NewAssociations

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PROMOTING PSYCHOANALYTIC AND PSYCHODYNAMIC THINKING | ISSUE 46 SUMMER 2025

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On Trust and Mistrust

Daniel Pick interviewed by Emmanuelle Smith

The psychoanalyst and historian talks about his interest in the eclectic byways of the past, his book on 'brainwashing', and the history of suspicion of Freud.

ES Is it unusual for you to be doing this kind of interview?

DP I have been interviewed and done it the other way around – interviewing analysts including Hanna Segal and Betty Joseph, later in their lives, about their experiences of Melanie Klein and of becoming analysts and their approaches and so on.

ES And today it's about your life and your approach. Can you tell us about your path – what did you study before becoming an analyst and how did that shape your thinking?

DP English literature, then after a break, a PhD in history, both at Cambridge, at a very interesting time. There was a ferment of debate around intellectual, medical and cultural history, and the implications of theories, especially derived from France. Fierce arguments raged about politics and ideology, and the relevance of psychoanalysis.

ES Were Freud and psychoanalysis new to you arriving at Cambridge?

DP Yes and no. Psychoanalysis was in one sense close to home. My mother and father, Irma and Abe Pick, who had come to England from South Africa in the 1950s, became psychoanalysts in the Kleinian tradition, as did my stepfather, Eric Brenman.

ES Did you envisage becoming an analyst early on?

DP I didn't, in my youth, but grew ever more interested.

ES Can you say more about your two paths, how you moved from the academic path to the clinical one?

DP No doubt there were many factors – it was overdetermined. I had my own wishes for an analysis, mixed feelings about academia, as well as a keen interest in research and in people. I was drawn towards rather eclectic byways of the historical past, delving into the origins of criminal anthropology, alienism, phrenology, mesmerism, Victorian fears of invasion through the Channel Tunnel, vampire myths... Often enough questions about or deriving from psychoanalysis kept coming up. My particular interest was how ideas about evolution were taken up in different cultural forms. My doctorate focused on degeneration theory, which emerged as a counterpart to evolutionary theory. I also became absorbed by ideas about the crowd and investigated claims that the mass could be studied scientifically. Increasingly I sought to find ways to combine or at least develop in parallel my clinical understanding and practice and my role as a historian working in the university sector.

> **"I was an adult education tutor at Pentonville, running a weekly class with prisoners. It was slightly surreal to juxtapose that with doctoral work in Cambridge"**

ES I understand you worked in prisons – was that linked to this interest in criminal anthropology?

DP Only an evening a week, and for a relatively brief time, but yes, I was an adult education tutor at Pentonville, running a weekly class with prisoners. It was slightly surreal to juxtapose that with doctoral work in Cambridge. Those classes were sometimes very poignant, and painful – there was so much deprivation. The direct contact I had with those groups stayed with me, and I think also contributed, along with other work outside the university, towards my desire to train as an analyst. In the end, I became an academic not exactly accidentally – because I was, I'm sure, quite driven – but not with any overall plan. Part of the attraction of the job, for many of us I expect, is the licence to be a continuing student oneself.

ES And you later became a student of psychoanalysis.

DP I went into analysis after my doctorate. I then started to dip a toe more seriously into the possibility of training, and undertook it, which was very challenging, as well as enormously enriching.

ES Did you move entirely over to analysis at that point?

DP For many years I worked as an analyst as well as keeping my post in the university. I was keen to keep a foot in both worlds, and to try to bridge between these fields. Now, having retired from Birkbeck, I'm not actually in a university on the payroll or with a grant.

ES Your latest book, *Brainwashed: A New History of Thought Control* was funded by a Wellcome Trust grant.

DP Yes, this came out of a larger project, with many contributors, and outputs, funded through Wellcome. It was a great privilege. We had fascinating visits from scholars abroad and resources to produce short documentaries, and these can still be seen on the website that emerged from this grant.

ES Where does the literature on brainwashing begin?

DP Much of this vocabulary around mind control emerged during the Cold War; the term brainwashing was coined in 1950. In *Brainwashed*, I explore a language of the mind and its manipulation that really took off during that era. The culture of the 1950s and 1960s was infused with fears about hidden power, conspiracy, brainwashing, corporate take-over, totalistic states of the mind – not only in the East but also in the West.

As a clinician, I'm interested in the borderland between healthy and pathological mistrust, be it about medicine, psychotherapy or the deep state. I have had patients who probed how far I would myself be a blind defender of the faith of psychoanalysis, and to what extent I could question psychoanalytic preconceptions, as well as to face past abuses, follies, scandals in the analytic organisations. The question – does psychoanalysis provide the most profound analysis of cult-like processes, or become one itself? – has been at issue ever since Freud made the group psychology of his own movement into a running theme in his work.

> **"I'm interested in the borderland between healthy and pathological mistrust, be it about medicine, psychotherapy or the deep state"**

ES You talk of cult-like processes and we do have our different factions...

DP Yes, the possibilities are always present of the formation of sects, schisms, silos, and the excoriation of other groups. There are crucial differences of theory, technique and practice, and also, as Freud put it, 'the narcissism of minor differences'. Psychoanalytic organisations can stifle as much as they can encourage creative, independent thought. Freud demanded fierce allegiance even as he also encouraged, up to a point, dissent, and the questioning of past orthodoxies, including his own. Psychoanalysis, if it is worth anything, is bound to be disturbing and to expose both the analyst and patient to all kinds of vulnerabilities. There is naturally going to be doubt and caution

Interview

for any of us as patients, about what we are being invited to surrender ourselves to; lying on a couch, being invited to free associate, in a room with a person who aims to remain abstinent, and who refrains as best they can from colluding or conventionally reassuring. To undertake the analytic process is a big ask, even though in my view it can also potentially offer great help, illumination and value.

