and countenance large numbers of people intermingling in shopping centres. The point is that all of these confusing directives contribute to a climate conducive to 'mass psychosis'.

Another writer worth reading on the advent of delusional psychosis on a massive scale today is psychiatrist Dr Mark McDonald (Mercola, 2021a; reference available from the present author; see also Cheah, 2020). This is what McDonald said on the advent of mass delusional psychosis in the course of the 'pandemic' in an interview, as quoted by Dr Mercola:

> *There was never a medical crisis. There were always enough resources to deal with the people who were sick… Many resources were in fact turned away… The question then, for me, became, 'What's the real crisis? What are people really suffering from?'*
>
> *It became clear to me, very quickly, within the first two or three weeks in March [2020], that it was fear. Since then… the fear… has morphed and evolved, not just into a 'I'm worried, I'm scared so I need to stay home,' but an actual belief that is against reality — because the definition of delusion is something you believe that doesn't conform with reality.*
>
> *They believe that they are going to die — no matter what age, no matter what state of health they're in — if they don't leave their house with a mask and gloves on every day and run from [other] human beings. That's delusional psychosis. It's false, it's wrong, it's not backed up by evidence. And many, many Americans are living that and believing that.* (2021a, paras. 13–15; reference available from the present author; italics in original)

This delusional behaviour is not restricted to America, of course. One witnesses it in virtually every country worldwide. The pervasive delusional condition explains the infantilism one witnesses around one, manifested in the manner that many (if not most) adults display regressive behaviour by adopting an otherwise inexplicable, virtually complete submissiveness to 'authorities', who strip them of the rights enshrined in their countries' constitutions, as well as in the *United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights*. As observed in the After Skool video discussed earlier, the flipside of such infantile submissiveness on the part of ordinary citizens afflicted with mass psychosis, is that the

equally deluded ruling elites usually believe that they have the knowledge *and* the right to exercise control over citizens in putatively democratic countries in a 'top-down' manner.

LACAN ON PSYCHOSIS AND PASSAGE Á L'ACTE

Finally, to be able to get a more nuanced grip on the concept of psychosis, I turn to the work of Jacques Lacan in two of his seminars—on *The Psychoses* (Lacan, 1993), and on *Anxiety* (Lacan, 2014), which provide somewhat divergent—but mutually enriching—perspectives, respectively, on the mass insanity of the present. First, it strikes one as pertinent to the current global outbreak of mass psychosis that Lacan observes, *vis-á-vis* the work of his erstwhile teacher, De Clérambault, that the latter was concerned to:

> demonstrate the fundamentally *anideational*…character of the phenomena that manifest themselves in the development of psychosis. What this means is *that which doesn't correspond to a train of thought*…This reference point is supposedly located, then, in terms of being understandable. The initial reference to understanding serves to decide exactly what it is that introduces a breach and appears as unintelligible. (Lacan, 1993, p. 6)

This explains something crucial about the emergence of the current collective insanity: the mass delusional behaviour of people who wax 'hysterical' (note the scare quotes; this is meant in the loose, everyday sense of the term; not the strictly clinical one) when faced by people's actions which contrast with their own, is seldom, if ever, the result of a 'train of thought'. On the contrary, their behaviour assumes the guise of an immediate, psychotic response to an image, including that of someone who is not wearing a mask, or someone who comes too close to them as measured by required social distancing rules, such as screaming uncontrollably at the offending person. Their behaviour is, then, in Lacan's words, 'unintelligible'. What is it, under present circumstances, that 'introduced a breach'?

One finds a clue where Lacan, referring to one of Freud's case studies, describes a boy having a hallucination that he has cut his finger badly with his knife while sitting with his nurse, and not 'daring' to tell her about this. Lacan elaborates:

> How significant is that suspension of all possible speech! – and precisely with the person [the nurse] he used to recount everything to, and especially things of that order! There is an abyss here, a temporal submersion, a rupture in experience, following which it turns out that he has nothing at all wrong with him, it's all over, let's drop the subject.
>
> The relation that Freud establishes between this phenomenon and this very special *knowing nothing of the thing, even in the sense of the repressed* expressed in this text translates as this – what is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real. There is a close relation between, on the one hand, negation and the reappearance in the purely intellectual order of what has not been integrated by the subject and, on the other, *Verwerfung* [foreclosure] and hallucination, that is, the reappearance in the real of what the subject has refused. (1993, p. 13)

The clue in question is to be found where Lacan writes: 'There is an abyss here, a temporal submersion, a rupture in experience…' In other words, there is no intelligible sequence of events here. This applies primarily to psychotic hallucinations on the part of individual subjects and, as may be seen in the citation, above, are understood by Lacan as the effects of a psychic function that he calls 'foreclosure'—the complete rejection (*Verwerfung* is Freud's term) of something from the subject's psyche; not merely its 'repression' in the unconscious, as in the case of the aetiology of neuroses. In the seminar on the psychoses Lacan (1993; see also Evans, 1996) relates foreclosure causally to the rejection of the signifier that 'anchors' the symbolic system of language, namely what he calls 'the Name-of-the-Father', from the psychotic subject's symbolic horizon. Hallucination is a corollary of this in so far as the foreclosed signifier 'returns' in the register of the unsymbolisable 'real', disrupting the chain of language—in the case of the little boy, his hallucinatory experience of having nearly decapitated his finger, which he was incapable of articulating symbolically. Lacan expresses the relation between psychosis and the 'transcendental' signifier ('transcendental' in the sense of being the condition of the possibility of the system of language) as follows:

> Observe this crucial moment carefully and you will be able to pick out this passage in the onset of every psychosis – it's the moment at which from the Other as such, from the field of the Other, there comes the interpellation of an essential signifier that is unable to be received. (1993, p. 306)

The 'Other' for Lacan represents the unconscious, repressed field of cultural values embedded in the symbolic register, and his thesis is that the signifier which functions as the 'quilting point' or nodal 'anchor' to this entire symbolic system—the 'Name-of-the-Father'—is 'rejected' ('unable to be received') when it 'interpellates' or interruptively addresses the subject, as was the case with Freud's psychotic Judge Schreber. This is the 'breach' or 'rupture' referred to earlier, which interrupts and undermines sequences of intelligibility, giving rise to psychotic delusions or hallucinations. This may seem to apply largely to instances of individual psychosis, and apart from the notion of a breach of intelligibility, it does not appear to go very far in explaining the emergence of the *mass* psychosis we are witnessing today. I shall return to this.

How does one account for the emotional outbursts that so often accompany such psychotic behaviour? Here is a reported example, from a colleague (at the university where I work) who was singled out by a pro-'vaccine' colleague because of the former's insistence that one should have the right to choose *not* to be 'vaccinated' (I have omitted my colleague's name to protect their privacy):

> On Oct 25 2021, at 8:13 pm, [my colleague] wrote:
>
> Dear All

> Thank you for all the e-mails going around today. I did not respond as I was the target of quite a vicious emotional attack from a colleague this morning, so, I had to deal with some emotions. (Author's colleague, personal communication, October 25, 2021)

To grasp this, one has to peruse Lacan's seminar on *Anxiety* (2014), specifically his account of the '*passage á l'acte*' ('passage to the act'), which represents a different approach to the question of how to understand the currently pervasive mass psychosis. What does Lacan mean by '*passage á l'acte*'? He writes:

> The moment of the *passage á l'acte* is the moment of the subject's greatest *embarrassment*, with the behavioural addition of *emotion* as a disorder of movement. It is then that, from where he is – namely, the locus of the stage where alone, as a fundamentally historicized subject, he is able to maintain himself in his status of subject – he rushes and topples off the stage, out of the scene.
>
> This is the very structure of the *passage á l'acte.* (2014, p. 115)

Lacan's dramatic metaphor of the stage, from which the 'embarrassed' subject 'rushes', is borrowed from a case of Freud (as he acknowledges), where a young, homosexual woman ('Dora')—who was embarrassed by her father seeing her in the company of the woman she loved, and casting her an unmistakeably disapproving glance, upsets her beloved to the point of the latter's exasperation—hastened away from the scene and threw herself over a parapet onto a tram- or railway-line in an attempt at suicide. It is important to note that this colourful scene exemplifies the 'structure of the *passage á l'acte*', that is, a *structure* that is shared by all such 'acts'.

In the seminar on *Anxiety*, Lacan (2014) proceeds to draw a distinction between the phenomena of *passage á l'acte* and 'acting out' ('ausagieren', in Freud's terms), in relation to anxiety. What they have in common is that both are extreme responses to anxiety, but they differ in so far as Lacan locates the subject who 'acts out' *in* the 'scene', while the subject who traverses a 'passage to the act' *leaves* the scene completely (exemplified in Dora's attempted suicide). What this enigmatic distinction means is that 'acting out' occurs *within* the realm of the symbolic, and embodies what Lacan thinks of as a 'symbolic message' to the (big) Other—his term for the unconscious field within which societal norms and the 'moral law' are embedded (Evans, 1996; see Olivier, 2017, for an elaboration of this in the context of student protests in South Africa, seen as 'symbolic messages'). By contrast, an instance of the *passage á l'acte* instantiates an *exit* from the symbolic field, and therefore a suspension of the social bond altogether. Put differently, it is a flight from the symbolic into the realm of the unsymbolisable 'real'; hence the purely 'physical' occurrence of 'falling down' or 'fleeing'. It is significant that, as Dylan Evans (1996) reminds one, Lacan does not see the 'passage to the act' (p. 140) as necessarily indicating a primary psychosis, although it does imply a temporary suspension or dissolution of the subject, in the place of which a 'pure object' momentarily remains.

One thing remains to be added here, which concerns the role of what Lacan calls the *objet petit a* (*a*, 'object *a*', or 'little other object'). If the subject is dissolved into an *object* of sorts in the 'passage to the act', what is the status and function of this 'object'? The following passage from the *Anxiety* seminar is pertinent to understanding its role:

> What occurs then is the subject's absolute identification with the *a* to which she is reduced. Here it is a matter of the confrontation between the father's desire, upon which her entire conduct is built, and the law which is presentified in the father's gaze. This is what leads her to feel definitively identified with *a* and, by the same token, rejected, evacuated, from the stage. And only the being dropped, the *letting oneself drop*, can realize this. (Lacan, 2014, p. 111)

The subject is reduced to an *a*, or 'object *a*' through the 'passage to the act'. Here it is relevant that, in Lacan's lexicon, the 'object *a*' manifests 'a lack' (Lacan, 2014, p. 107). He elaborates:

> What is the object *a* at the level of what subsists as a body and which hides from us, so to speak, its will? This object *a* is the rock that Freud speaks of, the final irreducible reserve of libido…
>
> In what place does the *a* stand? At what level could it be recognized, if indeed this were possible?...
>
> Indeed, the object is bound to its necessary lack right where the subject is constituted in the locus of the Other… (p. 107)

Put more plainly, in the 'passage to the act' the subject—in Lacan's Freudian example, the young lesbian woman, Dora—occupies the place of the object *a* in correlation with the patriarchal, moral 'law' (embodied in the father's disapproving look), which represents the 'locus of the [unconscious, repressed, social] Other'. This explains why, as object *a*, she is 'evacuated', reduced to a 'lack' which, simultaneously, represents the 'final irreducible reserve of libido'. As object *a* (or 'lack'), in the sense of having been emptied of symbolic significance, it (or she as object *a*) nevertheless instantiates the point from the perspective of which the father's desire (which represents that of the Other) can be understood. This makes of her the object of (his) desire, that is, as object *a*. As Evans (1996) reminds one, this also means that, for Lacan, the object *a* is not so much what *is* desired, but rather the object-cause *of* desire. Hence Dora, flaunting her (unconventional) love-attachment to a woman in public, functions as the *object-cause* (object *a*) of her father's (conventional) desire in a negative sense, which is why, correlatively, his disapproving gaze reduces her to an object *a*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRENT MASS PSYCHOSIS

What does Lacan's reflections on psychosis and the *passage á l'acte* teach one regarding the current mass delusional psychosis under 'pandemic' conditions? Recall that in the previous section I wrote about lockdowns that gave rise to rampant fear of contamination and panic at the thought of a deadly pathogen that was likely to kill people, giving rise to 'psychotic

insight', where fear makes way for reassuring explanations regarding the origin of the terrifying state of affairs, to which one may add the further reassurances offered by the development of the 'vaccines'. Recall, too, Dr McDonald's (Mercola, 2021a: reference available from the present author) observations on the manifestations of mass delusional psychosis in the course of the 'pandemic', particularly that people became so scared that they believed they should 'stay home', and that 'they are going to die' regardless, 'if they don't leave their house with a mask and gloves on every day and run from [other] human beings'. Tellingly, he added: 'That's delusional psychosis' (paras. 14–15).

Seen in the light of Lacan's theorising on psychosis, this collective insanity of people who (by all accounts, and as personally experienced by myself) react emotionally when confronted by others who don't wear masks, or do not observe social distancing rules, for example, is clearly not the result of a 'train of thought', but rather (as remarked earlier) a quasi-psychotic response to a specific, unbearable image (of people who deviate from obsessively followed patterns of psychotic behaviour). Lacan contends that their behaviour is, in ordinary terms, 'unintelligible', except if one considers that something 'introduced a breach' of some kind. Earlier I mentioned that it may seem not to be valid for '*mass* psychosis', and yet, I would contend that, in so far as it is *individuals* who behave in unintelligible ways when confronted by unmasked people in social space today, what we have here are precisely *individual* manifestations of mass psychosis that may be understood as 'the interpellation of an essential signifier that is unable to be received' (Lacan, 1993, p. 306). The interpellating signifier in question, which is inseparable from the anchoring signifier of the 'Name-of-the-Father' (in 'the field of the Other'), and which addresses the psychotic subject, assumes the form of the (Kantian) 'categorical imperative' or ethical injunction, to treat others in a manner that is *universalisable*. Except…under current circumstances this imperative cannot 'be received'; that is, it is rejected, foreclosed, as shown by the psychotic subject hallucinating the putatively lethal status of the 'unmasked other' (who is therefore implicitly not treated as fellow human being).

What about the implications of the *passage á l'acte*? Just as Dora occupies the place of the object *a* in relation to 'the moral law' as instantiated in her father's disapproving gaze (which represents the unconscious, repressed, social Other), the dissenting, unmasked subject under the 'pandemic' assumes this position of disapproval, which temporarily reduces the quasi-psychotic, mask-wearing subject to the position of the object *a*, of a 'lack' in terms of symbolic significance. Recall that, according to Evans (1996, 140), Lacan does not associate the 'passage to the act' definitively with a primary psychosis, but with a temporary 'suspension' of the subject, in the place of which a 'pure object' briefly remains. This is why I used the term 'quasi-psychotic' above. Moreover, just like Dora, the quasi-psychotic, *emotional*, mask-wearing subject functions as the object-*cause* of the (mask-less) subject's unconscious desire, where the latter indicts the former morally in so far as it (the mask-less subject's desire) represents the Other and hence, the moral law. Ironically, the emotional, quasi-psychotic subject

imagines itself as occupying the latter position, but its 'falling down' or 'disappearance from the scene' marks it as the object *a*. This also accords with Lacan's reference to the presence of emotion.

PSYCHOTHERAPY

As to the question concerning the possibility of therapeutic actions in the face of the mass delusional psychosis that still has the world in its grip in early 2022, the first thing to note is that the preceding sections of this article already have therapeutic value in so far as they contribute to an identification of the source(s) of the collective craze besetting the world, as well as to understanding it. When one has an intellectual grasp of something, one has a better chance of addressing it efficaciously. One should note, too, that what Dr Peter McCullough (2021b) tellingly calls 'therapeutic nihilism' (a reference to the experimental, highly dangerous, evidently pseudo-vaccines recommended worldwide as the appropriate treatment against COVID-19) is *not* what society needs at present—in fact, this 'therapeutic nihilism' is one of the aetiological constituents of the collective psychosis. One would benefit from heeding the advice in the video from After Skool (2021) in this regard, before nuancing it further by means of psychoanalytical theory, because it paves the way for the latter.

In the video the question is posed: '…can the effects of mass psychosis be reversed?' Answering in the affirmative, it is emphasised that the response to the 'multipronged' menticidal approach, which causes the mass psychosis in the first place, must be equally multipronged. In Jungian fashion, the video advocates a primary 'centring' of oneself, which enables one to live in such a manner as to 'provide inspiration for others to follow'—in other words, to be someone others can identify with. Carl Jung is quoted to this effect:

> It is not for nothing that our age cries out for the redeemer personality, for the one who can emancipate himself from the grip of the collective psychosis and save at least his own soul, who lights a beacon of hope for others, proclaiming that here is at least one man who has succeeded in extricating himself from the fatal identity with the group psyche. (After Skool and Academy of Ideas, 2021, 17:53)

One cannot argue with the compelling force of a personality who acts in a conspicuously moral or ethical manner, sometimes confronting ostensibly unconquerable forces in the process. Under current circumstances there are several such individuals, such as Dr Reiner Fuellmich, Robert Kennedy (Jr), Dr Joseph Mercola, Prof. Dolores Cahill, Dr David Martin, and Dr Peter McCullough, to mention only six among many. To follow their exemplary leadership-through-action against the perpetrators of demonstrable injustices against humanity (such as Pfizer, Moderna, the World Economic Forum, the WHO, the CDC, and others; Kennedy, 2021; Mercola & Cummins, 2021; Olivier, 2021) today, is indeed one way to resist the effects of the mass delusionary psychosis pervading society.