I have been exploring the cultural history of suspicion of Freud and psychoanalysis, and the claim that it subverts rather than enhances free will. Some of the great classic papers are about fear of hidden influence, the veiled role of suggestion in therapy and psychiatry, and the nefarious roles ascribed to 'the mind doctors'. In Tausk's (1919) paper, 'On the Origin of the "Influencing Machine" in Schizophrenia', the patients are at the mercy of a terrifying, seemingly external and mechanical process. Perhaps such delusions are an extreme version of an ordinary fear. I've been prompted to think about these questions, albeit in less dramatic fashion, by patients who've worried about the safety of the procedure, to the point where they might be in the grip of a delusional belief about covert influence. I describe in my book a moment, for instance, where a patient is raising the question, how does he know that I am not wired up to the headquarters of the analytic institution with a secret earpiece, getting instructions? If all goes well in analysis, this can be explored.

ES And yet that has to happen within an analytic frame that could itself be mistrusted.

DP We hope that the frame survives and that the analyst is willing to allow the patient to examine as fully as possible their ambivalent feelings, including suspicions about the analyst and the analytic process. These may be gross or subtle. We endeavour to analyse rigid beliefs but also the more delicate movements in the transference, moment by moment in a session, for instance attentive to whether a patient responds in one way or another to an interpretation. If a patient says, 'You're wrong', that might be very helpful as a corrective; the analyst may be quite wrong, of course. It might be the interpretation's misconceived, or it might be an anxious defensive negation, a 'no' that reflects the fact that the comment was too sharp and intrusive, not necessarily wide of the mark. There is a role, as others have said, for truth and kindness. Truths are easier to tolerate, we expect and hope, when delivered with kindness. Whether home truths are heard the way they may be intended is another matter.

> **"Psychoanalytic organisations can stifle as much as they can encourage creative, independent thought"**

ES Given the current state of the world, perhaps it's hard to feel there is much kindness around? I wonder whether, and how, you remain hopeful?

DP It is hard to feel hopeful at present, admittedly. Although there's that famous Gramsci saying that we require, 'optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect'. As many thoughtful commentators around the world have been exploring in recent years, we need to consider as deeply as possible what it is that, say, Brexit, Trump and the European right-wing populist movements are keying into, the reasons that millions are, understandably, rejecting the globalised, neo-liberal corporate world order that prevailed for the previous 40-plus years, as well as to note the central role of projections, splitting, envy, hatred, sadism or sometimes nihilism that is at work in this ferocious backlash.

ES In balancing your more academic side with your psychoanalytic work, perhaps you have been holding that tension between pessimism and optimism.

DP I think it is remarkable how much change is possible in many people, even if analysts, no less than anyone else, have to guard against zeal, or overblown claims about the universal efficacy of their practice. Sometimes features that seem intractably stuck, be it in a person, or in the therapy itself, can move in surprising ways. As to what is 'mutative' in an analysis, we may sometimes know the sources, seek to grasp the causes and effects, but other times it may remain mysterious.

I think that can be true, collectively, with things that seem hopeless – look at the Northern Ireland peace process, and what emerged. You can scrutinise the causes and the actors involved but also feel there was something almost miraculous in the way things finally moved. Tragically, this has not happened yet in the Middle East, quite the reverse, a dire spiral, continuing war crimes, the seemingly relentless 'logic' of zero-sum thinking and unconscionable policies of mass annihilation. But there is a question of course both psychically and socially as to what are the contingent and the structural factors, what are the new and unforeseen effects of third-party interventions, and what are the deeper historical conditions that produce benign or malign developments in an individual, a group, party, or state.

> **"I suppose what psychoanalysts seek to do is to say to the patient, 'You can say anything to me – you can't actually get up and hit me, but you can say anything, however lacerating"**

ES You've mentioned issues such as Brexit, that cause a split in politics – and that can be mirrored in relationships. How we can keep speaking and is there a time when we can't?

DP Are there experiences that patients might have with an analyst, that mean they can no longer go on? And conversely, for the analyst, where a patient's nature and challenges can't be worked with. I wonder how I'd fare if I found myself analysing a person signed up to a neo-Nazi party. Would that be an intolerable state of affairs, to be in the same room as them, or might something unforeseen and moving emerge? I suppose this raises the question of what the patient is prepared to engage in and what can the analyst stand. Of course, fascistic thoughts, racist beliefs and murderous impulses, may feature in any of us, and can emerge in any analysis, in either party, or both. We may not know this in advance. And we are obliged to try to be open to exploring particular kinds of fantasy or the hidden forms of a pathology in a patient, and see what we can cope with, what it stirs up for the clinician as well as the patient. I suppose what psychoanalysts seek to do is to say to the patient, 'You can say anything to me – you can't actually get up and hit me, but you can say anything, however lacerating.' Freud made the remarkable offer that we continue to try to honour – an invitation to the patient to free associate, and that might well include the patient saying wounding, frightening, and hostile things, as well as bringing the most loving sentiments too – the positive transference may discomfort the analyst as much as the negative transference.

Daniel Pick is a psychoanalyst and historian. He is a training analyst at the Institute of Psychoanalysis and Professor Emeritus at Birkbeck College. He was awarded the 2023 Sigourney Award for his contribution to the advancement of psychoanalytic thought. His many publications include Brainwashed: A New History of Thought Control *(Profile Books 2022) and* Psychoanalysis: A Very Short Introduction *(OUP 2015).*

Emmanuelle Smith is a psychodynamic psychotherapist in private practice, and Joint Editor-in-Chief of New Associations.

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Do you need a proofreader specialising in psychoanalytic writing?

As proofreader for *New Associations* and freelance editor in the field of psychoanalysis, I have significant experience in editing everything from magazine articles to books (Dilys Daws, *Quietly Subversive*) and papers for journals (*Journal of Child Psychotherapy/ Infant Observation*).

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Editorial

‘Things fall apart.’ These words from W.B. Yeats’s poem, ‘The Second Coming’, have pressed themselves upon us while we edited our first complete issue of *New Associations*. He writes:

‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.’

Written in 1919, after the First World War and at the beginning of the Irish War of Independence from Britain, Yeats writes of a world riven and traumatised by conflict, where dread predominates and hope is in short supply. We recognise this world today, emerging from a global pandemic and torn apart by suspicion and fear, wars, mass killings, human rights abuses, and impending climate catastrophe. The continuous news cycle evokes feelings of horror, rage and despair but also helplessness and guilt as many of us – though not all – look on from a safe distance. These distressing feelings churn around inside, a toxic cacophony, at times almost unbearable.