Secondly, in the After Skool video (2021; see also Mercola, 2021a; reference available from the present author), one is encouraged to 'share and spread the truth', which is specified as

'the counternarrative to the propaganda', as much as possible, given the perpetrators' incessant censoring of the truth (Mercola, 2022b; reference available from the present author). It is also recommended that this be combined with humour and ridicule of the ruling elite, in the process delegitimising their rule. Reference is made to a book (*The Power of the Powerless*) by Vaclav Havel (1990), the erstwhile president of the Czech Republic, who suggested working through 'parallel structures', that is, any kind of organisation, movement, or even alternative technology that can exist within a totalitarian society, but importantly, is *outside* of it, morally speaking. Such parallel structures can lay the foundation for 'a parallel culture' that can fulfil the role of 'a sanctuary of sanity within the totalitarian world'. Particularly pertinent for present purposes are these words by Havel, where he writes about 'living within the truth':

> living within the truth becomes the one natural point of departure for all activities that work against the automatism of the system. And…such activities ultimately grow beyond the area of living within the truth (which means they are transformed into various parallel structures, movements, institutions, they begin to be regarded as political activity, they bring real pressure to bear on the official structures and begin in fact to have a certain influence on the level of real power)… (1990, p. 61)

This should, I believe, be regarded as very significant for therapy in the face of an unconscionable onslaught against our very humanity by forces that do not even have the courage to come out into the open, but instead work through a medical tyranny and its intermediate administrators. However, what does 'living within the truth' ultimately mean? Havel again, where he contrasts 'living within a lie' with 'living within the truth' in a manner that resonates audibly with the degraded time of the present global crisis:

> The profound crisis of human identity brought on by living within a lie, a crisis which in turn makes such a life possible, certainly possesses a moral dimension as well; it appears, among other things, as a deep moral crisis in society. A person…whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own personal survival, is a demoralized person. The system depends on this demoralization, deepens it, is in fact a projection of it into society.
>
> Living within the truth, as humanity's revolt against an enforced position, is, on the contrary, an attempt to regain control over one's own sense of responsibility. In other words, it is clearly a moral act, not only because one must pay so dearly for it, but principally because it is not self-serving: the risk may bring rewards in the form of a general amelioration in the situation, or it may not. In this regard, as I stated previously, it is an all-or-nothing gamble. (Havel, 1990, p. 62)

Although written in the Czechoslovakia of the 1970s, long before the advent of the 'pandemic', the applicability of Havel's words to our current situation is undeniable, and I would like to stress their therapeutic value, keeping in mind that Havel himself personified the person who lives 'within the truth', exposing what it means to 'live within a lie'. This is all

the more important because, as emphasised in After Skool (2021), the totalitarian elite does not waste time to expand and reinforce their power (Kennedy, 2021); hence, to counteract this, those who have the courage to 'live within the truth' have to act in a conspicuously sane, creative manner to inaugurate the 'parallel structures' which can embody a preferable alternative to the *status quo* of mass psychotic behaviour as correlate to totalitarian rule.

THE PERTINENCE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

The work of psychoanalytical thinkers, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, and Ian Parker, is an invaluable source to draw on regarding questions of therapy in the face of pervasive, ever encroaching collective insanity. In particular, Kristeva's notion of 'revolt' instantiates a powerful reminder of what human beings are capable of when confronted by ostensibly overwhelming odds. When asked for clarification of this concept in an interview, she responded as follows:

> In contemporary society the word revolt means very schematically political revolution. People tend to think of extreme left movements linked to the Communist revolution or to its leftist developments. I would like to strip the word 'revolt' of its purely political sense. In all Western traditions, revolt is a very deep movement of discontent, anxiety and anguish. In this sense, to say that revolt is only politics is a betrayal of this vast movement…Therefore if we still want to conquer new horizons, it is necessary to turn away from this idea and to give the word revolt a meaning that is not just political. I try to interpret this word in a philosophical and etymological sense. The word revolt comes from a Sanskrit root that means to discover, open, but also to turn, to return. (Kristeva, 2002, pp. 99–100)

To be sure, in the present context it would be understandable to wish for a far-reaching political revolution that would effectively remove the alienating, prevailing conditions (large-scale, delusional compliance with imperatives concerning lockdowns, social distancing, mask wearing, and 'vaccination'). However, it must kept in mind that, even when collective resistance to these conditions grows, without 'revolt' at a personal, individual level—that is, a willingness to be open to an alternative mode of existence, to 'return' to oneself in the sense of re-discovering one's own capacity for surpassing the strictures emanating from the pro-'vaccination' lobby—such a revolution is unthinkable. Moreover, 'revolt' of this kind is a prerequisite for happiness, as Kristeva insists:

> Happiness exists only at the price of a revolt. None of us has pleasure without confronting an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law that allows us to realize ourselves as autonomous and free. The revolt revealed to accompany the private experience of happiness is an integral part of the pleasure principle. (2000, p. 7)

One should note, in particular, the connection she draws between 'revolt' and one's 'autonomy' as a (morally) free human subject; all totalitarian rule—whether under Nazi rule in early 20th century Germany, the Stalinist dictatorship in Russia, the fictional varieties of Margaret Atwood's 'Republic of Gilead', and George Orwell's *1984* (Olivier, 2019a), or the

current medical tyranny—per definition reduces political subjects to a condition of abject heteronomy. One should not forget that, under such conditions, the quest for autonomy via 'revolt' is bound to be met with attempts at subjugation, or worse. This is no reason to refrain from 'revolt' in the Kristevan sense, however, as Jacques Lacan teaches one.

It may appear incongruous, but according to Lacan, *even if one should lose one's life* in the process, resisting or revolting against an unjust or totalitarian power may yield the kind of 'surplus pleasure' (that he calls '*jouissance*') of the kind noted by Kristeva. Surely this is impossible, one may retort. Structurally speaking, an event of this kind occurred in the massive revolt that slaves launched under the leadership of the gladiator-slave, Spartacus, against the might of Rome in 72–71 BCE (Mallory, 1971), at the end of which he and thousands of his followers were executed by the Romans. This epitomises what Lacan names 'the revolutionary's choice: freedom or death!'—a situation which entails a win-win scenario, unlike the so-called 'mugger's choice' ('Your money or your life!'), which is a lose-lose situation (Copjec, 2002). How so? Because it is better to fight (and perchance die) for freedom from inhuman suffering under tyrannical oppression, than to tolerate it: if you acquiesce in suffering, you don't live a properly *human* life. It is better to resist, which may result in freedom from oppression (winning), or in death, which frees one from such inhuman suffering as well (winning). Hence the 'pleasure' (or *jouissance*) accompanying it. Hence also the convergence of *jouissance* and 'revolt'. It is no exaggeration to claim that, under present circumstances, if one actively opposes and resists the pervasive mass psychosis, together with the conditions that have caused it, one may have to make the revolutionary's choice. Those people who have bowed under repressive regulations and have 'taken the jab', have ostensibly made the 'mugger's choice', with a twist: they believe that they have chosen life, but with the latest mortality figures (of the 'vaccinated') from England in mind, they may be in for a nasty surprise (The Exposé, 2022).

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the therapeutic value of these two psychoanalytical perspectives on the collective madness surrounding one today amounts to what Ian Parker (2011) conceives of broadly as a reconfiguring of one's relationship with power—in this case (judging by the available evidence) a relentless power intent on subjugating the human race unconditionally through medical tyranny. Emphasising that this is an interminable process, Parker's thinking resonates with Kristeva's on 'revolt' where he writes:

> Lacanian clinical psychoanalysis does not solve the riddle of whether the spirit of revolt can take the place of the revolt of spirit against capitalism today. However, Lacanian work can be taken forward in order to reflect on its own practice and on the limits to what it can claim to do. Theoretical advance in its therapeutic practice is predicated on a theory of revolution that occurs outside the clinic, even if the paradoxical point of connection is a point at which we learn about the necessary disjunction between the two spheres of action. The kind of revolution in

> subjectivity that occurs inside the clinic makes of the clinic a quite specific site of refusal…It gives birth to glimmering, fading, and glimmering again of a subject open to change, to subjectivity in revolution. (Parker, 2011, pp. 198–199)

Needless to say, one can substitute 'totalitarian rule' for 'capitalism' in the quotation, above, with the corollary that whatever occurs within the clinic is at best a *preparation* for revolutionary action outside the clinic—that is what the 'necessary disjunction between the two spheres of action' implies. The 'refusal' within the clinic can pave the way for a 'refusal' outside the clinic. Today we are rapidly approaching a point where such refusal should take shape in decisive social action, lest we reach a point where it would be difficult (albeit not impossible) for the human spirit to overcome fearsome odds. In this regard, Dr Joseph Mercola's words are reminiscent of Lacan's 'revolutionary's choice':

> Just how much freedom are you willing to lose? Don't think for a minute that it'll all end once you get fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Sooner or later, everyone will have to make a choice: freedom or slavery. There's no middle ground anymore. (2021b, para. 47; reference available from the present author)

We are therefore facing a 'crisis' in the Greek sense of *krisis*, which means 'a turning point'. It is up to humans themselves to decide in which direction we turn—'overcoming' or 'going under'. At times like these, Margaret Atwood never fails to inspire me with her immortal words from *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985, p. 47), namely: '*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*!' ('Don't let the bastards grind you down!'). That in itself is therapeutic.

REFERENCES

After Skool and Academy of Ideas. (2021, August 4). M*ass psychosis — How an entire population becomes mentally ill* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09maaUaRT4M

Atwood, M. (1985). *The handmaid's tale*. https://nz1lib.org/book/1650357/5212a4

Berry, T. (1996, April 11). *The university: Its response to the ecological crisis*. [Paper delivered before the Divinity School and the University Committee on Environment at Harvard University]. http://ecoethics.net/ops/berrybio.htm

Breaking News-CA. (2021a, May 10). *57 top scientists and doctors release shocking study on covid vaccines and demand immediate stop to all vaccinations*. https://breaking-news.ca/57-top-scientists-and-doctors-release-shocking-study-on-covid-vaccines-and-demand-immediate-stop-to-all-vaccinations/

Breaking News-CA. (2021b, May 3). *1,000 lawyers and 10,000 doctors have filed a lawsuit for violations of the Nuremberg code.* https://breaking-news.ca/the-new-nuremberg-trials-2021-please-share-this-info/

Breaking News-CA. (2021c, September 5). *Must watch: Nurses speak out at town hall meeting on Covid-19 vaccine injuries – Lack of reporting to VAERS* [Video]. https://breaking-news.ca/must-watch-nurses-speak-out-at-town-hall-meeting-on-covid-19-vaccine-injuries-lack-of-reporting-to-vaers-video/

Bruno, R., McCullough, P., i Vila, T. F., Henrion-Caude, A., García-Gasca, T., Zaitzeva, G. P., Priester, S., Martínez Albarracín, M. J., Sousa-Escandon, A., López Mirones, F., Payeras Cifre, B., Zaragoza Velilla, A., Borini, L. M., Mas, M., Salazar, R., Schinder, E., Yahbes, E. A., Witt, M., Salmeron, M., … Acevedo-Whitehouse, K. (2021, May 9). *57 top scientists and doctors: Stop all covid vaccinations.* Assets Global. https://assets-global.website-files.com/606d3dece4ec3c3866cc798a/60a5ff1fd9f50f42f696aec6_23%20Fifty%20Seven%20Top%20Scientists%20and%20Doctors.pdf

Cheah, S.G. (2020, December 22). *Psychiatrist: Americans are suffering from 'mass delusional psychosis' because of Covid-19.* Evie Magazine. https://www.eviemagazine.com/post/americans-are-suffering-from-mass-delusional-psychosis-because-of-covid-19

Copjec, J. (2002). *Imagine there's no woman. Ethics and sublimation.* The MIT Press.

Edeling, H. (2021, August 10). *COVID-19 pandemic – health and economic crises. Open letter to President Ramaphosa.* EMLCT. https://emlct.com/index.php/covid-19-pandemic-health-and-economic-crises-open-letter-to-president-ramaphosa/

Evans, D. (1996). *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Freud, S. (2011). *Freud – Complete works.* Ivan Smith.

Gadamer, H-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer, & D.G Marshall Trans., 2nd revised ed.). Continuum.

Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Harvard University Press.

Havel, V. (1990). The power of the powerless. In J. Vladislav (Ed.), *Living in truth* (pp. 36–122). Faber and Faber.

Heidegger, M. (1977). The question concerning technology. In W. Lovitt (Trans.), *The question concerning technology and other essays* (pp. 3–35). Harper Torchbooks.

Kennedy, R. F. (Jr). (2021). *The real Anthony Fauci. Bill Gates, big pharma and the global war on democracy and public health*. Skyhorse Publishing.

Kristeva, J. (2000). *The sense and non-sense of revolt: The powers and limits of psychoanalysis, Vol. I* (J. Herman, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (2002). *Revolt, she said. An interview by Philippe Petit* (Rainer Ganahl & Rubén Gallo, B. O'Keeffe, Trans.). Semiotext(e).

Lacan, J. (1993). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The psychoses 1955–1956* (R. Grigg, Trans.). W.W. Norton & Company.

Lacan, J. (2014). *Anxiety. The seminar of Jacques Lacan*, *Book X* (A.R. Price, Trans.). Polity Press.

Love, A. (2021, August 27). *Graphene oxide detox protocols for the vaxxed and unvaxxed.* Ambassadorlove. https://ambassadorlove.wordpress.com/2021/08/24/graphene-oxide-detox-protocols-for-the-vaxxed-and-unvaxxed/

Martin, D. (2021, September 1). *Dr. David Martin - Covid vaccine mRNA code is a bioweapon developed via a digital simulation.* Health Ranger Report. https://www.brighteon.com/309412a4-65e5-4bd6-a7c9-52805b5a6b93

McCullough, P. (2021a, March 11). *Top COVID Doc Peter McCullough: 'These jabs are killing people'.* Principia Scientific International. https://principia-scientific.com/top-covid-doc-peter-mccullough-these-jabs-are-killing-people/

McCullough, P. (2021b, October 2). *Winning the war against therapeutic nihilism and the rush to replace thrusted treatments with untested novel therapies* [Presentation]. AAPS 78th annual meeting, Pittsburgh, PA, United Stateshttps://aapsonline.org/aaps-78th-annual-meeting-recap-videos/

McGee, L. (2021, September 4). *Vaccine slowdowns in the wealthy West could incubate the next disaster in the Covid crisis.* CNN Health. https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/04/health/vaccine-rollout-slowdown-intl-cmd/index.html

Mallory, J. (1971). *Collins Gem dictionary of biography*. Collins.

Meerloo, A.M. (2009). *The rape of the mind.* Pyreaus.

Mercola, J. (2021a, October 7). *The world is suffering from mass delusional psychosis.* Dr Mercola.

Mercola, J. (2021b, November 2). *How to fight vaccine mandates and passports.* Dr Mercola.

Mercola, J. (2022a, April 11). *Over 100000 released documents expose COVID origin fraud.* Dr Mercola.

Mercola, J. (2022b, March 10). *Who needs the fake fact-checkers?* Dr Mercola.

Mercola, J. (2022c, April 27). *Mindless mask mandates are over.* Dr Mercola.

Mercola, J. & Cummins, R. (2021). *The truth about COVID-19 – Exposing the great reset, lockdowns, vaccine passports, and the new normal*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Moss, R. (2021, September 8). *Why the latest Covid death data is not all it seems*. Yahoo News. https://uk.news.yahoo.com/why-latest-covid-death-data-115025200.html

NBC News. (2021, July 16). *CDC Director Walensky warns of 'pandemic of the unvaccinated'* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkZym2WLd9k

Oliver**,** N. (2021, August 28). *Neil Oliver: 'The West is firmly in the grip, not of a virus, but of delusional madness'*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJZ8Brf5vNA

Olivier, B. (2005). Re-affirming the value of the image, and its social implications: Shlain and Lacan. *Communicatio (South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research), 31*(1), 141–154.

Olivier, B. (2008). Women's 'nature' and architectural design. *South African Journal of Art History*, *23*(3), 66–74.

Olivier, B. (2017). Protests, 'acting-out', group psychology, surplus enjoyment and neoliberal capitalism. *Psychology in Society (PINS) 53*, 30–50. http://www.pins.org.za/pins/pins53/olivier.pdf

Olivier, B. (2019a). Freud on group psychology and leaders: The case of Donald Trump. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 2020, Advance online publication, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1569

Olivier, B. (2019b). Religious authoritarianism and/or 'instrumentarian' technical surveillance: *The handmaid's tale* and *1984. Alternation – Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa*, Special Edition 28, 10–37. http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/Files/articles/special-editions/28/02-Olivier-F.pdf

Olivier, B. (2020). *Why nothing seems to matter any more: A philosophical study of our nihilistic age*. Montagu House.

Olivier, B. (2021). The 'pandemic' and the *differend. Phronimon – Journal of the South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities, 22*, 1–35. https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/Phronimon/article/view/9764/5124

Olivier, B. (in press). Massive deception masquerading as information and communication: A (largely) Derridean perspective. *Phronimon - Journal of the South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities, 23*.

Parker, I. (2011). *Lacanian psychoanalysis. Revolutions in subjectivity*. Routledge.

Philips, T. (2021, September 3). *MPs condemn mandatory vaccinations for employees.* Mail & Guardian.https://mg.co.za/news/2021-09-03-mps-condemn-mandatory-vaccinations-for-employees/

Richardson, H. (2021, September 5). *'After everything that has happened, I was in total shock': The double-jabbed people catching Covid.* The Independent on Yahoo News. https://uk.yahoo.com/news/everything-happened-total-shock-double-060000576.html

Shlain, L. (1998). *The alphabet versus the goddess. The conflict between word and image*. Penguin Arkana.

Speare-Cole, R. (2021, September 7). *How many double-jabbed people are dying from Covid?* Yahoo News. https://uk.news.yahoo.com/how-many-double-jabbed-people-are-dying-from-covid-151218361.html

Swart, N. (2021, September 15). *'Vaccine deaths are being hidden, suppressed and falsely recorded' – Dr Herman Edeling.* BizNews. https://www.biznews.com/thought-leaders/2021/09/15/vaccine-deaths

The Exposé. (2022, March 1). *Whilst you've been distracted by Russia's invasion, the UK gov. released a report confirming the fully vaccinated now account for 9 in every 10 Covid-19 deaths in England.* https://dailyexpose.uk/2022/03/01/russia-distraction-uk-gov-revealed-triple-vaccinated-account-9-in-10-covid-deaths/

Vanden Bossche, G. (2021, October 25). *Why can't C-19 vaccine mandates be taken seriously?* Voice for Science and

Solidarity.https://www.geertvandenbossche.org/post/why-are-the-current-covid-19-mass-vaccinations-to-be-considered-a-public-health-experiment

Waldburger, C. (2021, August 21). *Bombshell UK data destroys entire premise for vaccine push. The media can read just as well as me (maybe), but somehow it is left to me to report this.* https://chriswaldburger.substack.com/p/bombshell-uk-data-destroys-entire

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Bert Olivier is an Honorary Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Free State, South Africa. He has published academic articles and books across a wide variety of disciplines, including philosophy, art theory, architecture, literature, psychoanalytic theory, cinema, communication studies, and social theory. Bert received the South African Stals Prize for Philosophy in 2004; and a Distinguished Professorship from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in 2012.

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–11
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.09

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Meditation, critical psychology, and emancipation: The social construction and deconstruction of the self

Dániel Ványi,* Independent researcher and psychological counsellor, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

In this article, it is argued that the original Buddhist notion of meditation can be regarded as an emancipatory practice, as opposed to a legitimation of oppressive social relations. The article first discusses the Buddhist notion of meditation as a practice of the deconstruction of the illusion of a substantial (separate, solid, autonomous) self. Then, it explains theories of the social construction of the self and argues that the notion of the autonomous, separated self is an ideology closely tied to social relations of power. Finally, it concludes that meditation, as a practice of the deconstruction of the self, is an emancipatory practice.

KEYWORDS: meditation; critical psychology; social construction; the illusion of a substantial self; emancipation

*Contact details: daniel.vanyi@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Social critics often regard meditation as part of the individualist ideology that reinforces the existing alienated and oppressive social relations (Bazzano, 2014). This view has a basis, if we regard meditation as a stress-reduction method, that helps us get back to work and consumption (Bazzano, 2014, 2017). However, in its original Buddhist context, meditation has a different meaning. It is a social and mental practice for facing the groundlessness of our existence, the fact that everything is constantly changing, and that we ourselves do not exist as solid, delimited, substantial selves (Bazzano, 2016, 2017; Trungpa, 2002). Critical scholars have argued that the concept of an autonomous, substantial self is an ideology in the service of modern state and capitalist power (Fox et al., 2009; Gergen, 1999; Hankiss, 2015). In fact, the subject or self is itself created through subjugation to power (Butler, 1997). If the *illusion* of an autonomous self is an ideology that is part of social oppression, then the practice of meditation can be seen as an emancipatory practice, which deconstructs the self, and therefore relations of domination.

In this article, I first discuss the Buddhist notion of meditation as a practice of the deconstruction of the self. Then, I explain the notions of critical theory and critical psychology. I continue with explaining the processes of the social construction of the self in the context of social relations of power. Finally, I connect these notions, concluding that meditation can be seen as a social practice of emancipation, since it deconstructs the ideology of an autonomous, separated self, which sustains relations of power.

MEDITATION

The practice of meditation has more than a 2,500-year-old past as part of the Buddhist tradition. It exists in many forms, from the most widely known mindfulness meditation to practices working with compassion to mantras and visualisation techniques (Bodhi, 2010; Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). The practice of presence forms the basis and essence of all meditation techniques. In Western psychology, John Kabat-Zinn (2005) developed and popularised ‘mindfulness-based stress reduction’ (MBSR), which is an adaptation of Buddhist mindfulness meditation.

MBSR has gained great popularity, and has also received numerous critiques from both social critical and Buddhist perspectives. According to social criticism (Bazzano, 2014, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Purser, 2019), if we regard meditation merely as an individual stress-reduction method, it can bolster self-centredness. Therefore, it can become an ideology and practice which reinforces oppressive and alienated social relations, and supports reactive forces of control, efficiency, and uncritical adaptation, instead of active forces of emancipation. To give a simple example: if you feel bad, go to MBSR training which will help you to quickly go back

to your alienated work and (over)consumption habits, to serve the capitalist economy by exploiting yourself and others.

According to critics from the Buddhist perspective, MBSR takes out meditation from its original context, where it is emphasised that it is a *communal* practice, and the connection with the community of practitioners, the teacher, and all living beings forms an essential part of it (Bazzano, 2014, 2019b; Dalai Lama & Alt, 2017; Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Buddhist teachings emphasise the phenomena of interdependence; that nothing exists on its own, in separation, but only in relation to other existents (Bazzano, 2009, 2017). Therefore, our own happiness cannot be separated from the happiness of all living beings, and, consequently, ethical behaviour is a fundamental part of the practice of meditation (Bodhi, 2010; Dalai Lama, 2000; Dalai Lama & Alt, 2017). Thus, the Buddhist path of meditation cannot be regarded as one-sidedly individualist. Although the goal of individual liberation from suffering is part of it, according to its perspective of interdependence, individual liberation is intertwined with the liberation of all sentient beings—these two goals together form the final aim of Buddhist practice (Dalai Lama, 2000; Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). At the same time, to practice meditation, it is necessary to let go of our habitual goal-oriented attitude, and to simply notice and accept the flow of experiencing, whatever arises in it (Bazzano, 2014).

How can meditation lead to liberation from suffering? According to Buddhist teachings, the fundamental cause of suffering is the *illusion* of a solid, separated, substantial *self* or *ego*, and the self-centred perspective that arises from that illusion (Bodhi, 2010). Thus, to terminate suffering, we need to face this illusion, and by facing it, see through it. During the practice of meditation—either in formal meditation or outside of formal practice—an *insight* might arise; that our experiencing, and therefore our world, is constantly changing, and that there is an awareness, or consciousness, that is experiencing this flow, which is, at the same time, inseparable from the flow of experiencing itself (Bazzano, 2017; Dalai Lama, 2000; Trungpa, 2002). This insight is also called the experience of *selflessness* or *egolessness*: the realisation that the experiencer (awareness) is inseparable from the experience (object of awareness) itself. This can be a truly perplexing and unsettling experience, since it makes us face the fundamental groundlessness of our being and our deep confusion regarding the nature of our existence (Bazzano, 2016; Trungpa, 2002). On the other hand, the experience also carries within itself a relief—since maintaining the illusion of the self is highly burdening—and the qualities of freedom, love, and compassion are also present in it (Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b). It is important to emphasise that this is direct experience and not a theory or a concept—it transcends the conceptual mind, and thus it cannot be understood through theoretical contemplation only (Dalai Lama, 2000; Trungpa, 2013c).

Thus, the practice of meditation carries within itself the possibility of reducing self-centredness, and accessing the qualities of compassion and love that are inherent in the mind (Dalai Lama, 2000; Dalai Lama & Alt, 2017). Love can refer not only to Agape, the *universal*, unconditional love, that transcends all boundaries, but also to Eros, the love that is partial,

desiring, and ambivalent (Bazzano, 2017, 2018, 2019a). Bazzano (2018) describes the latter as taking a minority position, being radical and subversive to the status quo and well-established identities, opposing structures of power and the logic of self-preservation, and hence, creating new possibilities of actualisation.

CRITICAL THEORY, CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

What can be the connection between meditation and critical social theory? Critical social theory and critical social science aims not merely at *describing* social reality, but also at *changing* it; it aims to work in the direction of abolishing oppressive power relations, reducing suffering, and advocating social emancipation (Fox et al., 2009; Tar, 2017). Therefore, it puts *social relations of power* into the centre of its analysis. Critical psychology analyses and critiques psychological theories and practices from a critical perspective, by reflecting on the power dynamics involved in them (Fox et al., 2009). One of its main themes is individualism, analysed as an ideology that legitimises and reproduces existing power relations. In the following part of the article, I explore social and critical theories of the self, and I conclude by connecting this analysis to the Buddhist practice of meditation.

SOCIAL POWER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF

Freudo-Marxist perspectives

The Freudo-Marxist concept of the internalisation of oppression is one possible level of analysis of the interconnection between social power and the psyche (Erős, 2001; Tar, 2017). According to this approach, social oppression is built into the psyche of the individual through repressive family socialisation—where the father represents authority—and manifests as psychological repression and an authoritarian ('potentially fascist') personality. The latter is characterised by emphasising hierarchy in social relations, respect for power and authority, uncritical submission to authorities, desire for a strong leader and obedience, aggression towards subordinates, tendency to be prejudiced, rigid adherence to conventional values, and closed-mindedness (Adorno et al., 2019; Csepeli, 2005). Later, social and political psychological theories reinterpreted the internalisation of oppression as the internalisation of negative social stereotypes and prejudices by members of minority groups (Jost et al., 2015; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). According to these theories, this results in negative self-image in minority group members, and the general legitimisation and reproduction of existing unequal social relations (system-justification).

This level of analysis points at some important phenomena regarding the connection between the psyche and social power relations. However, it does not address the possibility that the concept (and experience) of a solid and separate *self* is itself the product of those power relations, and acts also as an ideology that reproduces them.

Several critical thinkers have argued that the concept of an autonomous, substantial self and the individualism resulting from it is the product, tool, and legitimising ideology of oppressive power relations (Gergen, 1999; Hankiss, 2015; Sampson, 1990). One of the main criticisms of critical psychology regarding mainstream psychology is exactly that the latter is overly individualistic: it focuses on the individual and individual-level solutions, thus ignoring the role of social injustice and oppressive power relations in producing human suffering, and by that, it contributes to maintaining and reproducing these social relations (Fox et al., 2009).

Social constructionist perspectives

The fundamental subject of social psychology is the socially determined nature of the self (Csepeli, 2005). Mead (1934) defined social psychology as a perspective which 'presupposes an approach to experience from the standpoint of the individual, but undertakes to determine in particular that which belongs to this experience because the individual himself belongs to a social structure, a social order' (p. 1). According to Baldwin, the child first experiences his or her own existence through the feedback received from others (Csepeli, 2005). Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self proposes that the self is constructed according to how others reflect their image of the individual back to them, or rather, how these reflections are represented by the individual (Pataki, 1982). As social relations are permeated by power (Foucault, 1978), the social psychological investigation of the social nature of individual identity is closely related to the critical investigation of the role of power in the creation of the self.

In their social constructionist theory, Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain that the self is part of the socially constructed reality, and, in turn, this social reality is determined by relations of power. In his related theory, Foucault (1971, 1978, 1982) analysed the interconnections between social discourses (norms of knowledge, truth, and what can and cannot be said), relations of power, and the creation of the subject (or self). Judith Butler (1997) analysed further Foucault's ideas and combined them with certain psychoanalytical theories, thereby exploring the social *and* psychological processes of the creation of the subject by power. In the following, based on the above theoretical approaches, I try to point out that the concept of a substantial (separate and solid) self is the product of social relations of power, and, in turn, also reproduces these relations of power and the oppression inherent in them.

In their treatise titled *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Berger and Luckman basically analyse how human nature and social reality mutually create each other. According to their approach, although the biological nature of humans does not determine the specific form of social order they create, the creation of a social order itself (*externalisation*) is a necessity for humanity in order to mould the inherently open nature of humans into a specific form, channel their energies, and thereby create stability. The social order created by humans

then becomes *objectified*: it appears as an objective reality for the individual who is born into it, lives in it, and, who, through the process of *socialisation*, learns or *internalises* this social reality. Therefore, in a dialectic manner, humans become determined by the social reality that is their own product in the first place.

Social reality includes language, concepts, worldview, social institutions, roles and norms, and also the social categories that determine the individual's identity (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Berger and Luckman note that the social construction of reality is situated in the context of relations of power: the success of possible alternative conceptions of reality is determined by the power of those who put them to work.

Foucauldian, deconstructivist perspectives

A similar idea is explicated by Foucault (1971, 1978) when he emphasised the processes through which relations of power determine social discourses. These discourses delimit the accepted forms of social communication and knowledge. They define the norms that determine what can and cannot be said, who can be accepted as the legitimate source of knowledge and who cannot, what can be accepted as truth, and what cannot. It's not only that power determines social discourses, but, in turn, the discourses also determine relations of power: according to Foucault (1971), discourse itself *is* power.

Foucault (1971, 1978, 1982) saw power not only as oppressive, but also as a productive force, that is not localised at certain points in society (groups or individuals), but permeates every social relation, and we are best able to recognise its presence through the phenomenon of resistance. The interconnections between the individual and power relations are at the centre of his critical analysis: how do social relations of power—therefore, social discourses—create the subject, determine the individual's identity, and produce their self? (See also Butler, 1997.) Foucault (1982) states:

> This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (p. 781)

It needs to be mentioned here that for Foucault (1982) (and also for Butler, 1997), the word 'subject' means the *identity* of the individual, the self, experienced as an autonomous, solid entity, and acting agent, as opposed to *subjective experiencing*, the direct, nonconceptual flow of experience. The latter is already present in newborns, since they experience bodily feelings, visions, sounds, etc., but they don't associate conceptual categories to these experiences, they don't have a self-concept or a self-image, and thus, they don't experience themselves as separate selves (Cole & Cole, 2001).

Our conceptions and categories about reality, which are determined by social relations of power, delimit how we can possibly imagine ourselves, define our identities, and thus, how we can understand ourselves as *selves*. The example of minority identity demonstrates well how the social categories that determine the individual's identity are permeated by relations of power and oppression (Csepeli, 2005; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Social stereotypes and prejudices devalue minority groups, resulting in negative self-image, even self-hatred in individuals who identify themselves or are identified by others as members of those groups. In fact, the creation of minority identity itself is a product of relations of power, since the concept of a minority is based on differentiation or exclusion from the majority: all hierarchies are based on categorical distinction (differentiation) itself (Csepeli, 2005; Derrida, 1981, 1982; Gergen, 1999; Graeber, 2007; Ridgeway, 2011).

The 'self' is a socio-linguistic product (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Hall, 1994); in fact, in the final analysis, it is a function of grammar (Bazzano, 2017, 2019a; Derrida, 1982). The subject is created by *subjection* to power; subjection to the categories that are defined by power (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1982). Emancipation from oppressive power relations therefore involves dismantling and deconstructing the self (Asenbaum, 2020; Olivier, 2020).

It can be noted here that, as all concepts and theories, the theory of the social construction of the subject by power, and the concept of power itself as a presumption, are also questionable, debatable, and open to deconstruction, since language itself is a relative, arbitrary, and changing system (Derrida, 1978, 1981, 1982; Gergen, 1999; Parker & Shotter, 1990). To put it another way, as Nagarjuna, the Buddhist logician explained in his tetralemma: any proposition is true, false, both true and false, neither true, nor false (Bazzano, 2017). On the other hand, the dynamic, incomprehensible, and conceptually ungraspable nature of reality is not a reason for not creating playful interpretations of it, that can express and foster the free manifestation of life (Bazzano, 2017, 2019).

Butler's perspective

Thus, one level of the analysis of the determination of the self by social power is how linguistic categories and social discourses construct the individual's identity. Judith Butler (1997) attempted to integrate this level of analysis with psychoanalytic theories, since according to her in Foucault's theory, the *psychological* mechanism by which social power creates the subject is missing. Butler understands this psychological mechanism as the emotional attachment of children to their parents, to whom, at the same time, they are subordinated: 'If there is no formation of the subject without a passionate attachment to those by whom she or he is subordinated, then subordination proves central to the becoming of the subject.' (Butler, 1997, p. 7). This matches with Berger and Luckman's (1966) observation that the internalisation of social reality always happens through emotionally charged relationships. Therefore, primary socialisation, by which children internalise the basic foundations of social

reality—including the language and the social categories that form the basis of their identities—happens through intimate relationships with their parents or significant others.

Later too, changes in people's worldviews and their closely related identities always happen through emotionally charged connections with others. The deeper the transformation is, the stronger the emotional intensity that goes along with it, since the experience of emotional intensity forms the basis of transformations of identity (Bazzano, 2019a, 2020).