Sometimes it seems as if the only thing we can do is identify whoever is responsible. We turn on one another. To find someone to blame can bring relief, albeit temporarily; a receptacle to carry our pain. The superego exacts a heavy toll. Around the world we see the terrifying continued rise of populism. Authoritarian leaders conjure words like the seductive tunes of a Pied Piper, perversely offering up bad objects as vessels for the group’s projections. We have seen or heard of this happening before, many times – the compulsion to repeat playing out before our very eyes.

When we look to the group for comfort, support or reality testing, we are confronted by fragmentation and the impression that society is breaking apart. We cannot agree on what is happening, never mind on what to name it. It can feel psychotic, like we have become dislocated from reality – or worse, like there is no shared reality, just siloed enclaves of thoughts in search of a thinker, each more troubling than the next. It is not surprising then that we might unconsciously rely on splitting and projection to bring some order to the chaos.

So how can we remain thinking when everything feels like it is falling apart?

We have been preoccupied with this question over the past few months, as we and our colleagues on the editorial board have worked with authors to produce pieces that help us to think; to metabolise and symbolise; to link. This has been a demanding experience for all concerned. Holding and containing take a great deal of effort and perseverance and we are grateful to all the contributors and editorial board members for their commitment to the process. Readers might find the pieces challenging or provocative in different ways. The pieces are designed to help us reflect and this can be an uncomfortable, frustrating and sometimes painful experience. As we know from clinical practice, reassurance might be soothing but it rarely makes it past the most rudimentary of defences. Our guiding question has been: How can psychoanalytic thinking help us understand something in a way that would not have been possible without it? This is the unique and nuanced contribution we can make as psychoanalytic and psychodynamic practitioners and theorists, and it is the central premise underpinning and framing *New Associations*.

“How can psychoanalytic thinking help us understand something in a way that would not have been possible without it?”

Most pieces touch on conflict and its traumatic effects in some way or another – be it as something happening in external reality or as a psychic state. Katja Heyer (p. 16) reflects on the film *Freud’s Last Session*, set at the beginning of the Second World War, from her perspective as a child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapist and as the mother of the actor who plays Freud at age six. Tom Fielder (p. 4) considers the way in which political discourse can be co-opted to divide and conquer, arguing that ‘psychoanalysis can expose the deepest threads of racist passion drawn from the past and newly festering beneath the surface of contemporary politics’. This ‘nativist politics’ makes use of ‘the armed lifeboat’, according to Paul Hoggett (p. 5), as a ‘strategy for managing social collapse’. While weaponised by populist leaders for political gain, it also serves a defensive function to protect against overwhelming anxiety and ‘facing difficult truths’.

Hana Salaam Abdel-Malek (p. 9) invites us to consider a ‘fraternal complex’ at play in the Middle East, focusing specifically on conflicts between Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Syria; sibling groups seeking to destroy one another in the process of competing for ‘exclusive possession of the maternal space’. The power that some actors have to capture our imaginations is the focus of Candida Yates and Siobhan Lennon-Patience’s (p. 15) piece about their transferences to Mark Rylance as Thomas Cromwell – and why Rylance and male political advisors have become objects of fantasy.

Arturo Ezquerro and María Cañete (pp. 10-11) bring their group analytic expertise to think about what they describe as the ‘intractable and asymmetrical’ Israel-Palestine conflict, focusing on the ongoing traumatic impact of the Holocaust and the Nakba on the region and why these ‘traumatic experiences cannot be properly metabolised’. Merav Roth (p. 7) reflects on the mechanism of ‘traumatic time’ in her work with survivors of October 7th as she conceptualises ‘three illusory attempts to transcend trauma by negotiating with time in deceptive ways’: the illusion of return, the illusion of a fresh start and the illusion of eternal traumatic time.

One of the ways in which we are developing the magazine is to extend the space for interviews with experienced psychoanalytic and psychodynamic practitioners and theorists. David Bell (pp. 12-13) spoke to Deborah Wright about his influences and career, psychoanalysis and politics, and his writings on Gaza, while Daniel Pick (pp. 1-2) talked to Emmanuelle Smith about his experience as a historian and a psychoanalyst, and what it means to trust or mistrust.

We are keen to include reviews of professional events. We have a write-up of the annual Foundation for Psychotherapy and Counselling (FPC) conference, where Ruth Brenner Ungar (p. 6) shares her impressions, along with an overview of papers presented by Alessandra Lemma, Narendra Keval and Jay Barlow. Agnes Meadows and Harriet Mossop (p. 8) write about two events they convened about the relationship between Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham and their home for decades, which is now the Freud Museum. These events offered ‘a “queer encounter” with psychoanalysis’ troubled history of homophobia and transphobia’.

Together with Niamh Downes, Managing Editor, we held our first writing workshop in May, aimed at people who would like to contribute to *New Associations*. We enjoyed meeting everyone and hearing their questions and ideas for articles. The first part of the workshop was recorded and is available as a podcast on the *New Associations*’ section of the BPC website. We are receiving pitches and ideas almost daily, and we continue to welcome proposals for articles and reviews. Do check out the website for our free online archive of previously published issues, and for further information about what we are looking for and how the process works.

New Associations is borne out of collaboration. It would not be possible without the talented work of our colleagues on the editorial board and design team: Niamh Downes, Allen Fatimaharan, Matthew Lumley, Lydia Prior, Susan Rentoul, Marita Vyrgioti, Deborah Wright, Candida Yates and Usman Zafar. We are indebted to them for their work, collegiality and dedication to the magazine. We also appreciate our BPC colleague Nishma Bhimjiyani’s support at our writing workshop.