Regarding the parent–child relationship that determines the creation of the subject, Butler (1997) emphasises not only the emotional intensity, but also, the quality of *dependency*: being vulnerable and subject to power is the psychological condition of the birth of our selves. The foundation of our dependency is our drive for survival and our need for a socially meaningful existence. Power creates our selves through exploiting these needs: this is what makes us accept the subordination that goes together with the creation of our selves. Our dependency is not merely material, but also psychological and social in nature. As the abovementioned theories regarding the socially constructed nature of the self point out, our social existence and identity can only be constructed through identification with categories and norms that are predefined by relations of power, and are transmitted to us by our parents.

Butler (1997) also analyses the basic paradox regarding the 'autonomous self' being born in dependency: the individual is not able to face the dependency that determines their existence from the very beginning, since then the illusion of being an autonomous self would be lost. Therefore, the person hides their own dependency on power from themself, so that the idea of existing as a substantial, autonomous self can be maintained. This can be regarded as a possible model for the birth of the unconscious. The hiding of dependency is thus a constitutive element of the concept of existing as an autonomous self: power creates the self *exactly by hiding* that the very same self is dependent on it.

CONCLUSION: MEDITATION AS EMANCIPATION

The idea of being a substantial self and the linguistic tools that form the basis of it are thus created by social relations of power. In turn, this concept of self reproduces those power relations that created it, and therefore, it is an essential part of these relations. Thus, the self and social relations of power mutually condition, and continuously produce and reproduce each other (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1982; Gergen, 1999). If that is so, then a social and mental practice, that makes it possible to face the *illusory* nature of the self as a substantial entity, is *emancipatory*, since it carries within itself the possibility of liberation from oppressive power relations—both on an individual and collective level. As I implied above, meditation in its original Buddhist meaning is exactly this kind of practice.

This practice has the potential to *deconstruct the self* as an autonomous, self-existing entity. Thus, it can break down the oppressive relations of power that this illusory sense of self—and the self-centred attitude resulting from it—feeds.

REFERENCES

Adorno, T., Frenkel-Brenswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (2019). *The authoritarian personality*. Verso Books.

Asenbaum, H. (2020). The politics of becoming: Disidentification as radical democratic practice. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *24*(1), 1–19.

Bazzano, M. (2009). Brave new worlding. *Existential Analysis*, *20*(1), 9–19.

Bazzano, M. (2014). Mindfulness and the good life. In M. Bazzano (Ed.), *After mindfulness* (pp. 61–78). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bazzano, M. (2016). Deathlife, lifedeath. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, *15*(3), 256–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2016.1204348

Bazzano, M. (2017). *Zen and therapy: Heretical perspectives*. Routledge.

Bazzano, M. (2018). Beauty and the cyborg. In M. Bazzano (Ed.), *Re-visioning person-centred therapy: Theory and practice of a radical paradigm* (pp. 28–45). Routledge.

Bazzano, M. (2019a). *Nietzsche and psychotherapy*. Routledge.

Bazzano, M. (2019b). Meditation and the post-secular condition. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, *17*(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1490

Bazzano, M. (2020). The skin is faster than the word. *Existential Analysis, 31*(1), 53–64.

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Penguin Books.

Bodhi, B. (2010). *The noble eightfold path: The way to the end of suffering*. Buddhist Publication Society.

Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford University Press.

Cole, M., & Cole, S. R. (2001). *The development of children.* Worth Publishers.

Csepeli, G. (2005). *Szociálpszichológia* [*Social psychology*]. Osiris.

Dalai Lama. (2000). *Dzogchen: Heart essence of the great perfection.* Snow Lion.

Dalai Lama, & Alt, F. (2017). *An appeal to the world.* Harper & Collins.

Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and difference*. University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. (1981). *Positions*. University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. (1982). *Margins of philosophy*. University of Chicago Press.

Erős, F. (2001). *Analitikus szociálpszichológia: Történeti és elméleti tanulmányok* [*Analytical social psychology: Historical and theoretical studies*]. Új Mandátum.

Foucault, M. (1971). Orders of discourse. *Social science information*, *10*(2), 7–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847101000201

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, Vol. 1: An introduction.* Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical inquiry*, *8*(4), 777–795.

Fox, D., Prilleltensky, I., & Austin, S. (2009). Critical psychology for social justice: Concerns and dilemmas. In D. Fox, I. Prilleltensky, & S. Austin (Eds.), *Critical psychology: An introduction*. (pp. 1–19). Sage.

Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. Sage.

Graeber, D. (2007). *Possibilities: Essays on hierarchy, rebellion and desire.* AK Press.

Hall, S. (1994). Cultural identity and diaspora. In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader*. (pp. 227–237). Columbia University Press.

Hankiss, E. (2015). *Az ezerarcú én* [*The thousand-faced self*]. Helikon.

Jost, J. T., & Banaji, M. R. (1994). The role of stereotyping in system-justification and the production of false consciousness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *33*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1994.tb01008.x

Jost, J. T., Gaucher, D., & Stern, C. (2015). 'The world isn't fair': A system justification perspective on social stratification and inequality. In M. Mikulincer & P. R. Shaver (Eds.) *APA Handbook of personality and social psychology, vol. 2: Group processes* (pp. 317–340). American Psychological Association.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. Delta.

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. University of Chicago Press.

Olivier, B. (2020). The psychopolitics of (and psychotherapy required by) neoliberalism. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, *18*(1), https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1519

Parker, I., & Shotter, J. (1990). Introduction. In I. Parker & J. Shotter (Eds.), *Deconstructing social psychology* (pp. 1–14). Routledge.

Pataki, F. (1982). *Az én és a társadalmi azonosságtudat* [*The self and social identity].* Kossuth.

Prilleltensky, I., & Gonick, L. (1996). Polities change, oppression remains: On the psychology and politics of oppression. *Political Psychology, 17*(1), 127–148. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791946

Purser, R. (2019, September 13). The mindful conspiracy. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jun/14/the-mindfulness-conspiracy-capitalist-spirituality

Ridgeway, C. L. (2011). *Framed by gender: How gender inequality persists in the modern world.* Oxford University Press.

Sampson, E. E. (1990). Social psychology and social control. In I. Parker & J. Shotter (Eds.), *Deconstructing social psychology* (pp. 117–126). Routledge.

Tar, Z. (2017). *The Frankfurt school: The critical theories of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno*. Routledge.

Trungpa, C. (2002). *The myth of freedom and the way of meditation*. Shambhala Publications.

Trungpa, C. (2013a). *The path of individual liberation* (Vol. 1). Shambhala Publications.

Trungpa, C. (2013b). *The bodhisattva path of wisdom and compassion* (Vol. 2). Shambhala Publications.

Trungpa, C. (2013c). *The tantric path of indestructible wakefulness* (Vol. 3). Shambhala Publications.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dániel Ványi is an independent researcher and psychological counsellor from Budapest, Hungary. He has published academic articles in the fields of critical social psychology and psychotherapy. He has practiced and studied meditation for more than 15 years.

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–19
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.10

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE: CONTROVERSIAL DISCUSSION

A critique of leftist gaming

Dr Jan De Vos*[1] and Dr Alfie Bown[2]

[1]Research Group Cibersomosaguas, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain
[2]Department of Media Arts, Royal Holloway University of London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article presents a discussion between Jan De Vos and Alfie Bown on leftist gaming. Bown wrote a well-read and well-referenced book entitled *The Playstation Dreamworld* (2018a) in which he also advanced the idea of the necessity to develop gaming for the left. In his book *The Digitalisation of (Inter)Subjectivity* (2020), De Vos challenged and critiqued the concept of leftist gaming in a chapter entitled 'Digital Mass Effects'. In this article, Alfie Bown introduces the discussion after which Jan De Vos rehearses the main arguments of his book, adding a few extra elements to his critique. De Vos's main question is whether the fact that digital technologies, historically underpinned by mainstream psychological theories, undermine Bown's psychoanalytic project for leftist gaming. In his response, Bown then pleads to scrutinise not only the pre-digital history of coding but also the future of it, so as to rewrite the history of the digital infrastructure as inherently tied to the history of capitalism. De Vos closes this article with a brief afterthought.

KEYWORDS: capitalism; culture; digital technologies; gaming; digitalisation of (inter)subjectivity

*Contact details: janr.devos@outlook.com

INTRODUCTION - *Alfie Bown*

A lot has happened since I wrote *The Playstation Dreamworld,* the ideas of which were developed mostly in the year 2016. Then, we were still in what we might retrospectively see as the aftermath of Gamergate, the saga in which racist and sexist trolls mobilised against what they perceived to be a diversification of the game industry. After years of imagining videogames as a bit of harmless (or harmful) escapism, the world had suddenly realised that videogames intersected deeply with politics. At that time, we were also seeing the rise and election of Donald Trump and vast attention to the image board 4chan and its associated communities of memeists and digital activists, who were seen as the hard edge of an 'alt-right' activism that had mobilised behind Trump out of nowhere. The liberal media were obsessed with a very real threat from the political right and turned their attention toward anti-fascism, but had once again neglected the anti-capitalism that was needed to go alongside any progressive agenda. In my book, I argued that the games industry was making the same mistake: endorsing diversity and responding by promoting anti-fascism, but failing on many levels and in many ways to be anti-capitalist. Against that, I tried to show that there could be a gaming for the left that might emerge out of this moment of political chaos that had thrown the industry—and beyond—into chaos.

Six years later, there are plenty of questions. Have games and associated digital media, particularly those technologies which 'gamify' our world, made any progress when it comes to promoting leftist, progressive, or revolutionary ideas, or did the far-right have a strong hold on this space that continues today? Alternatively, have the corporate forces of Silicon Valley and the platform capitalists smoothed over the cracks and (in the way that capitalist realism does) ironed out the wrinkles that were visible in 2016? Can there be leftist gaming now? I was presented with the following paper—a kind of response to my book—by Jan De Vos. It is full of provocative questions and reflections on the complex problem of how digital media, games, and capitalism form an important triangulation in contemporary society. De Vos argues that any concept of gaming for the left—if it is even possible—would have to go much further than my book had suggested. In that I agree fully, and we present below his paper followed by my response. Between us we attempt to work out, at least in a preliminary way, how we might think of the relationship between digital capitalism, videogames, and psychoanalysis in 2022.

A CRITIQUE OF LEFTIST GAMING - *Jan De Vos*

Introducing Alfie Bown's plea for leftist gaming

Alfie Bown argues that video games are political, and predominantly biased, conservative, and patriarchal in nature (e.g., depicting imperialist values such as empire, domination, and conquering by force). From here, he pleads for the need for new kinds of games that are not only leftist and emancipatory in terms of their content, but also in terms of their form itself. For, as he argues: 'Video games communicate ideology at the level of form, and laying a progressive storyline over the top does not necessarily prevent a game from serving right wing ideas.' (Bown, 2018b).

To open up the discussion, let me point to a related debate concerning certain political propaganda techniques that are used by the right to deceive and hook people. The argument here of some critical theorists and leftist scholars is that the left should adopt these same strategies on the condition that they should explain to people how the luring is done (see, for example, Connolly, 2002; De Vos, 2013). The question, however, is whether models or techniques truly can be said to be inherently neutral and thus can be used either for foul (rightist) or good (leftist) politics: are they not also *political, and predominantly biased, conservative, and patriarchal in nature*?

It is in this sense that I endorse Bown's argument: the strategy should not be to use pre-existing gaming forms and merely add leftist content to it. However, we should perhaps also go a step further than Bown and state that it would also not suffice to simply invent new gaming forms (that would envision a more emancipatory use of gaming and engender a more critical attitude amongst gamers), but that instead we should seek to question or rework the very issue or form of digital gaming itself, or even, perhaps, address the forms of the digital technologies that underpin gaming as such. For, at the very least, should we not add to Bown's argument by stating that the issue of forms being contaminated by ideology is already at work at the very level of digitality as such?

Gaming, literature, and reading heads

To begin with, Bown's argument is predicated on a slightly problematic comparison between gaming and literature. Through recourse to Raymond Williams, Bown (2018b) contends that novels such as those by Charles Dickens, despite their left-wing content (evoking sympathy with the repressed working class, for example), ultimately are conservative with respect to their form, and are thus incapable of instigating social change and instead exist as mere commodities to be enjoyed by bourgeois readers. Modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf realised that the very form of novels needed to be problematised, and that this was what was required for literature to become more progressive and politically forward-

thinking. For Bown, gaming must undergo an analogous shift. However, can gaming truly be situated on the same level as reading and writing?

That is to say, if today gaming restricts gamers to performing specific tasks (to kill, to conquer, to build, etc.), then, in accordance with Bown, can one imagine games that subvert such preconfigured actions by either bestowing upon players a greater degree of freedom or allowing them to deconstruct these actions? However, would this not solely concern, at least to begin with, hidden or simply unspoken tasks: *conquer the castle in a critical or deconstructive way*?

Or, phrased otherwise: in contrast to being a scholar among a reading public (to use the Kantian designation), is being a gamer among a gaming public not subject to the narrower confines of gaming, and, as such, its very form itself? That is to say, even with the advent of more creative and politically daring games, such critical engagement with them would still occur within the boundaries of the game itself. Consequently, it appears to me that an answering player cannot but accept the basic coordinates of the specific game that is being played. Moreover, even if a meta-answer would be possible; that is, if a game could be answered and/or criticised within another or a new game, would this not mean that the public debate would ultimately be a debate between technicians and experts, and thus exclude code-illiterate laypersons? Indeed, even if games could be built in such a way that incited users to become code-literate—i.e., allowed gamers to learn the hidden algorithms and the obscured strategies of data-gathering, or even allowed users to rewrite the algorithms and manage the data themselves—would this not ultimately mean that the very base of digital technologies (the current hardware, software, and anything in between) would remain completely untouched and unquestioned? It is perhaps here that one can discern the crucial difference between writing and gaming technologies: the latter's forms are constrained and conditioned by a different and underlying technological level, which cannot be simply contested. Or, to put it another way, while Joyce and Woolf were able to use writing as a way through which to subvert writing as a bourgeois technology, this cannot be simply transposed to defying the constraints that digital technologies place upon us.

The crucial point to make here is that while both writing and digital computing technologies are arguably not about mimicking human nature or improving it—regarding writing, recall the Derridean argument (Derrida, 1974) that writing is not the result of a natural process nor the obvious or logical transposing of spoken language—it can be documented and demonstrated that digital technologies do set out from specific *scientific theories and models* about human nature (something which, arguably, is not the case with the advent of writing). Just consider McCulloch and Pitts' (1943) phrasing of 'neural networks' most commonly used by AI developers to back up their claim that the technologies they develop are modelled after the nature of the human brain. To show how particular conceptions of the human are mobilised in digital technologies, it is instructive here to refer back to Alan Turing's so-called universal machine (see, for an extended discussion, De Vos,

2020), where the algorithmic handling of data is based on a 'head' that reads squares on a paper strip, with each square containing data (Turing, 1950). The head of the Turing machine thus places a kind of agent in charge, an unproblematic (and also unproblematised) fully present agent, who engages directly with the data, whilst, simultaneously, remaining independent from the data, and thus remaining unaffected by what it reads. This, one could argue, is the ghost in Turing's machine. Clearly, this head-subject is not the subject that is delineated in psychoanalysis (on which also Bown leans to develop his plea for leftist gaming); it is neither the Freudian split subject nor Lacan's subject that is suspended between two signifiers, or, as Lacan himself put it: 'a signifier represents the subject for another signifier' (Lacan, 1964/1978, p. 207). The difference between Turing's head and Lacan's subject is that the latter concerns a zero-level of subjectivity, which means that the subject has no weight nor amplitude as such but, rather, only exists in the interstices of language. Even though, most remarkably, Turing and many other Artificial Intelligence theorists and cyberneticists initially started out from explicitly referencing psychoanalytic theory (De Vos, 2020), they ultimately resorted to simplified mainstream psychological conceptions of the human being in order to devise their technologies. Hence, in contrast to the divided and thus necessarily ephemeral subject of psychoanalysis, Turing's head simply is what it is, undivided and fully present, which is where, I would argue, subjectivity disappears as such: the head is not that which gives rise to fissures or ambiguities. Can it not be argued that this scheme, which underpins our digital technologies, is also constitutive of how our subjective and intersubjective spaces are constructed in the era of digitalisation? Consider here the contention of Dave Winer, a software developer, who argued: 'Connect persons to data objects to persons. That's the social today' (cited in Lovink, 2012, p. 11). This can be considered as a mortifying reversal of Lacan's formula, whereby humans are narrowed down to *persons*, mere datasets to be incorporated into Winer's definition of the social, which, above all, appears to fit the definition of the market.

Will digital gaming not also eventually be structurally marked by this scheme? Arguably, gaming today does not allow space for the subject. In this way, gaming can perhaps be wholly situated at the level of *dream work*, which is one of the key arguments put forward by Bown in his book on gaming. I would argue that dreaming in the Freudian sense of the term has no subject per se, and that the subject of the dream only arises in the act of remembering and awakening, which is the other space of dreaming, where dreams enter the social as they are told to someone else: only there does the subject divided between the dream and the world come into being. Digital gaming, which is based on our current digital technology, thus can be said to be above all the dreams from which one cannot wake up, as it does not allow any 'other space', an elsewhere that is necessary for the subject qua split being. Moreover, as *dream work* is about fantasies being put to work while our motor functions are shut down, as per Freud's account, then one could perhaps conclude that game-dreaming about the leftist revolution is not likely to lead to any significant action.