We welcome feedback and suggestions from readers. If there is something you find particularly interesting or helpful, or if you would like to see more or less of something in *New Associations*, please get in touch:
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Contribute to *New Associations*
We welcome ideas for articles, interviews and reviews. To propose an idea, email noreen.giffney@bpc.org.uk and emmanuelle.smith@bpc.org.uk

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Politics and Society

Enoch Powell's Political Psychiatry: A Post-Brexit Reflection

Tom Fielder

A classics scholar who had dreamed of being Viceroy of India before becoming a Conservative MP in 1950, Enoch Powell is chiefly remembered today for his notoriously racist 1968 speech – 'Rivers of Blood' – and his subsequent emergence as the champion of a nostalgic cultural politics which blamed non-white migrants for the symptoms of a deepening crisis in the metropole. Nigel Farage has repeatedly expressed his passionate admiration for Enoch Powell – 'a singularly great man' – and many scholars have situated the Brexit referendum as a seismic irruption of anti-immigrant sentiment comparable to the Powellite turn of 1968-1974. Yet in using psychoanalytic thinking to reckon with the wild mental weather of Brexit, we could do worse than begin with the surprising psychoanalytic resonances of Powell's own discourse as a self-styled 'psychiatrist' of the nation's soul.

In a remarkable speech at a convention dinner in Manchester in November 1965, Powell explicitly identifies politicians as 'the nation's psychiatrists', whose 'business' it is to provide the people 'once more with success, achievement, ambition triumphantly fulfilled, in short, with power and glory.' He had titled his address 'Power & Glory: The Nation in the Mirror' and began by describing the processes of 'personification' whereby the nation is invested 'with the attributes of a person' to whom its history and current fortunes can be assigned, 'as with a human character in a story.'

'Nations', Powell asserts, 'like women' – a ready flash of male chauvinism – 'cannot resist looking at themselves in the mirror.' Yet notwithstanding the 'element of falsification' inherent in the imaginary representation of the nation, he says that its 'mental picture' – the image in the mirror – 'is nevertheless something real', an intersubjective fact in which every citizen is more or less involved. Functioning as a kind of surrogate ego, the personified nation makes its members 'sad or happy' and forms 'the accompanying background to the events of their individual lives'. 'It enables us', Powell says, 'to daydream as we live out our lives, as the factory-girl daydreams with the aid of her paperback thriller.' The national story, Powell suggests, provides an escapist 'daydream' for the working classes, who may not be 'powerful and glorious' themselves, yet may enjoy some narcissistic 'compensation' in thinking that they 'belong to something powerful and glorious, or something which is at least on the way to be so.'

"'Nations', Powell asserts, 'like women' – a ready flash of male chauvinism – 'cannot resist looking at themselves in the mirror'"

On Powell's account, the passive daydream of nationhood can provide a psychological security comparable to religious faith. But it is not an excuse for 'idolatry' and he warns that 'the picture which we see in the looking-glass' must do more than 'simply afford the features which people desire to find in it'. Indeed, if it is not 'sufficiently credible,' he continues, its effects can become 'pernicious'. And in such a case, says Powell, the nation 'can be neither happy nor successful, but falls a prey to neurosis, fluctuating between desperate attempts to force or interpret the real world to fit the picture, and morose self-depreciation, which, having rejected the picture as discredited, finds nothing to replace it.'

The language of psychoanalysis has been especially apparent in analyses of Brexit Britain that emphasise the persistence of the past in the present, with a particular focus on what the historian Bill Schwarz (2011) calls 'memories of empire' (p. 6). And in this context, Powell's (1965) account of postwar Britain resonantly identifies the 'baleful' effects of a moribund national self-image, which has been 'broken up under the blows of external reality', but has not yet been reconstituted, and lingers instead like an unlaid ghost in the interstices of personal and social life. The corollary alternation between 'elation' and 'dejection' – Powell uses the term 'manic-depressive' – indeed affords a valid critical framework for the vicissitudes of Brexit between the boosterism of Boris Johnson and the accumulating evidence of 'Bregret'.

In his speech, Powell (1965) describes the 'fateful' habit of staring at 'the red colouring of the maps' to illustrate England's imperial 'expansion' and sensibly proposes 'the re-writing of our national history' to overcome the atavistic 'obsession with bigness' in the era of decolonisation. 'I am not quite saying that the new history would be "Britain without empire",' he says, 'but it will be very nearly "Britain with the imperial episode in parentheses".' Yet this is Powell's own characteristically fateful move: to assume that Britain's imperial history can be placed 'in parentheses' so as to better serve the needs of its postcolonial condition. Even as he rejects the British obsession with empire as a *folie de grandeur*, he licenses an increasingly militant form of denial, bracketing the historical reality of empire at the same time as he perversely preserves the racist underpinnings of imperial rule. As Schwarz (2011) argues, Powell taunted the nation with new memories of a lost time of whiteness, when our 'power and glory' was not yet corrupted by them.

At the end of his speech, Powell (1965) aptly recalls 'that humility which the psychiatrist – and not least the political psychiatrist – ought to practice to an eminent degree.' 'It is already almost too great a presumption to have attempted diagnosis,' he continues. 'Who but a quack dare claim to promise cure?' In taking seriously Powell's notion that politicians act as the nation's psychiatrists – a profession more closely related to psychoanalysis in the 1960s – we should equally follow Powell in emphasising that 'the political psychiatrist' is prone to more or less egregious forms of 'quackery.'

For his part, Powell was susceptible to arrogance, seduced by his mythological status as a self-styled 'prophet' or 'word-giver' who crystallises 'what most people mean,' as he told the *Daily Mail* in 1968, 'even if they don't know it,' – giving language 'to what is instinctive and formless' (quoted in Heffer, 1998, p. 474). Whenever he was accused of racism, Powell insisted that he was simply relaying the views of his constituents. But if a psychiatrist must do more than repeat the words of his patients, a 'prophetic' psychiatrist more deliberately gives shape to a welter of hidden desires, retroactively judging his sublime power according to the scale of the effects he is able to conjure in his clients.

While aspects of Powell's (1965) diagnosis of Britain's 'manic-depressive' national culture remain resonant, his implied 'cure' was always a nostalgic species of quackery. Rather than working-through the trauma of decolonisation, he aggravated the underlying condition, accusing his enemies of a 'neurotic' surrender to otherness – in the form of non-white immigration – while stirring psychosocial anxieties into explosive forms of hatred that flooded the horizons of public debate.

"While aspects of Powell's diagnosis of Britain's 'manic-depressive' national culture remain resonant, his implied 'cure' was always a nostalgic species of quackery"

Without dismissing the range of socio-economic concerns related to UK immigration policy, psychoanalysis can expose the deepest threads of racist passion drawn from the past and newly festering beneath the surface of contemporary politics. Armed with an image of the ethnic nation – the (white) man in the mirror – Powell and his successors on the British right have been able to ratchet the worst aspects of the unconscious mind, electrifying the political landscape with unappeased memories of 'power and glory' that more authentically psychoanalytic practitioners must struggle to contain.

Tom Fielder, PhD, is an associate tutor at Birkbeck College. His doctoral thesis asks what psychoanalysis can contribute to our understanding of Brexit.

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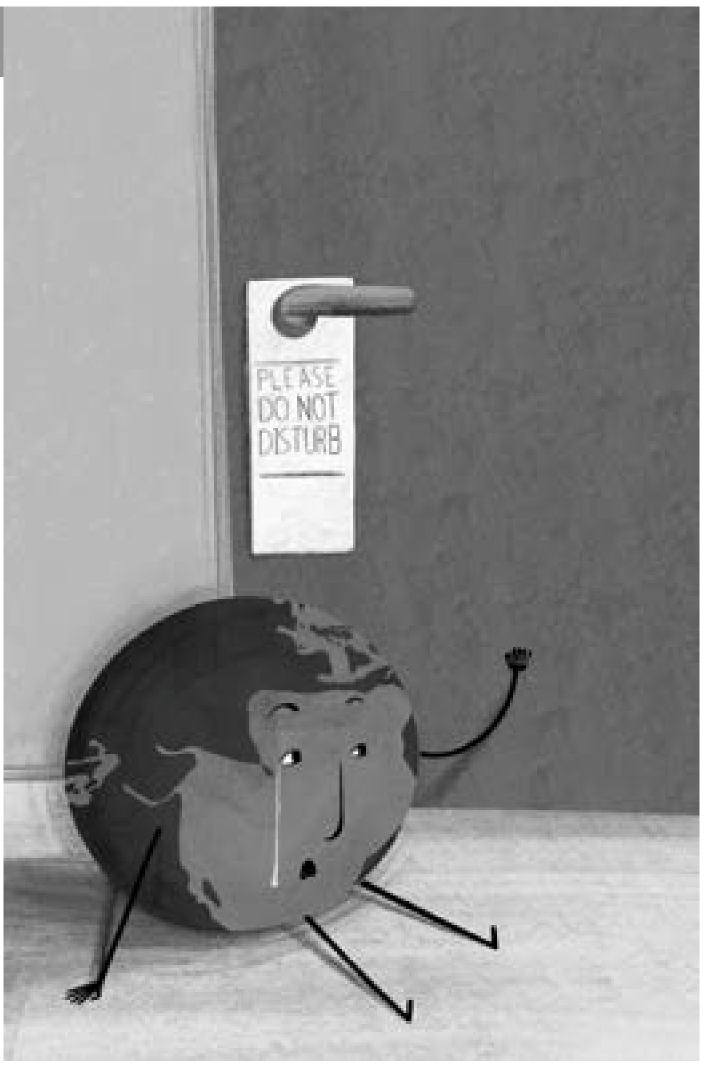
Politics and Society

Facing Difficult Truths: The Armed Lifeboat

Paul Hoggett



Facing Difficult Truths is the strapline of the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA), an organisation I helped establish in 2012. Fearful of the truth of what we were doing to the planet, it was as if both individually and collectively a 'Do not disturb' notice had been erected in the liberal West which, at best, resulted in action that was token and performative. This was not a case of outright denial but a perverse relation to the truth (Hoggett, 2013) where one part of the mind knew about the crisis whilst another, more powerful part, disavowed this knowing by splitting off fact from feeling, and knowledge from belief.

Psychoanalysis is founded on the assumption that relation to the truth is fundamental both to individual and collective development. There are perhaps four different relations to the truth. We can face up to it, live in fear of it, have contempt for it or believe we enjoy exclusive possession of it (Hoggett, 2023). In the last few years, as liberal democracy has waned, the latter two relations to the truth have become much more powerful.

"We can face up to [the truth], live in fear of it, have contempt for it or believe we enjoy exclusive possession of it"

At this point I wish to use a metaphor, one familiar to the climate change world. Imagine a ship called HMS Civilisation, which was launched during the benign climatic conditions that developed just 11,000 years ago, but has hit an iceberg and is starting to list. Afraid of the truth, the passengers 'know' about their predicament but cannot quite bring themselves to believe it.

A deep lying disturbance develops. Leaders emerge promising salvation. Some, the populists, are not so much afraid of the truth as contemptuous of it. They assume that the ship's voyage is effectively over, that attempts to rectify the trajectory of the ship are futile, and that political capital can be made by promising to secure the conditions for societal survival in the face of the environmental and social chaos to come. This has become known as 'the politics of the armed lifeboat'. This finds a reflection in the psyche of the modern citizen; the survivalist culture strengthens that part of the self which resembles an internal fortress or retreat. The frightened self in turn becomes frightening, constantly anticipating the appearance of monsters it must destroy.

"The populists are not so much afraid of the truth as contemptuous of it"

The armed lifeboat is a perfectly realistic and all too probable strategy for managing social collapse where, at least for a while, the social fabric of some societies (mostly in the Global North) is maintained whilst others disintegrate under the escalating pressures of heat, drought, famine and war. Seen from this perspective the new breed of nativist populist leaders, the Trumps and so on, are the would-be commanders of the vessel's lifeboats. But as Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2021) demonstrates in *Strongmen*, her study of autocrats over the last 100 years, many of these cynically narcissistic leaders believe in just one thing, that is, themselves. They certainly do not believe in the nationalist illusions they so freely peddle.