For it, at the very least, is not the crucial question, which is perhaps overlooked by Bown in his hopes for more emancipatory forms of gaming; what constitutes the social in gaming? Even though new forms of gaming could incite us to think critically (and thus be educational as such), could they truly bring people together, could they truly engender a collective body capable of opposing the hegemonic forces? In other words, the question I am interested in is whether the technological conditions of gaming communities are not only structurally incompatible with a true understanding of subjectivity, but also with a proper political community, or 'the entire public of the world of readers' as envisioned by Kant (1784/1996, p. 18)? For, if one accepts that the digital technologies we have currently are based on what I would call a psychologised falsification of subjectivity, then how would they allow for a genuine manifestation of sociality? One is reminded here of how Bernard Stiegler assessed the conditions of the social under digitalisation. Stiegler (2010) argued that 'psychotechnical attention capture' results in

> an immense psychological, affective, cultural, economic, and social disaster, and has led to the weakening and increasing fragility of social linkages that at this point are capable only of engendering generalized insecurity and immense doubts about the future condition of all intergenerational relations. (p. 58)

Hence, should we abandon all hope when entering the digital game? Will the revolution not be gamified? Or, for that matter, will the revolution not be digitalised because it cannot unite people around a collective cause? Hence, the question that requires addressing in greater detail is a general one: what does it take for a collection of individuals to form a group? Perhaps the psychoanalytic distinction between a mass and a society, between a gang and a group, might be expedient for this purpose.

The deadlock of subjective identification in the play cave

Digital gaming clearly sets out from the 'one-on-one' model. One could compare this, for example, with all sorts of digital education platforms which are ostensibly wholly adaptable to the individual needs of students, thus signalling the realisation of the ultimate solipsistic form of education and schooling. Digital learning platforms appear intent on ruling out group effects, or, at the very least, wholly containing, controlling, and steering them. To put it more dramatically yet still: the digital *one-on-one* is where the erstwhile collective *speaking being* becomes the solipsistic *speaking beast*; every utterance or deed is now tracked, while every 'social exchange' is managed as a result of everything being processed along the individualising psychological schemes that form the backbone of the algorithms.

It is precisely here that educational technologies and also, for that matter, social media platforms and hence gaming platforms, by virtue of addressing the *individual as an individual* (in order to pre-script, nudge, steer, and ultimately commodify them), turn the digitalised human being into a mere cog in the systemic faceless mass. It is against this backdrop that

Winer's aforesaid definition becomes more tangible: 'Connect persons to data objects to persons. That's the social today' (cited in Lovink, 2012, p. 11). Think in this respect of a Facebook project aiming to develop non-invasive sensors capable of detecting brainwaves, which, in turn, would allow one person to feel what another person feels (see Lee, 2017). This, arguably, would mean the end of subjectivity and individuality as we know it, insofar as it would lead to the establishment of a uniformed swarm mind; the ultimate form of massification.

Of course, concerning these telepathic technologies, the question imposing itself here is how would brains be connected; that is, *which theory* of the psychological and the social would be used as the interface? For, arguably, the mere electro-chemical brain activity would need to be modelled in order to transport and then transpose them into another brain. I contend that the algorithms that would do this job would inevitably lean on certain theories and models of the human being and their social interactions. One could argue that, for all sorts of reasons, psychoanalysis will not be the first inspiration base here, being on its decline and probably coming across as too complex and even contradictory. As such, it can be observed that programmers and designers of, for example, digital education technologies or social media tend to take recourse to the more simple and straightforward psychological models of the human being and of society: much easier to model (compare this with neuroscientists using mainstream psychological models in order to chart the brain; De Vos, 2016)! Would it not be an insurmountable ordeal for digital engineers or designers to implement the overly complex and baroque psychoanalytic theory on how individuals form groups and, most importantly, how this is mirrored and interconnected with how groups form individuals? One can safely argue that no one in Facebook's Building 8 team working on developing the 'brain–computer interface' is pondering on how to model the interconnectedness of the Oedipus complex (as formative for individual subjectivity) with the Freudian myth of the primal horde (as formative for groups and society as such).

However, here we might make a remarkable side observation: is not digital culture, and especially gaming, testifying of a golden age for fantasy and fiction providing ample grist for the psychoanalytic mill? Or, if one is in doubt about where all the rich imagery of psychoanalysis has gone, now that psychoanalysis is ostensibly in decline, then one answer might be that it went to the digital entertainment industry: to the endless series and content on Netflix and similar streaming services and gaming. Indeed, incest stories, castration fears, father figures, sibling rivalries, and so on and so forth all appear to have found refuge in the world of fantasy and gaming. Hence, while mainstream neuropsy-scientists explain the 'mental' via dry cognitivism, behaviourism, and cerebral functions and regions, and laugh warily at the 'old' psychoanalytic explanations, in the meantime the Romanesque imagery of psychoanalysis proliferates across popular culture.

All this perhaps justifies a first psychoanalytic conjecture of the possible changes in times of digitalisation as to what concerns the formations of subjectivities and intersubjectivities.

For, can we not discern in the digital hero cult, especially rampant in gaming, a crucial shift in the processes of identification? Instead of forming a symbolic identification with the hero, first and foremost the gamer acts *being* the hero: does this not mean that instead of symbolic identifications, then, gaming invariably confines gamers to imaginary identifications? This stems from the fact that the form, or perhaps more accurately, the structure of gaming involves an *acting out*, a repetitious role-play in which we play at being the hero, which, in turn, can be said to provide us—if I am allowed this wink to Lacan's Mirror stage—with an image of unity and substantiality that we ourselves do not possess. This is perhaps because there is only space for acting out in the digital realm as opposed to developing symbolic identifications whereby one would not merely identify with what one would like to be, but, rather, to use Žižek's designation, one would identify 'with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love' (Žižek, 1989, p. 116). At the very least, such modes of symbolic identification entail that we do not identify in the first place with that what we want to be (or with what we are said to be), but, rather, we identify with what we want to be *from the perspective (or the gaze) of where we would be seen as that which we want to be*. For example, a child role-playing as a knight with a toy sword must, at the very least, imagine the gaze of someone (the archetypal example here would be an invisible audience) watching them and admiring their sword skills and heroic courage at confronting all these evil forces. Here, one can firstly discern the split subject, who is split between a primary and secondary identification and, hence, eventually a zero-level of subjectivity: ultimately, we are nothing but the gaze from where we look at ourselves.

The key question here is whether this precise constellation, form, and structure is wholly impossible within the historically contingent development of digital technologies. Consider, once again, Turing's reading head, which can be said to be the equivalent of a full agent, insofar as it was wholly equal to itself and remained unaffected by the data. Does this mean that digital technologies are simply incapable of offering us anything more than placeholders for the solipsistic imaginary ego, which serves to foreclose the symbolic subject; the subject who lacks a full subjectivity and who has no choice but to lose itself in the act of attempting to establish itself symbolically? Hence, are gamers, and by extension everybody dwelling in the digital virtual life-world and its limited forms of subjectivity (pre-configured on the base of the cardboard mainstream psychological models and theories) condemned to fool around within the range of imaginary coordinates designed by game developers and the like? Could one not argue that the symbolic antagonism that is made possible via the adoption of an external gaze, which allows for an act of subjectivation (where the individual can become a subject and a mass can become a social group), structurally has no place within the digital? Indeed, the entire issue of making gaming more 'real' (via ever more realistic 3D graphics and virtual reality possibilities that make fully immersive gaming simply a matter of time) might result in the symbolic 'as if' dimension becoming thinner yet still. In gaming, the toy sword is an AK 47, and you can literally feel the kickback of the weapon in your hands as the control

pad rumbles when you fire. However, as virtual reality technology advances it will soon be possible for gamers to feel the sensation of the cold steel on their hands, to smell the gun oil, and so forth, while if cerebral access becomes possible, we would not have to play as the hero, or imagine ourselves as being the hero, we would just *be the hero*.

However, perhaps, for the time being, it suffices to say that the digital promotes imaginary rather than symbolic identifications. The crucial issue here is that the external gaze which structures symbolic identifications (the perspective from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves worthy of love) in digitality is no longer external, but, rather, is fully drawn within the framework of the digital itself, which, in turn, condemns us to be locked up in imaginary identifications. This is where 'the loving gaze' is no longer supposed, but, rather, is either realised imaginarily in the form of either systemic rewards (gaining experience points (XP), reaching another level, winning trophies), or is substantialised via the gaze of our peers in the gaming community. While the community aspect is regularly invoked as a positive feature of gaming (in the sense that it brings people together), one could argue that gaming and social media, in fact, deprive us of the 'invisible audience' and condemn us for life to endure the 'real' presence of peers evaluating, applauding, supervising, following, sympathising, and, of course, liking us. The horror!

However, while the horror is all mine, it clearly has its counterpart in the zealous enthusiasm of those pedagogues who are so anxious to include gaming as soon as possible within their educational practices: to use, for example, gaming to let teenagers experience the dangers of sexting in a playful way, or to even let adults become acquainted with healthy food via online interactive platforms that are replete with funny movies and entertaining quizzes. While technology in this way draws us all into its imaginary scenery of immature and even childish play, in the meantime our new economy condemns us to life-long learning. This is the paradox: as school is on the verge of being shut down and replaced by an interface between persons and data, we ourselves have become eternal pupils dispersed on the learning platforms, which we cannot escape from as the prospect of finally graduating and entering public life appears to have been foreclosed. Hence, is the ultimate objective, then, to keep everybody immature and continually part of a virtual classroom/playroom where each person is isolated and addressed separately? Within such a constellation, group formations are bypassed for a more generalised solipsism; at most, we could say that we are led to *fake* pre-configured groups, based on empty socio-psychologised signifiers, such as well-being, empathy, and participation. It is precisely here, I would argue, that massification and its unchecked effects are imminent.

Conclusions: Reclaim the concrete

Digital technology so it seems, is easily usable for both corporate interests and rightist ideologies. Seemingly, the capitalists and the alt-right does not have work too hard and can

suffice to use technology straightforwardly and naively. The left, in contrast, has to think and work hard so as to reverse engineer the digital machinery. This argument—which considers the advent of technology as a natural process which, for reasons left unexplained, tends to favour the right in its manipulation of the people—is what I have questioned in this essay. At times, Bown seems to embrace this position I have critiqued as he contends that tinkering with the emotions of the people via technologies should also be part of the subversive game of the left as it should go beyond merely deconstructing ideology:

> This is a question about the politics of subversion in a much wider sense, since embracing this possibility would involve an admission that it is necessary not only to deconstruct existing ideological assumptions but to construct new ones, operating consciously to manipulate the emotions of others. It may be time for the left to accept this necessity. (Bown, 2018a, p. 78)

However, if, as I argue throughout my latest book, it is the mainstream neuropsychological models that are mobilised when it comes to digitally (pre)designing emotions, is not the first problem that, if one opts for an alternative digitality starting out from psychoanalysis, for the latter emotions are far from an unproblematic category? For example, Lacan argued the following concerning the function of the Chorus in Greek tragedy:

> Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you … Therefore, you don't have to worry; even if you don't feel anything, the Chorus will feel in your stead. Why after all can one not imagine that the effect on you may be achieved, at least a small dose of it, even if you didn't tremble that much? (Lacan, 1992, p. 247)

The central insight here is that emotions and psychology only come to the fore in the very process of outsourcing them to the Chorus. The human being itself does not do emotions, and neither does it tremble—that is what the Chorus is for. Is hence the central question here not: would this critical psychoanalytic model be capable of serving as the basis for devising new forms of digitalities?

Consider, in this respect, how Srecko Horvat condemned Tinder for being a brutal commodification of love and sex that has messed up the emotional lives of an entire generation of young people, only to then plead for a leftist variant of Tinder (Horvat, 2016). However, is the question that one must ask here not what would be the psychological theory that would underpin this pharmacological variant? Given that Horvat himself leaned on psychoanalysis, did he himself consider how one would build into Tinder some of Lacan's most famous dicta, such as 'Woman does not exist' (Lacan, 1990, p. 38) or 'there is no sexual relation' (Lacan, 1985, p. 170)? These two dicta, at the very least, testify to the non-psychological approach of psychoanalysis, which understands the field of sexuality as being inherently antagonistic; one name for this irresolvable antagonism is precisely the subject. Simply put, in light of psychoanalysis being useless at acting as a stand-in for the *bad and fake psychologies* that currently inform social media and digital technology, I believe that Tinder, Facebook, and the like cannot be disconnected from the psycho-economy of digital

capitalism: they cannot be tweaked, neither at the level of content nor at the level of form. That form is never neutral is one of the key lessons of psychoanalysis: form is always condensed or crystalised content.

At the very least, perhaps Bown's central argument that the digital and virtual world actually function along the psychoanalytic logic of subjectivity (revealing the human subject as driven by desires which in the end are alien to the subject) has to be amended. Bown (2018a) depicts the alleged homology between subjectivity and digitality as follows:

> while our instincts (insofar as they exist) to a certain extent belong to us, our drives certainly do not. Like a decision made inside the virtual dreamworld, we are given a kick in the arse but nevertheless feel instinctive agency driving us in the directions in which we move. (p. 75)

Hence, for Bown, the algorithmic organisation of desire in the digital points to the fundamental otherness of the drives. Once could refer here to the neurological experiments Žižek often mentions: the manipulation of the brains of rats via implants so that one can control the rat's movements making it turn left or right as if using a remote control. Žižek (2017) asks how a human subject would experience this:

> …will a steered human continue to experience his movements as something spontaneous? Will he remain totally unaware that his movements are steered, or will he become aware that something is wrong and an external power is deciding his movements? And, how, precisely, will this external power appear: as something inside the person, like an unstoppable inner drive, or as simple external coercion? (para. 13)

However, should one here not be a bit more Freudian? That is, if these (thought) experiments seem to point to a mere formal logic of desire and drives, are we not justified to bring back in the Freudian references to repression and its links to infantile sexuality and subjectivation history? For, can we not argue that the uncanniness that would be provoked by stimulating your brain will be in the end far removed from the uncanniness that you experience in, for example, your nightmares? Only in the latter case, the dimension of the psychoanalytic Real is to truly be at play; that is, only there one is confronted with how one's subjectivity is fundamentally thwarted and how this, on the one hand, passes over the dimension of sexuality and, on the other hand, is inextricably linked to the history of one's subjectivation. What I want to argue for is a radical qualitative difference between how the Real would be evoked by mere cortical stimulation as compared to it being evoked within the everyday logic of the subjective. From here, cannot the same be said regarding to the algorithmic creation of drives and desires? These will arguably remain external, and never become truly intimate/extimate, as the latter antagonism concerns the subjectivation history which, I argue, necessarily remains outside of the algorithm. Put differently, either the illogical of cortical stimulation or the logic of the algorithms are not the same of the *un-logic* of human subjectivity.

Moreover, it could be argued that cortical stimulation and algorithmic simulation of 'desires' and 'emotions' would make subjectivity as we know it disappear. However, to make it clear, the issue here is not to safeguard particular forms of subjectivation, but perhaps, subjectivation as such. Does this then mean that what is left to confront are structures, and in the first place, as I attempt to show in my book, the structure of Logos? Is my reasoning ultimately that digitality, as a thing of Logos, as Logos radicalised, inevitably will go rogue on human beings and human subjectivity? To put it tentatively: Logos is a machine that uses subjectivity in order to grow, but this cannot but engender the vision, the final fantasy, of Logos only reaching its ultimate end when it swallows whole subjectivity, and, thus, abolishes it. That is to say, Logos, grounded in a zero-level of subjectivity (the empty subject situated between two signifiers) cannot but eventually fully realise the zero-level of subjectivity. Hence, the contemporary thrust towards our very own digital death represents Thanatos in its most elaborate form.

However, I have tried to demonstrate here and in my book that, in order for things to go bad, digital technologies must have been developed from bad models (bad in the sense of leading to bad things, but also bad because these models overlook the truth of human subjectivity and sociality). Hence, is my final conclusion that we must fight the entropy of Logos, by fighting its lies, and, hence, fighting Logos as such? The typical strategy has hitherto centred on pointing out to everyone: *we are speaking-beings, we are children of Logos, so do not underestimate the power of the symbolic when you speak of our brains, body, society, economy, and so on*. Perhaps we have now reached a point where an alternative strategy is needed; that is, instead of defending Logos, the time has come, not to reject it (by pointing to the body or the brain), but simply to oppose it, not through gaming or playing, but, rather, through actively withstanding it and fighting it from the perspective that *real and concrete* people in their *real and concrete* circumstances are suffering because of it. Of course, the real and the concrete are here not to be understood as 'really existing', but rather, as the logical outcome of partisan and engaged and thus leftist, political struggle.

FUTURE CODE - Alfie Bown

To begin to answer this question of whether leftist gaming is even possible, with or without psychoanalysis, is a difficult task. To start thinking about it, I'll take three main points from De Vos's article and briefly give some reflections on each. First, I consider how games relate to literature, film, and other art forms and whether De Vos is right that the peculiar digitality of gaming separates it from those other mediums in a way that limits the subversive potential of gaming. Second, I connect games to the digital love industry and the question of social life, which connects De Vos's comments on sociality and digital apps like Tinder to developments in contemporary gamification, which are perhaps the most significant way in which games

relate to the political future in 2022. Third, I re-articulate the role psychoanalysis might play in the future of digital media. Then it will be time to load up the PlayStation again.