So, what then of their followers, the believers? In her study of totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt (1951) provides many insights regarding the reactionary state of mind. Far from being afraid of, or contemptuous of, the truth, the reactionary mind claims to be in possession of the real truth, one which lies hidden to the ordinary person. By becoming an adept, one acquires a sixth sense; by mastering the important texts (now largely online), one is able to intuit the hidden meanings and secret intents behind public events.

The spread of conspiracy theories became a striking feature of the first Trump presidency. As the tendency to perceive a connection or meaningful pattern between unrelated or random things, apophenia appears to be one of the key psychological processes underlying the attraction of conspiracy theories. There is virtually nothing in the psychoanalytic literature on apophenia (Berkowitz, 2020). The term was developed by the German psychiatrist Klaus Conrad who saw it as a crucial feature of the early stage of schizophrenia. Whilst those gripped by conspiracies, such as The Great Replacement, might speak in terms of having an epiphany, the reality is that they are in the grip of an apophany, a kind of semantic promiscuity where hidden meanings lurk everywhere. In psychoanalysis we tend to be preoccupied with the splitting of experience that should be integrated but in apophenia we get the reverse, here everything connects.

"In psychoanalysis we tend to be preoccupied with the splitting of experience that should be integrated but in apophenia we get the reverse, here everything connects"

Starting with the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, for much of the last century antisemitism constituted a rhizome supporting an array of conspiracy theories. But the new wave of authoritarians have turned to Islamophobic conspiracies such as the Great Replacement. This holds that a liberal elite, through immigration policies, connives to overwhelm the indigenous white Christian population with non-white Muslims. For the far right, particularly in Germany and the USA, Israel now represents the bastion of an imaginary Judeo-Christian civilisation threatened by a rising Islamist tide. Might this help us understand why the West stands by and does nothing as month after month thousands of Palestinians are slaughtered in Gaza?

As James Baldwin once said, 'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.' As Bion puts it, truth provides nourishment for the mind. By embracing the truth, the individual and the group grow stronger. Rather than fear and panic, the self experiences loss, remorse and grief for that loss, and anger at its causes. These moral anxieties provide the condition for real ethical/political engagement, one which is capable of transcending much that separates us. This reaction grounds itself upon a recognition of our inextricable dependency, both upon nature, upon our own creaturely nature and upon others. It is this ethic of individual and species humility, the antithesis to the exceptionalism of the modern self, which provides the foundation for the movement to save the planet.

Paul Hoggett co-founded the Climate Psychology Alliance and was its first chair. He is a retired psychoanalytic psychotherapist, non-practising Associate of the Severnside Institute for Psychotherapy and Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at UWE, Bristol.

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The 2025 Foundation for Psychotherapy and Counselling Conference

Ruth Brenner Ungar

The 2025 conference of the Foundation for Psychotherapy and Counselling (FPC) took place on Saturday 15th March at Resource for London on the Holloway Road. It was a day of thought-provoking presentations by keynote speakers and stimulating responses from the attendees. FPC is the professional home of graduates of the former WPF Therapy. Since the sudden loss of our brick mother in July 2023, the FPC continues to provide CPD events and unwavering support and containment for its members.

The conference began with colleagues excitedly catching up over tea and coffee. Noisy reunion settled into rapt attention as Alessandra Lemma presented her paper, 'The Seductions of Identity: Thinking Psychoanalytically About Identity and Transgender', chaired by Ulisses Belucio. She initially spoke about identity before focusing on transgender identity. Lemma was a major influence on my thinking about work with transgender patients and the writing of my dissertation on the subject. Her writing informs an understanding of how the unconsciously held beliefs we have about our bodies affect our sense of identity. Psychoanalysis thinks about identity from the internal landscape, but an external narrative is formed through social processes and becomes the scaffolding which holds the strands of identity together. Lemma compelled me to think more deeply about continuous and emergent gender identity when she juxtaposed synchronic identity, which has an episodic quality, and diachronic identity – one with continuity that persists over time.

I thought about gender fluidity in my work with transgender patients and particularly liked Lemma's referencing Gilles Deleuze's (1991) paper, 'The Fold', which asks us to think about what can be made from folding a plain piece of paper and how each fold renders other folds possible – or within reach. The fold can be said to symbolise a hidden subject in identity. From our earliest experiences of how bodies should look, we are informed about how we view them. Lemma (2022) said that work with this group of patients is anchored in embodiment, so they might find their 'right physical home for the self' (p. 44). The caveat is a need to remain mindful of Winnicott's (1988) words: 'We cannot take for granted the lodgement of the psyche in the body'. Instead, we have to regard it 'as an achievement' (p. 122).

Though we strive for psychoanalytic neutrality, thinking about gender identity as something fluid feels new and hosting otherness in our minds may feel challenging. We should not be invested in the outcome of the therapeutic journey but provide a safe space in which to explore the internal world and perhaps be open to exploring gender without identity (Saketopoulou and Pellegrini, 2024).

"Keval included antisemitism – a form of racial hatred too often missing from papers exploring otherness"

The theme of sameness and difference in identity continued, with Navendra Keval presenting on 'Exploring the "Racial Scene" in the Clinical Encounter', in a talk chaired by Daniel Weir. I felt Keval offered us a different perspective on a topic too often perceived as a threat. The phantasy that race has to do with being a person of colour, whilst whiteness is its absence can lead to a disavowal of race being ever-present in psychoanalysis, regardless of who sits in the room.

Keval included antisemitism – a form of racial hatred too often missing from papers exploring otherness – and went on to reference Freud, racially ostracised as 'a black Jew in Vienna', who became a displaced refugee. The Holocaust and other examples of ethnic cleansing in our cultural history are embedded in the generations that follow and Keval posits that this internally held knowledge may prevent curiosity. As practitioners, who pick up on the unconsciously communicated racist messages in our patients, Keval observed that we position ourselves between the embracing of our curiosity and the fear of where that curiosity might lead. What we know is that difference in the other too often becomes the carrier of what feels unbearable within us all. He concluded by reminding us that we are required to 'look and listen to racial scenes in our work with curiosity, moving from the provocative to the evocative'. We moved into discussing the nature of internal bias and our need to rush to certainty, killing the moment without time to take things in.

Before the day's final speaker Jay Barlow (2024) delivered his paper 'The Umbilical', Chris Driver, who was in the Chair, announced that it had that morning been awarded the 2025 Michael Fordham Prize; we seemed to sit up taller in anticipation. The paper discusses Barlow's work with his patient, Charlie, a trans man, who was seemingly attempting to form a psychic umbilical attachment. Othered by his family, as he did not meet their heteronormative expectations, the paper explores how early relational trauma led to a dysregulated state. Barlow was aware that, in addition to the provision of holding and containment in the therapy, it was important to remain mindful that an analyst's unconscious bias could lead to interpretations that resemble conversion therapy, leaving the patient feeling alienated and reinforcing their sense of being disconnected. He creatively utilised Louise Bourgeois's umbilical artworks to illustrate the development of projective identification, where unwanted feelings are projected onto others in an attempt to find belonging. The images were arresting and I felt they captured the complexity of a defence mechanism that is often hard to define.

The day left me feeling prouder of my solid training at WPF. I was struck by the calibre of the reflective group of its alumni and the quality of the conference. Having sat in a split state of ambivalence about the demise of our training organisation, the conference affirmed my positive feelings, making a depressive position more comfortable. As the day concluded, it felt as if we were left with heads full of three movingly insightful presentations and hearts enflamed by the identity we now carry from our psychodynamic journeys.

Ruth Brenner Ungar is a psychodynamic psychotherapist in private practice in London, having trained at the Tavistock and WPF/Roehampton University. She holds particular interest in work with transgender patients and working with racial bias in psychodynamic work.

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Practice

‘I am still on October 7th’: The Mechanisms of Traumatic Time

Merav Roth

One of the most common expressions in Israel since the October 7th 2023 massacre is: ‘I am still on October 7th.’ Each day has become so unbearable to endure that it seems eternal. Yet, paradoxically, the reason this one date is singled out is precisely because it does not mark a trauma that has ended. Beneath the feet of its survivors, the abyss remains wide open. A year and a half after, both the direct victims and Israeli society remain in the heart of an ongoing, rolling collective trauma. The families of the murdered have no home to come back to and to grieve in, no state they can rely upon, no end to the war that has caused innumerable devastating losses to both Israeli and Gazan civilians. This only sharpens an ongoing sense of danger and despair, no sign of a peaceful horizon that might restore a sense of safety and sanity to this region. And worst of all, the survivors of October 7th still have dozens of loved ones in captivity – a human catastrophe that destabilises the most fundamental covenant between a person and the place they live: the knowledge that they are protected, and that should harm befall them, everything will be done to rescue them.

> **“In melancholia, time is the enemy. It distances one from the dead. It demands a return to life”**

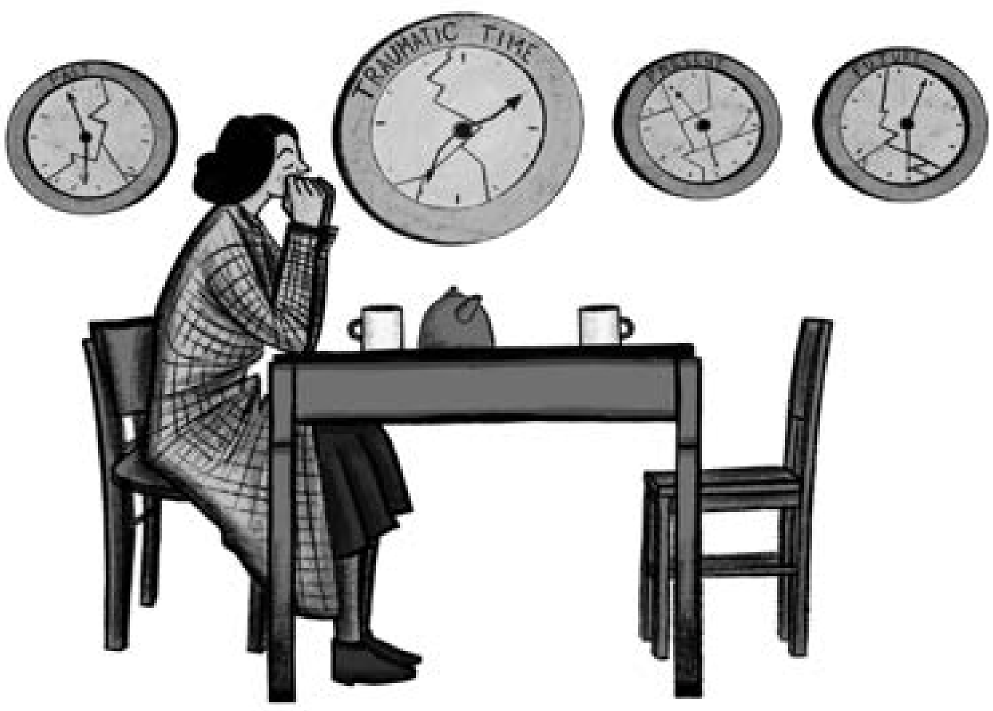
Ongoing events deny the psyche the space needed for the labour of grief. Mourning processes usually take a long time. Under conditions in which the psyche can bear the loss, time carries it forward – from the sense of rupture toward the reconstruction of the self within its world, now weaving absence and presence together in a way that restores meaning. However, traumatic experiences – and even more so, ongoing and collective traumatic events that reinforce internal traumatic states – can severely impair the capacity to mourn and to recover.

They alter the conventional syntax of time: past, present, and future. For someone who has experienced trauma – especially prolonged and radical trauma – there are now **four temporal circles** in their life: past, traumatic time, present, and future. The familiar cliché, time is the great healer, is true in most cases – except in melancholia. In melancholia, time is the enemy. It distances one from the dead. It demands a return to life. It marks the passage of days, pulling the mourner further from the moment of rupture, and for the melancholic, this elongation of time is experienced as a prolonged stay in a cruel prison. Traumatic times are therefore circular, unchanging, possessing a quality of timelessness, devoid of linear continuity. My work with patients who have experienced traumatic loss has taught me that their sense of time is disconnected from the past and does not lead into the future. Often, survivors lack the ability – or the will – to unify the world of reality with the world of traumatic memory. Thus, traumatic memory remains suspended outside of time, frozen, meaningless.