For De Vos, because of the formal mechanical structure of games, 'even with the advent of more creative and politically daring games, such critical engagement with them would still occur within the boundaries of the game itself.' Games have rules and limits that cannot be transgressed, even if they allow for a certain variability within those limits. Life, on the other hand, is often imagined as a swirl of endless possibility in which no line is ultimately impassable. Or so the argument goes. I would suggest, on the contrary, that the limits of a game are not as dissimilar from the limits imposed in (psychological) life, rendering the connection between games and psychoanalysis a pertinent one.

In 1986, just before both myself and the internet were born (two things I always think of as connected) Niklas Luhmann wrote *Love as Passion: The Codification of Love.* It was a book about how romance and relationships are structured by sets of codes, how romantic exchanges are scripted and planned, executed to perform certain functions. We are actors on the stage, but we didn't write the script. Of course, this was a time before the coding, scripts, and functions that we associate with contemporary digital life. For Luhmann, once upon a time, the institutions of the church were the biggest force which set the code of love, or perhaps at another point in time it was the institution of the family. At a certain point in history, Luhmann argues, literature takes over as the dominant force which writes the script in which we live, love, and desire. After that, we might add that cinema and the television industry take up the mantle and teach us how to think and feel, setting the codes for love, romance, and social relations.

I would argue (though there is not space to prove it here) that videogames and (perhaps even more importantly) gamified social applications have taken the prime spot as the dominant force that organise the codes of desire today. Apps that use algorithms to organise and curate individuals, interfaces which organise the movements of citizens within the smart cities of tomorrow, and games which turn us into the players of today's contemporary society all organise and script social life in a way that literature could only dream of doing. We were actors on a stage playing out a script we didn't write, and now we are players in a game that we didn't design.

However, for Luhmann, literature does not simply *take over* from the church and the family as the author of the codes of everyday life. Rather, almost like a blockchain ledger, each re-writing adds itself to the long history of codification, taking things in new directions and perhaps even retroactively changing the past, but often containing within it what has gone before. He writes:

> Each individual characterization of love must be understood as referring back to all others. As this is true of *every* characterization, and thus holds true for *all the others,* every theme occurs in all the others as *the other of the others.* (Luhmann, 1986, p. 29)

When platform capitalism—the kind of Facebook, Tinder, Grinder, and so on—takes over from literature as the primary code-writer that produces the scripts through which we interact, desire, and relate, it does not replace what has gone before but retains it (and even intensifies it). In other words, the histories of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and of religious oppression that have historically played a role in organising social life—from the church to the family to the state to the movies—are not replaced by a digital future that shoots off in a new direction, which exists untethered from the past. On the contrary, these forms of digital capitalism re-shape us only by adding to the ledger, often preserving those much deeper and more longstanding codes that organise us on economic, gendered, sexual, and racial lines. As Eva Illouz writes, economic and cultural institutions 'have clearly codified the cultural fantasies through which love as a story, as an event, and as an emotion is imagined.' (2012, p. 198). These codes reach back into long histories of power structures that tell us how to emote, think, feel, and love. It is a *longue durée* of capitalism, a kind of systems update, capitalism 9.0, or whatever one chooses to call it.

De Vos comments that 'while Joyce and Woolf were able to use writing as a way through which to subvert writing as a bourgeois technology, this cannot be simply transposed to defying the constraints that digital technologies place upon us.' This is a provocative question: is there less space for subversion in the digital, than there was in the literary? In a sense this—and the above argument—recall Donna Haraway's (1991) famous claims from her 'Cyborg Manifesto' that the digital can be the site for re-writing our politics and escaping the long history of oppression that precedes digital life. In recent years this has been the task of the Xenofeminism movement, which argues for an 'explicit, organized effort to repurpose technologies for progressive gender political ends', and seeks to 'strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world' (Cuboniks, n.d., para. 3; see also Hester, 2018). In seeing the digital world as fundamentally limiting, De Vos suggests a restriction to how earth-shatteringly revolutionary those spaces can be, and in some ways cutting against this trend in seeing a way out of political problems in digital and internet life.

There can be no doubt that digital life today is inherently connected to capitalism. In De Vos's response, the following point seems absolutely critical:

> 'Connect persons to data objects to persons. That's the social today' (cited in Lovink, 2012, p. 11). This can be considered as a mortifying reversal of Lacan's formula, whereby humans are narrowed down to persons, mere datasets to be incorporated into Winer's definition of the social, which, above all, appears to fit the definition of the market.

This recalls the arguments of Mario Tronti, the still-living Marxist critic of the *operaismo.* For Tronti, when capitalism reaches its peak the whole of social life becomes a macrocosm of the factory, where every interaction (every click, let's say) is a monetisable moment of production for the factory (platform) owner.

> At the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation is transformed into a *moment* of the relation of production. The whole of society is turned into an *articulation* of production, that is, the whole of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination to the whole of society. (Tronti, 2020, p. 31)

This is what we are up against. Today, our empathies, emotions, and interactions are programmed for us in advance. We opt into a digital 'Chorus'—as Lacan says—which speaks and feels through us as if we are ventriloquist's dummies whose masters sit in Silicon Valley, in Alibaba's 'Cloud Town', or on the outskirts of Shenzhen.

However, the fact that Tronti and Luhmann are pre-digital writers is vital and significant. The quote via Lovink (2012) has its pre-history in conceptions of pre-digital capitalism. Digital life today is indeed new, but it is not unprecedented. It's rather the ultimate articulation of a capitalism that has been incubating for centuries. The actions of platforms like Facebook and Tinder add themselves to the infinite ledger of codification, 'nudging' us (to borrow the term from the Facebook boardrooms) in altered directions but hardly shooting us off into uncharted territory.

In this sense, De Vos is quite right that Tinder, Facebook, and the like cannot be disconnected from the psycho-economy of digital capitalism. He argues that such platforms cannot be tweaked, neither at the level of content nor at the level of form. I would agree that they cannot be tweaked, but add that they can tweak us instead.

These technologies are already nudging and editing, and if we don't play an active role in the process, then we will have no control over the future directions in which we are nudged. In a quotation above, Žižek wonders whether 'a steered human' will become aware of being steered or continue to feel as if they are acting 'spontaneously'. It was the legendary feminist critic Shulmaith Firestone who wrote that women cannot afford to be spontaneous in the realm of love because they are on the wrong side of the oppression created by the entire history of romance (1970). Today, any progressive finds themselves in this position. We should both be aware of our being steered humans and seek not to be 'free' of such steering (as if liberated or unrepressed desire existed) but to re-steer and re-orient the direction of travel to one that suits progressive ends. Technologies of gamification, even games themselves, I still believe, could be part of this process.

To achieve anything like this, I hope to have suggested in this brief response, would mean to steer against a current that has been running for many years and to steer against capitalism itself. Against the claims of *The Playstation Dreamworld,* Vos argues that rather than inventing new gaming forms that might in various ways serve a progressive political agenda, we might be better served instead by seeking to question or rework the very issue or form of digital gaming itself, or even, perhaps, by addressing 'the forms of the digital technologies that underpin gaming as such'. In other words, 'game-dreaming about the leftist revolution is not likely to lead to any significant action' when the digital itself (on which video games cannot

help but rely) is so connected—as De Vos shows—to mainstream psychological conceptions of the human being and to a particular socio-economic political system: namely, that of capital. In short, for gaming to be leftist, it would have to steer against the current not only of the history of digital capitalism but of capitalism itself. A few leftist games aren't going to do much, but they might be part of a larger project of re-imagining digital space. The question of whether there can be 'leftist gaming' then, is also the question of whether we can address the very form of digital infrastructure, as De Vos says, but it is also the question of whether we can reject structures of capitalism from pre-digital history.

Ultimately, De Vos sees subjectivity as illogical or un-logical, and therefore as fundamentally distinct from the logic of algorithms. There are indeed fundamental ways in which the subject might be un-logical, and this is central to certain aspects of Lacanian psychoanalytic thought. There are also ways in which the subject is completely predictable, mechanical, and logical. These can often be its most uncanny moments, and of course the scariest thing about the algorithms of Facebook, Alibaba, Tinder, and such platforms is not that they fail to give us what we want but that they know what we want better than we know ourselves and our own desires.

Further, we can perhaps say that algorithms are not always as logical as they seem. Like a human subject, they can be full of inconsistency, glitches, and errors, which—when it appears—undermines the structure of the program itself. In that sense, the algorithm can confront the Real in a way the subject cannot. Psychoanalysis as a way of thinking about digital structure can be used in quite different ways. As a model for digital subjectivity, it may not always be the most appropriate theory—indeed, it is way out of fashion in media and communication studies—but as a way of thinking about how we experience impulse, desire, emotion, and even love *as if* they are internal, spontaneous, and our own when in fact they are external, planned, scripted, and edited, it is a vital tool. It politicises desire at a time when neoliberal tacticians and Silicon Valley technocapitalists precisely seek to make us think desire is apolitical. Psychoanalysis reveals the fantasy of ideology. We buy into digital desire because it knows what we want and offers it to us, and it is only with a psychoanalytic view that we can question this situation and seek to edit and steer desire in new directions.

In 2016 when I decided to write *The Playstation Dreamworld*, it seemed to me that we were in the middle of what Lyotard once called a 'desirevolution' (Bown, 2018a). From the Pepe memes circulating on 4Chan to the Jeremy Corbyn football chants, it appeared to be a moment in which political forces were battling over the libidinal future. It seemed then that desire was in a kind of deterritorialised moment, as Deleuze and Guattari might put it, and that both the right and the left were fighting to re-territorialise it (Deleuze and Guattari, 2000). Now, it seems rather that the corporate forces of 'centrist' neoliberal capitalism are the ones to have re-territorialised the libidinal economy back onto their side. Just as politicians in the traditional capitalist mould (such as Biden or Starmer) take back the microphones from those on both the right and the left (from Trump to Sanders and Corbyn),

so too does the field of desire shift away from the memes and image boards on the fringes to the old models of AAA gaming and apps designed in Silicon Valley. In 2016, it perhaps seemed enough to bring progressive discourse into the industry of videogames, but now from this bleaker position it seems there is a greater task ahead. In this sense, I think the arguments of De Vos bring much to the table. He shows how, if we are to discuss anything like the idea of progressive play or gaming, we need to think as well about a much wider digital infrastructure that is inherently tied to the history of capitalism. It's this history that we need to rewrite.

FINAL FANTASY - Jan De Vos

I was born before the internet; I always think that it this is important. Hence, in a way, like Tronti and Luhmann evoked by Bown, I myself am pre-digital too. However, perhaps the latter designation does not make much sense, and perhaps I should side above all with the position once described by Rainer Maria Rilke as 'each age has such disinherited children, to whom no longer what's been, and not yet what's coming, belongs' (cited in Agamben, 1993, p. 43). However, is this in-between position not defining human subjectivity as such; are we not always occupying this perspective once described by the Flemish novelist Louis Paul Boon as belonging to a time where one culture passes away in its death bed while another culture is born in the childbed (cited in Haasse, 2000, p. 23)? So perhaps, the designations of the pre-digital and the digital native should not be given too much weight, maybe the crucial question here is whether digitality still presupposes, evokes, or needs this in-between subject. Perhaps, the horizon of digitality is precisely the doing away of this subject interpellated to construct itself from an external or 'extimate' (to use Lacan's neologism designating a kind of intimate exteriority; Lacan, 2006, p. 224) vantage point: digitality's final move would be to incorporate this perspective fully within the coding itself. This is what I, in my book *The Digitalisation of (Inter)Subjectivity* (2020), tentatively called the 'digital death drive', referring to a potential final incorporation of subjectivity within the algorithms (which would not be the incorporation of an imaginary full psychological subject, but rather, the incorporation of the *zero-level of subjectivity* that according to psychoanalysis is the non-vitalist core of the human subject). This is not the place to re-elaborate on this, but let me just add that I also wrote that (1) the algorithmisation of the psychoanalytic subject is not possible and (2) that if it would be realised, it would mean the end of the digital machine (of data producing data) as the external motor would be removed. Hence, in a paradoxical way, it is in the interest of capitalism that we somehow stay *in-between subjects*, keeping the machine of digital capitalism running. It is precisely here that I concur with Bown as he concludes with the call that we need to rewrite the history of how capitalism is tied to digital technologies. Additionally, I think we both agree that the psychological, or better the psychoanalytic, is a key element, though I'd still be hesitant to conclude from here that it is up to us, as Bown writes, 'to edit and steer desire in new directions', so let us continue to discuss this.

REFERENCES

Agamben, G. (1993). *Infancy and history* (L. Heron, Trans.). Verso.

Bown, A. (2018a). *The playstation dreamworld*. Polity Press.

Bown, A. (2018b, August 13). Video games are political. Here's how they can be progressive. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/aug/13/video-games-are-political-heres-how-they-can-be-progressive

Connolly, W. E. (2002). *Neuropolitics: Thinking, culture, speed*. University of Minnesota Press.

Cuboniks, L. (n.d.). *Xenofeminism: A politics for alienation.* https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/

De Vos, J. (2013). Interpassivity and the political invention of the brain: Connolly's neuropolitics versus Libet's veto-right. *Theory & Event, 16*(2).

De Vos, J. (2016). *The metamorphoses of the brain. Neurologization and its discontents*. Palgrave Macmillan.

De Vos, J. (2020). *The digitalisation of (inter)subjectivity: A psy-critique of the digital death drive*. Routledge.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2000). *Anti-Oedipus* (R. Hurley, M. Seem, & H. R. Lane, Trans.). Contiuum.

Derrida, J. (1974). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Firestone, (S). (1970). *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution.* Bantam Books.

Haasse, H. S. (2000). *Lezen achter de letters* [*Read behind the letters*]. Querido.

Haraway, D. J. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In D.J. Haraway (Ed.), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (pp. 149–181). Routledge.

Hester, H. (2018). *Xenofeminism.* Polity Press.

Horvat, S. (2016). *The radicality of love*. Polity Press.

Illouz, E. (2012). *Why love hurts: A sociological explanation.* Polity.

Kant, I. (1996). An answer to the question: What is enlightenment? In M. Gregor (Ed.), *Practical philosophy* (pp. 11–22). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1784)

Lacan, J. (1978). *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Norton. (Original work published 1964)

Lacan, J. (1985). Seminar of 21 january 1975 (J. Rose, Trans.). In J. Mitchell & J. Rose (Eds.), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*. WW Norton & Company.

Lacan, J. (1990). *Television: A challenge to the psychoanalytic establishment* (D. Hollier, R. Krauss, A. Michelson, & J. Hehlman, Trans., J. Copjec Ed.). WW Norton & Company.

Lacan, J. (1992). *Seminar VII: The ethics of psychoanalysis 1959–1960* (D. Porter, Trans.). Routledge.

Lacan, J. (2006). *Le Séminaire D'un Autre à l'autre* [*The seminar from an Other to the other*]. Éditions du Seuil.

Lee, D. (2017, April 19). *Facebook team working on brain-powered technology.* BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-39648788

Lovink, G. (2012). What is the social in social media? *e-flux journal, 40*(12), 2012. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/40/60272/what-is-the-social-in-social-media/

Luhmann, N. (1986). *Love as passion: The codification of love*. Harvard University Press.

McCulloch, W. S., & Pitts, W. (1943). A logical calculus of the ideas immanent in nervous activity. *The bulletin of mathematical biophysics, 5*(4), 115–133.

Stiegler, B. (2010). *Taking care of youth and the generations*. Stanford University Press.

Tronti, M. (2020). *Workers and capital.* Verso.

Turing, A. M. (1950). Computing machinery and intelligence. *Mind, 59*(236), 433–460.

Žižek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso.

Žižek, S. (2017, September 13). Like mice, humans might soon have their brains controlled externally. *RT*. https://www.rt.com/op-ed/405138-mice-human-brain-science/

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jan De Vos holds an MA in psychology and a PhD degree in philosophy. His main interests are the critique of (neuro)psychology, (neuro)psychologisation, and, related to this, the subject of the digital turn. His inspiration is continental philosophy, Freudo-Lacanian theory, and ideology critique. His books include *The Digitalisation of (Inter)Subjectivity: A Psy-critique of the Digital Death Drive* (Routledge, 2020), *The Metamorphoses of the Brain: Neurologisation and its Discontents* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and *Psychologisation in Times of Globalisation* (Routledge, 2012). http://janrdevos.weebly.com/books.html

Alfie Bown is Lecturer in Digital Media Culture and Technology at Royal Holloway University London. He is author of *Dream Lovers: The Gamification of Relationships* (Pluto, 2022) and *The Playstation Dreamworld* (Polity, 2017) among other things. He also writes journalism for *Tribune, New Statesman, Guardian, Paris Review*, etc. He is editor of *Sublation Magazine* and host of Psy-Fi, a weekly show on Sublation Media about politics and psychoanalysis.

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–14
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.11

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

TALK

Academies of hope: Making radical hope a reality

Dr Maureen O'Hara,* President Emerita, Saybrook University of California; Professor of Psychology, Emerita, National University, California, USA

ABSTRACT

This article, based on a talk given to The First International Online Seminar on the Person-Centred Approach, October 10–11, 2021, has three main aims. Firstly, to remind us of Rogers' indefatigable commitment to cultural transformation, humanisation, and peace. I suggest that these are defining aspects of the origin story of the person-centred approach (PCA), which in recent decades has retreated from this focus in favour of increased attention to person-centred and experiential psychotherapies as methods of psychotherapy and counselling. Secondly, I describe how this cultural transformation project is still at work in the 21st century, showing up in a wide range of transformative initiatives which extend the basic ideas embedded in a person-centred philosophy into what some identify as an emerging counterculture. Thirdly, I urge the PCA community to revisit and re-engage the social transformation agenda at the heart of the approach, to collaborate and organise 'academies of hope', and to become advocates and activists for the creation of life-centred cultures before it is too late.

KEYWORDS: emergent process; existential threat; life-centred culture; person of tomorrow; prophetic imagination; transformative change

*Contact details: mohara@nu.edu

PREFACE: CONFRONTING THE EXISTENTIAL EDGE

This might be the most difficult presentation I have ever written. There are two reasons for this. The first is personal: I am preparing a presentation that I know I am unlikely to be able to deliver myself. Since last July (2020) I have been suffering from a difficulty with my speech. I have been doing speech therapy and I had hoped that by now my voice would have returned, at least enough that I would be confident enough to deliver these remarks in my own voice so I could connect heart-to-heart with my feelings as well as ideas. Alas, I have reluctantly come to the decision that it will work better to have someone else read the remarks while I sit alongside. I will watch the chat and reply there. My colleague and friend Professor Marcia Tassinari will facilitate the translation. Facing this new limitation has been—and still is—very hard for me. It has required a profound confrontation with the existential realities of being human, in a human body that either slowly or rapidly will one day cease to be. I have had to accept that there are limits in life not of my choosing, and death and decline are as human as birth and growth. It has also brought into clear focus what a miracle it is that all the elements of a living body usually work together without our attention.

The second reason is both personal and collective. We have all lived through a monstrous plague—COVID-19—that has killed and is still killing millions and destroyed the lives of millions more, and it is still far from over. It is a powerful reminder that this is the human condition for all of us. Life is uncertain; things change; we are not in control; and we must work within limits. However, at the same time, I realise that I am not powerless. Even within these uncertainties and new limits, there are yet boundaries to be explored; choices to be made; and opportunities to make a difference remain. Being is always becoming.

GROWING THROUGH CONNECTIONS

So, this presentation is an important pathway to regaining my sense of agency and more importantly my sense of connection to you—my community. I have received an enormous amount of love and support and it makes a big difference. With your encouragement, I realise that though I may have lost my previously fluent speech, I have not lost my voice; so, whether reflecting, speaking, or writing, I am still in the growth process, still learning, and still trying to make a difference.

CONFRONTING HUMANITY'S EXISTENTIAL EDGE

This Seminar was convened to consider what the person-centred approach (PCA) might have to offer in a post-COVID-19 world. I think we all expected that by now we would be past the worst of the crisis; sadly, this is not the case and, as we meet here thanks to Zoom technology, people all over the world are still suffering and dying. At the same time, fires are burning down the West Coast of the United States, forcing whole towns to evacuate, and there are

riots in the street in major cities around the world. Countless people are out of work and starvation is rampant. It is a nightmare scenario; people are grieving, and they are afraid. Additionally, this set of catastrophic events descends on a world already trying to cope with several other looming threats to planetary survival. We know the story and it's terrifying.

I don't know about you, but after decades of being carried along by the deep river of hope that is at the core of the person-centred approach (PCA) and this global PCA community, it gets more and more difficult for me to remain in touch with the radical hope contained in the idea of an actualising tendency. When every day I see the patterns of chaos, anger, violence, inhumanity, environmental devastation, suffering, and rising despair, this faith is challenged, and I wonder if it is naïve to hope for a better future or to imagine that anything I or we do can make any difference.

However, if I really believed that, I wouldn't be here, would I? I agreed to share these ideas here today because I am convinced that the core message of Rogers' work is more relevant today than it has ever been, and to urge all of us to think about ways we can extend our work into a far wider sphere—a world that is at an inflection point. With this in mind, this discussion has three main aims. Firstly, to remind us of Rogers' indefatigable commitment to cultural transformation, humanisation, and peace. I propose that these meta-level commitments are defining aspects of the origin story of the PCA, but in recent decades many of its proponents have retreated from this focus in favour of increased attention to person-centred and experiential psychotherapies as methods of psychotherapy and counselling. Secondly, I describe how this cultural transformation project is still at work in the 21st century, showing up in a wide range of transformative initiatives which extend the basic ideas embedded in person-centred philosophy into what some identify as an emerging counterculture. Thirdly, I urge the PCA community to revisit and re-engage the social transformation agenda at the heart of the approach, to collaborate and organise 'academies of hope', and to become advocates and activists for the creation of life-centred cultures before it is too late.

PERSONS OF TOMORROW

Many people, including himself (Rogers & Russell, 2002), have described Carl Rogers as a 'quiet revolutionary'. I think a more apt description would be 'prophet'. Rogers had what the theologian Walter Brueggemann (2001) called a 'prophetic imagination'. He saw the injustices in the world, offered a vision of a better way of being, and gave counsel on what we might do to make it reality. Like all prophets, he heard the voices and movements that most don't hear. Working in many different spheres, he listened deeply to the sounds of a world undergoing massive changes and, instead of focusing on what many of his peers thought of as cultural decline, he saw the promise of a new world that was underpinned by a shift in our ways of thinking and new ways of acting. He wanted his work to provide a pathway to that new world (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. ***Rogers the prophet***

Rogers was not naïve. He was a utopian in an era of cynical manipulators. Despite his admitted fear that in the near term, humanity had major challenges to face and may well be heading for what he called a 'new dark age' (1980, p. 329), he nevertheless believed that radical hope was still justified.

The PCA was always intended as more than a method of psychotherapy. Like many of his humanistic peers, Rogers was offering a new philosophical paradigm or conceptual framework that would inevitably change the world to make it more aligned with an actualising tendency that he believed animated the universe.

Reviewing the radical changes that had taken place in his lifetime, which spanned much of the 20th century, Rogers came to believe that a dramatic cultural shift was already under way—not only in the external world but in the inner world of the human psyche. This was not just a change within the existing dominant conceptual paradigm of the Western world, but was a deep transformation in the basic assumptions upon which Western civilisation had been based for centuries. This shift was changing not just what we do but how we understand ourselves, the world, each other, and the future.

Rogers and the other founders of humanistic psychology had seen two global wars, the Nazi holocaust, and nuclear devastation and believed that humanity would not survive if it did not change its ways of thinking and acting. However, Rogers went further. He believed that along with changing the world, we would have to change ourselves.

Every society has its own view of what it means to be a 'person' and these views vary greatly across time and across cultures. When a culture changes, so does its concept of personhood.

ANXIETY ABOUT CULTURAL CHANGE

In 1969, in a commencement address to graduating students at Sonoma State University, and returned to again in his final book, *A Way of Being*, in 1980, Rogers speculated about the impact of a radically changing world, on psychological reality, and our concept of what it means by personhood. He wondered out loud what should we expect of 'persons of tomorrow'. Change at the level of a culture inevitably creates instability and uncertainty. Many regarded the cultural unravelling of the 1960s with extreme anxiety—fears of social upheaval, loosening social mores, political dissent, loss of social control. However, true to his life-long emphasis on growth rather than pathology, Rogers focused on the creative and emancipatory possibilities this counter-cultural loosening presented. Though then, as now, reactionary forces resisted these movements, sometimes with violence, Rogers heard hope in the voices and choices of those he met at workshops and in encounter groups. He saw a new generation seeking radically new ways of being as they responded to the challenges and uncertainties of their times. It was this prophetic sense of radical hope, of the future as radically open, of reality not as something fixed and eternal but as an evolving story for which we are all responsible that first drew me to the PCA and still guides my work.

POWERFUL TIMES

I think it is fair to say that the world has not gotten less turbulent in the last 50 years. On the contrary, it has become more chaotic and incoherent, and people are far less optimistic than they were a generation ago, prompting apocalyptic imagery. Even before COVID-19, humanity was already facing a cascade of interlocking crises that pose an existential threat to human survival. In many leadership circles, the situation is coming to be called a 'VUCA world'—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—with multiple levels of crisis going on at the same time.

In an inquiry with colleagues in the International Futures Forum, we identify four different levels at which a VUCA world affects us.

The visible level

There is the 'visible' crisis, which we see all around us every day—intensified now by the COVID-19 pandemic and the vicious invasion by the Russian Federation of sovereign Ukraine. Communities are crumbling. Nothing works anymore. The systems and institutions we used

to take for granted for a stable society are failing across the globe. There is rising inequality, racial strife, millions of refugees, global crime, rising authoritarianism, and decay of the rule of law. The list is familiar, daunting, and gets longer every day. People can be forgiven for feeling helpless.

The conceptual level

Complicating this further is a 'conceptual' crisis. Core assumptions about reality are no longer fixed. Conceptual maps don't fit the world we now live in. It is too complex for reductionist and rationalist models. Ten minutes on Facebook will show you that there is no longer a reliable source of authority to turn to—science or religion—which everyone will trust. Scientific knowledge has become weaponised and is no longer trusted. People argue about COVID-19, masks, climate data, conspiracies. There is no shared narrative that the majority agree with.

Why should they? The information load is so overwhelming (sometimes described as 'drinking from the fire hose') that there is little chance any of us will ever know more than one small piece of the truth. We can no longer safely distinguish 'fact' from 'deep fake' or manipulated reality. We must make our way with only fragments and do the best we can. Whether we like it or not, things do not get better with more information, they get worse. This creates cognitive dissonance on a societal level.

The social/cultural level

This leads to a 'cultural' crisis: Humans cannot tolerate a VUCA world for long. Eventually, they will move to reduce the complexity and impose some patterning. One of the most common ways is to look for others who see the world the same way and separate themselves from those who challenge their truths. Creating homogeneous subcultures of like-minded people— 'us and them'—is now remarkably easy, thanks to social media. Gradually, cultures disintegrate, and social solidarity evaporates. It is a small step from here to 'us'—who are virtuous—versus 'them'—who are evil.

The existential level

Therefore, we find ourselves in an 'existential' crisis: Disruptions of this magnitude strike at the heart of our frameworks for reality. We lose our centre. What does it mean to be a person in this world? Who am I? Who are 'we'? What am I worth? What anchors my identity, my morality, my sense of purpose, my understanding of what we owe each other? What are my rights? What are yours? What do we owe other living beings, the planet, the future? In the current upheaval, the very definition of what we mean personally and collectively by the idea of 'person' must be reconsidered. Though there have been civilisational shifts before, this is

the first time in human history in which the survival of the planet is also uncertain. We are destroying the planet we live on. We are in a new world and we have few guideposts to help us travel.

If we are to survive these powerful times and learn to live fully human lives, we will need to learn our way forward into a new kind of consciousness. One that is advanced enough to operate in the new VUCA circumstances we have created. Person-centred practice provides a process for moving beyond the levels that create these crises. More on that later.

We know this can be done because our ancestors whose worlds we inherit faced similar civilisational disruptions and survived to build better worlds for their children. Now it is our time to respond to these accelerating crises with the kind of growth that changes not just what we do, but changes who we are. We must help people develop their psycho-social capacities and become Rogers' 'persons of tomorrow'.

PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH TREASURE

The good news is that, within the PCA community, there is a great storehouse of collected treasure. We have decades of experience of helping individuals and groups turn crisis into opportunity and to build communities that support human growth and potential. As Rogers the prophet told us in his last book in 1980:

> If the time comes when our culture tires of endless homicidal feuds, despairs of the use of force and war as a means of bringing peace, becomes discontent with the half-lives that its members are living—only then will our culture seriously look for alternatives… When that time comes, they will not find a void. They will discover that there are ways of facilitating the resolution of feuds. They will find there are ways of building communities without sacrificing the potential creativity of the person. They will realize that there are ways, already tried out on a small scale, of enhancing learning, of moving towards new values, of raising consciousness to new levels… They will find that there are ways of being that do not involve power over persons and groups. They will discover that harmonious community can be built on the basis of mutual respect and enhanced personal growth… As humanistic psychologists with a person-centred philosophy—we have created working models on a small scale which our culture can use when it is ready. (p. 205)

PUTTING THE PCA TO WORK ON THE LARGER SCALE

The PCA was always intended as an inquiry about more than a method of psychotherapy or counselling. From the outset it was, and for some still is, a mythic project. By that I mean it aimed to alter the world view or cosmology that provides the frameworks for understanding the world and ourselves. By the late 1990s, I was exploring the application of person-centred principles to larger contexts such as feminism (O'Hara, 1996), post-modernism (O'Hara,

1995), and in organisations (O'Hara & Leicester, 2019). I was interested to know if the growth-oriented principles that the PCA community took for granted would apply to a wider public who knew nothing of Rogers' work. Then, in a huge stroke of luck, in 2000 I received an invitation from Graham Leicester in St Andrews, Scotland to join the International Futures Forum (IFF) (https://www.internationalfuturesforum.com/), an international non-profit think tank that aimed to find out what it takes to live well in a VUCA world and how can we make a difference even though the barriers to doing so are very high. I was the only psychologist in the group. The others came from traditional disciplines like economics, philosophy, governance, and business. Discussions of psychology and consciousness were new and, frankly, suspect. At first, like true heirs of the Enlightenment, they were suspicious of subjectivity, feelings, and, especially, intuition and were more comfortable with objectivity, models, and abstractions. The word 'consciousness' was too counter-cultural for them. Some members avoided feelings and non-rational ways of knowing, calling them, only partly in jest, 'Californication'. They were more used to trusting quantitative science rather than qualitative and our first conversations were more debate than dialogue. However, at the same time, they were human beings, living in the same turbulence as everyone else. They also wanted to make a positive difference in the world, but they wanted to start with hard evidence. We had in common, though, an openness to the idea that the world's crises were at a level of complexity that was calling for a new world view—a paradigm shift, a change in consciousness.

So, we went looking for evidence by studying places where this cultural shift might already be happening, even in places that were far away from California. We found them—lots of them. We found examples of projects in the United Kingdom, USA, India, Latin America, Africa, and Europe where, despite many barriers, challenges were complex and seemingly insurmountable, transformative learning and cultural change had been achieved. We came to think of these projects as 'academies of hope'.

The projects were diverse and included a large urban renewal project in Falkirk, Scotland; a mutual care project for lonely elders; the creation of self-care Kitbags now used in schools throughout Scotland; a citizens' organisation in a large Indian slum; a US university; a dialogue project in Ireland, as well as arts organisations, the National Health Service, and government agencies.

Our methodology included visiting these projects and listening to the experiences of those involved. Our 'method' was essentially person-centred. It was, as much as possible, to suspend our own frames of reference and immerse ourselves in the world of the others/Others, participating in their work, using their language, metaphors, and stories to indwell in the issues as they experienced them. Like heuristic or phenomenology researchers, we moved away from a subject–object perspective with its expert gaze and instead strived for a subject–subject stance to know the Other as persons through mutual engagement. We listened empathically, opened up to the context, tuned in to group dynamics, shared our own feelings—including our vulnerability and admiration for the work these folks did every day.

We accepted unconditionally that the people living with the problem were the experts not us. We had no shared facilitation methodology to apply and likely would have distrusted anyone who claimed they had, so we met as persons, open to participate and ready to learn. Our job was only to help them and ourselves get a new look at the situation, reflect on what we experienced, and try to access and collect the group wisdom. We set out to make meaning together and, where possible and plausible, imagine new possibilities for action.

Though most of us in the IFF are experienced within our own disciplines, we had no shared theory of transformative change. We did share a values framework and a working hypothesis, however. Though we came from diverse ethnic, national, cultural, religious, and disciplinary cultures, we all trusted the life process and believed that even in extremely deprived circumstances, persons and their communities already possess immense resources for healing, creativity, and growth. We shared a belief that this can be enabled by conditions of respect, psychological safety, freedom of expression, empathic listening, and person-to-person dialogue. Moreover, it can be constrained when these conditions are absent or censured.

An important part of the approach was to closely shadow participants and successful leaders of these organisations on the job, to participate in their process where possible, listening to their ways of being, and being with their colleagues in their settings, trying to understand what made it possible for them to thrive and make a difference.

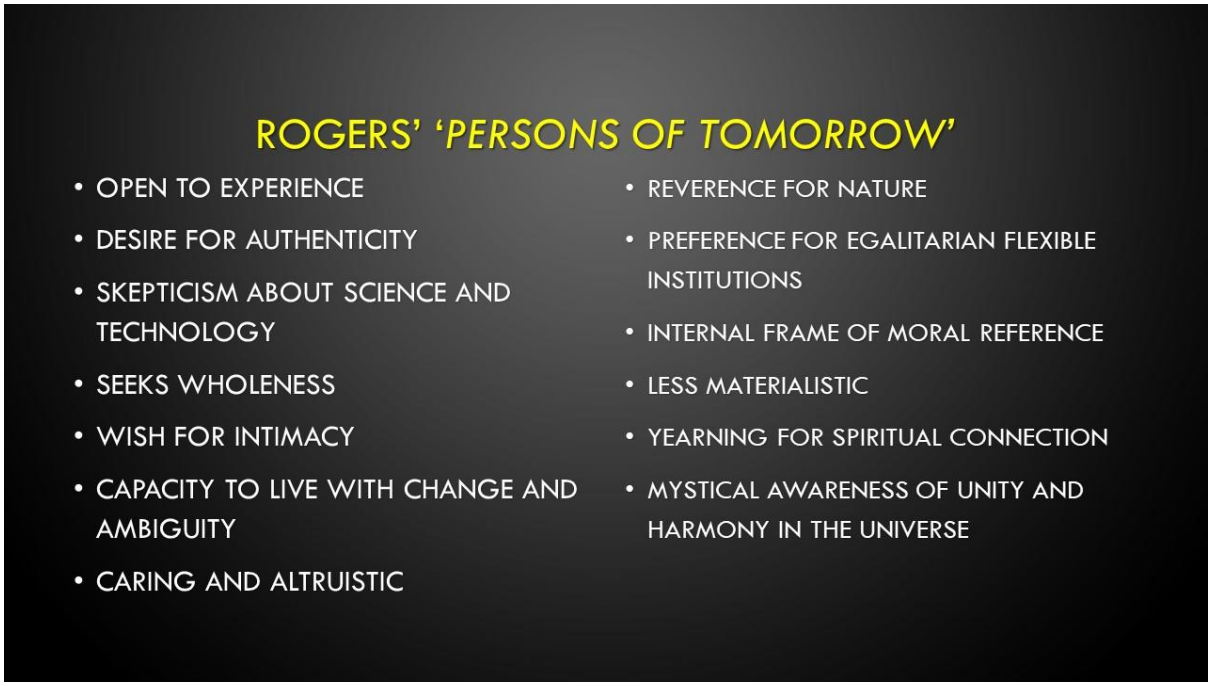
What were the secret ingredients?

We have described these findings in detail in our book *Dancing at the Edge* (O'Hara & Leicester, 2012) but none of it will surprise you. There were two main factors—one developmental and the other, the organisational or community context.

We were impressed over and over, that the people who seemed to be thriving and making a humane difference were more like Rogers' (1980) 'persons of tomorrow' than most of their colleagues and peers (see Figure 2). Their ability to stay sane and be effective was not just a matter of funding, technical expertise, or the right management skills. It was much more a function of their ability to be aware, to connect, adapt, and to respond to their situation, to tolerate complexity with humility, authenticity, and balance. They trusted the inherent potential for transformation in themselves and their co-workers and, above all else, they had faith in the future, even in the most challenging situations.

The other key factor that showed up in contexts as different as the National Health Service, Scotland, and a local community council in Delhi, India, was that they created around them, in their environment, the necessary conditions for their employees, colleagues, clients, and citizens to develop their own higher potentials too. They created settings where everyone was safe to take risks and stretch—learning together how to live in a VUCA world. They created 'academies of hope'.

Figure 2. ***Rogers' (1980) 'Persons of tomorrow'***



GROWING THROUGH THE CRISIS

The good news is that we, in the PCA community, know how to nurture human potential. We have seen on the level of individual clients and the macro level of organisations, cultures, and even civilisations, human beings are learning specialists, and in the right conditions, we expand our capacities and adapt to our new circumstances. We can learn and grow into them.

The capacities needed to thrive in the 21st century are not mechanistic, technical skills that can be applied according to manuals and fixed rules. They are qualities of being of persons as a whole. Becoming a person of tomorrow is not like assembling the parts of a machine. It is difficult to be compassionate, for example, without at the same time showing a capacity for empathy, authenticity, humility, and other qualities. Twenty-first century competencies must be appreciated holistically. Their expression will often seem counter-cultural to a dominant culture that works with abstractions, models, and metrics, and suggests that competencies can be distinguished one from another, developed in isolation, and mastered one stage at a time (O'Hara & Leicester, 2019).

We in the IFF believe, instead, as did Rogers, that these qualities are innate human potentials waiting to emerge. They are present in any human system (individual or collective): they simply require the right enabling conditions, challenging settings, life experiences, and imagination to be called forth and developed through practice. As PCA practitioners, we know those conditions include freedom to be authentic and congruent, acceptance, empathy, psychological security, respect, conceptual coherence, cultural awareness, and

understanding different ways of knowing. These conditions are the heart of the PCA community, encounters, and counselling.

SIGNS OF HOPE

I suggest that despite how dark things seem today, there are many signs of hope. We already see new kinds of persons (many of them young) emerging all around us who are more at home in the new complexity and have greater capacity to be effective in the face of the emergencies we describe. Greta Thunberg may be the most well-known of the young world changers, but she is not alone. Young leaders are at work anywhere there is need. In his bestselling book *Blessed Unrest*, environmental activist Paul Hawken (2007) dubbed it the 'largest movement in the world that nobody saw coming'. At the same time as they are at home in a digital world, this new generation are more likely to experience other cultures and older wisdoms, learn from nature, and, as we saw with the Black Lives Matter movement, seek reconciliation and work for social justice. The internet is awash with groups and communities 'getting stuff done' wherever they can to address the world's challenges and engaging in conversations that combine new forms of science with ancient indigenous frameworks that echo what Rogers heard 60 years ago.

A recent study of over 35,000 social change initiatives world-wide identified the most common key words in their mission statements (see Figure 3). This suggests that the paradigm shift is already gaining strength.

Figure 3. ***New value priorities***

So how can this new kind of person—the persons of tomorrow—already in our midst and in ourselves now be encouraged, supported, and put into action to help the world? How can I start an academy of hope?

I don't have time here to describe some of the pathways you might choose, for which I refer you to our IFF books, particularly *Transformative Innovation* (Leicester, 2019) and the International Futures Forum website (www.internationalfuturesforum.com) for more ideas; but here are some guidelines for how you might start a project that could become an academy of hope. Most importantly, it doesn't work to create training programmes in a classroom and then send people out to apply what they learned. This is an old paradigm that worked while the world was simple or stable, but not in a VUCA world. In today's fast-moving world, we develop ourselves by taking action—however small—that is designed to create change. We act, we reflect on what happened, we learn, and we grow in an ongoing transformative process. The key ingredients are the need for partners, staying faithful to core principles and flexibility in application, and being open to learning as you go. Be humble, always seek feedback, always stay human (see Figure 4).

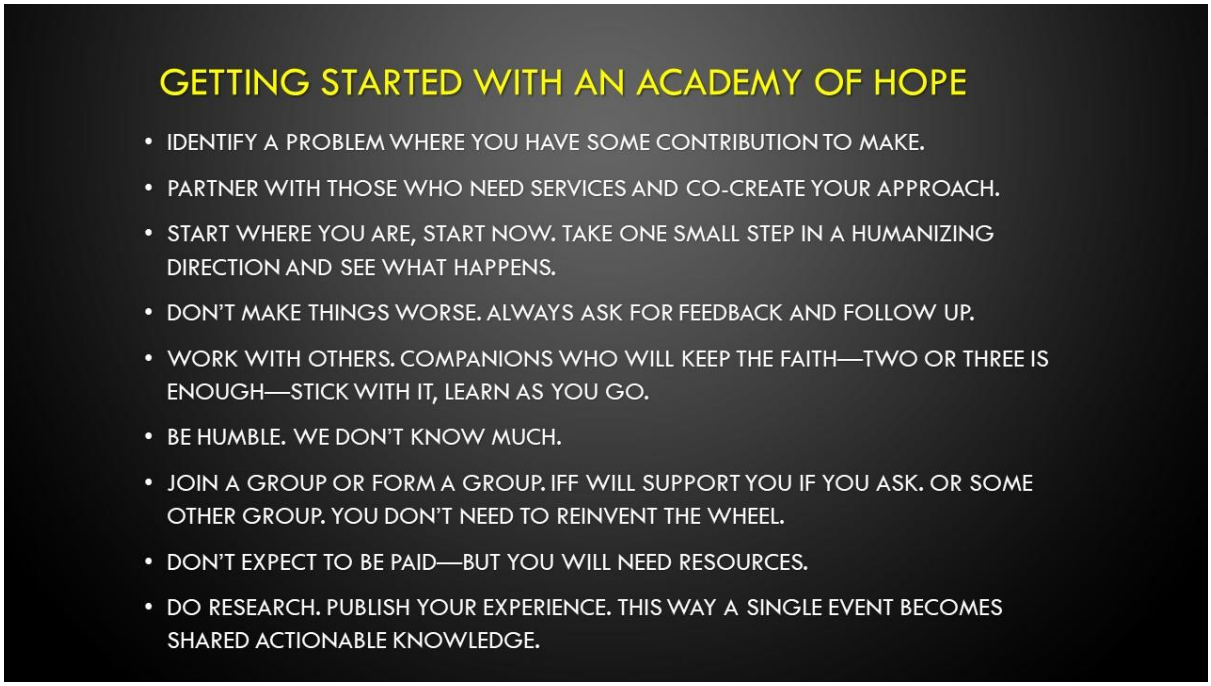
It is my deep belief that as the old world crumbles a new world is being born. We must, of course, take care of those who suffer and are casualties of the great transition we are in—including those affected by pandemics or disease and other catastrophes. However, we have bigger work before us. We are called to help a new world give birth to itself.

Whether the world that is being born is a better, more person-centred, and life supporting world, or one degraded and full of suffering, will depend on what we do in the next few years. As California State Senator John Vasconcellos often said, we must become hospice workers for a dying culture and midwives of the new one.

I have great faith in the collective wisdom of this PCA community. I urge us now to turn our attention to this larger task and consciously reframe what we do. Whether you work with individuals in pain, training groups, encounters, writing papers, creating social service agencies, coaching chief executive officers, or are an activist, etc., think of what you are doing in a bigger way. Let us remember the old story of the medieval stone cutter who spent his days cutting stone. One day, his son asked him why he spent all his days chipping at stones. The father replied, 'Son, I'm not chipping stones, I am building a cathedral'.

Over the past decades, the PCA community has been working in a multitude of settings helping individuals and groups learn how to live fully human lives, as persons and as communities. We too have been building a cathedral. It is time for those of us in the world-wide PCA community to remember its activist roots.

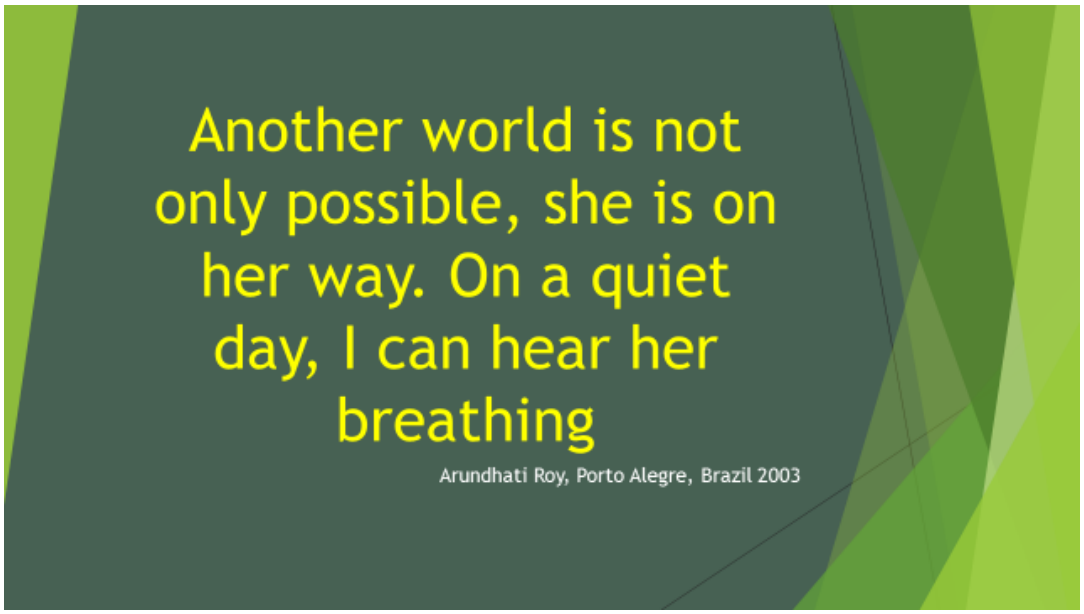
Figure 4. ***Guide to getting started***



We are called to facilitate the emergence of a new civilisation to replace the one that is dying and to base it in a new paradigm of thought and a new way of being that puts a consciousness of persons and all life at its centre. In 1980, again, Rogers the prophet, said:

> The many converging trends …constitute a paradigm shift. We will try of course to live in our familiar world, just as people lived upon a flat world long after we knew it was round. But as these new ways of conceptualizing the person and the world sink in, becoming increasingly the basis of our thinking and our lives, transformation becomes inevitable. (p. 348)

I will end with my favourite quote from Arundhati Roy from her presentation Confronting Empire (Roy, 2003):



REFERENCES

Brueggemann, W. (2001). *Prophetic imagination* (Rev. ed.). Augsburg Fortress.

Hawken, P. (2007). *Blessed unrest: How the largest movement in history is restoring grace, justice and beauty to the world*. Penguin.

Leicester, G. (2019). *Transformative innovation: A guide to practice and policy for system transition* (2nd ed.). Triarchy Press.

O'Hara, M. (1995). Constructing emancipatory realities. In W. T. Anderson (Ed.), *The truth about truth: De-constructing and reconstructing the postmodern world* (pp. 151–155). Jeremy Tarcher.

O'Hara, M. (1996). Feminist analysis of a session of psychotherapy between Carl Rogers and a female client 'Silvia'. In B. A. Farber, P. Raskin, & D. Brink (Eds.), *Carl Rogers: Casebook and critical perspectives* (pp. 284–300). Guilford Publications.

O'Hara, M., & Leicester, G. (2012). *Dancing at the edge: Competence, culture and organization in the 21st century*. Triarchy Press.

O'Hara, M., & Leicester, G. (2019). *Dancing at the edge: Competence, culture and organization in the 21st century* (2nd ed.). Triarchy Press.

Rogers, C.R. (1969). *The person of tomorrow*. [Sonoma State College Pamphlet].

Rogers, C. R. (1980). *A way of being*. Houghton Mifflin.

Rogers, C. R., & Russell, D. E. (2002). *Carl Rogers: The quiet revolutionary, an oral history*. Penmarin Books.

Roy, A. (2003, January 27). *Confronting empire* [Presentation]. World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Maureen O'Hara worked closely with Carl Rogers for 20 years during the period of his career focused on large group encounters. Maureen's work focuses on applying person-centred principles to larger scale social challenges. Her latest book, *Dancing at the Edge: Competence, Culture and Organization in the 21st Century* (2nd ed.) (with Graham Leicester, Triarchy Press, 2019) addresses the cultural disruptions straining collective psychological coherence in the 21st century and how together we might learn our way forward. She has published over 60 articles, chapters, and edited books including *Em Busca da Vida* (Looking for Life) (with Carl Rogers, John Wood, and Afonso Fonseca, Summus, 1983) and the *Handbook of Person-centered Psychotherapy and Counseling* (with Mick Cooper, Peter Schmid, and Arthur Bohart, Springer, 2013). She is President Emerita of Saybrook University, California and Professor Emerita of Psychology, National University in California, USA. She is a founding member of the International Futures Forum, Scotland. See also: www.maureen.ohara.net; www.internationalfuturesforum.com

Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NOS. 1 & 2, 1–8
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i1and2.12

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

BOOK REVIEW

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

Reviewed by **Dr Erica Burman**,* Professor of Education, University of Manchester, UK

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.

*Contact details: erica.burman@manchester.ac.uk

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 baulk, 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 pacificism) 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.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2014). *Willful subjects*. Duke University Press.

Danon, D. (2019, June 24). What's wrong with Palestinian surrender? *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/24/opinion/palestinian-peace-bahrain-conference.html

Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Penguin. (Original work published 1961)

Fanon, F. (1965). *A dying colonialism* (H. Chevalier, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1959)

Fanon, F. (1970). *Black skin, white masks* (C. L. Markmann, Trans.). Paladin. (Original work published 1952)

Fanon, F. (2018). Why we use violence (S. Corcoran, Trans.). In J. Khalfa & R. J. C. Young (Eds.) *Alienation and freedom* (pp. 653–659). Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1960)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Erica Burman is Professor of Education at the University of Manchester, Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, and a United Kingdom Council of Psychotherapists registered Group Analyst (and full member of the Institute of Group Analysis). She is well known as a critical developmental psychologist and methodologist specialising in innovative and activist qualitative research, about which she has lectured and taught courses all over the world. She is author of *Developments: Child, Image, Nation* (Routledge, 2nd edition, 2020), *Fanon, Education, Action: Child as Method* (Routledge, 2019), *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (Routledge, 3rd edition, 2017), and is an Associate Editor of the *SAGE Encyclopaedia of Childhood and Childhood Studies* (SAGE, 2020). Erica's research has focused on critical developmental and educational psychology, feminist and postcolonial theory, childhood studies, and on critical mental health practice (particularly around gender and cultural issues). Her recent work addresses the connections between emotions, mental health, and (social as well as individual) change, in particular as anchored by representations of, and appeals to, childhood. She has co-led transnational research projects on conceptualising and challenging state and interpersonal violence in relation to minoritised women and children, on educational and mental health impacts of poverty and 'austerity', on superdiversity and ‘traditional’ Muslim healing practices, and she is a co-investigator on a crossnational project exploring postsocialist childhoods.