The traumatised subject often gravitates toward **three illusory attempts** to transcend trauma by negotiating with time in deceptive ways.

The illusion of return represents an illusory desire to return to the time before the trauma. They recall who they were, and long to restore that prior identity. In the context of October 7th, all of us desire to return to October 6th. A hope destined, of course, to collapse. The psyche has no way of erasing what has been inscribed into its fabric. The post-October 7th self is already constituted by a radically different psychological configuration than the one that came before.

The illusion of a fresh start is an illusory attempt to begin anew – from the present forward – as though untouched by trauma, as if one can choose to be reborn without imprint. This, too, must disappoint, for everything that has happened to us is carried within us; it informs our positions, shapes our relationships, animates our fears, conditions our defences, and contours our modes of coping.



The illusion of eternal traumatic time is melancholic in nature and the most dangerous. It seeks to take up residence within traumatic time itself, as if there were no before and no after; to live as if time had ceased to move forward. This psychic position has deep, comprehensible roots. Traumatic times are the times in which one lost control of one’s life, the time when the unspeakable happened, when the beloved was taken, when injustice erupted into the structure of reality. It is mostly so with trauma inflicted by human-perpetrated harm. To move away from this traumatic time is to move away from those lost; it is to risk allowing the horror to fade, the wound to be erased. And the soul, in quiet revolt, arrests itself, refusing to go on as if to say: until what was inscribed in traumatic time is rewritten, I will not proceed along the axis of time.

> **“Traumatic times are… circular, unchanging, possessing a quality of timelessness”**

In the internal world of traumatic loss, clinging to traumatic time may appear – consciously or unconsciously – as fidelity to the dead or the abducted. ‘If they cannot move on, neither will I.’ It is an illusion of loyalty: ‘Instead of living with grief, I will die of grief. I will die with the dead, rather than live without them.’ This refusal carries within it the shadows of guilt and shame – the guilt of having survived, the shame of harbouring a life force that endured despite the destruction. This phenomenon is especially marked among bereaved parents, though it is by no means exclusive to them. At an unconscious level, the very concept of linear time collapses. What remains is a circularity that derives from the longing to control and repair what went awry. Yet this, in turn, becomes a compulsion to repeat, looping back endlessly, resisting integration.

There is, however, **a fourth, non-illusory possibility**. It lies in the weaving together of the four temporalities — past, traumatic time, present, and future – so that each may find meaning through its relation to the others. This requires sustained, delicate working through. It means interpreting the three false temporal adhesions as misguided efforts at repair, transforming them into a more flexible and meaningful movement between times that illuminate one another and shapes the individual’s sense of self. Such a movement must include not only the personal past, but also the familial, transgenerational one; not only the recent catastrophe, but the earlier traumas and the good internal others that preceded it; not only the shattered moment, but the present that is cast in its aftermath – and the new meanings that may radiate forward. These meanings can accommodate deep mourning, relinquish manic or omnipotent fantasies of repair, and allow for a creative practice of grief – a practice that opens the door not just to recovery, but to retroactive repair and future growth and hope.

This article was informed by the author’s leadership roles and clinical work with survivors of October 7th.

Merav Roth, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, training psychoanalyst and Associate Professor in the School of Therapy, Counseling and Development at the University of Haifa. She is one of the founders and chairs of First Line Med (FLM), a philanthropic network that offers long-term therapy for the victims of October 7th and she was the winner of the international psychoanalytic Sigourney Award in 2024. https://anatta.org.il/he/projects/health-and-mental-health/first-line-med

Profession

Queer Encounters at the Freud Museum

Agnes Meadows and Harriet Mossop

Few people know that Anna Freud lived for nearly 40 years with psychoanalyst Dorothy Burlingham in their Hampstead home which is, today, the Freud Museum in London. A century after they met in Vienna, what should we make of their relationship? This has long been a subject of speculation: was it a chaste intellectual partnership or a secret lesbian affair? Was Anna Freud a queer hero or a conservative psychoanalyst practising conversion therapy? How these questions are answered has consequences for the legacy and practice of psychoanalysis.

The Queer Encounters research network, of which we are both members, works at the intersections between queer theory (an interdisciplinary academic field that examines and resists normative social structures around gender and sexuality), psychoanalytic theory, and the clinical practice of psychoanalysis. Earlier this year, together with the network, we hosted two events at the Freud Museum in London to explore these questions about Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham and invite a ‘queer encounter’ with psychoanalysis’ troubled history of homophobia and transphobia.

A Tour of the Freud Museum

Our tour focused on the two women’s lives, particularly on aspects that are obscured by the house’s reconfiguration as a museum. They worked closely together as analysts, Burlingham specialising in blind children and twins. However, despite her significant contribution to child psychoanalysis, that work is little-known today. We explored further historical gaps in the museum’s archive. As she compiled letters from Anna Freud for the archive, Burlingham wrote that she removed any that seemed too personal. What was too personal about these letters is unclear, but one clue is a letter marked ‘To Destroy’ – presumably for removal from the archive. It tells a story of the two women’s domestic intimacy and of Anna Freud’s ambivalent position in psychoanalysis (Meadows, 2022).

In Burlingham’s bedroom, now displayed as Anna Freud’s room, we highlighted psychoanalysis’s history of lesbophobia, especially during the ‘controversial discussions’ of the 1940s. We suggested that the museum’s presentation of Anna Freud’s possessions in Burlingham’s room enacts an elision of their identities reminiscent of the pathologising psychoanalytic theory that lesbians have underdeveloped boundaries. These theories, alongside the idea that queer sexuality is caused by an unresolved Oedipus complex, certainly shaped the two women’s professional lives and how they talked about their partnership – unresolved conflicts implying unfitness to practise as psychoanalysts.

> **“Mossop suggested that instead of solidifying Anna and Dorothy’s puzzling relationship, we might allow it to affect us, acting as an enigmatic and stimulating force that generates new ideas”**

Anna Freud’s position is especially paradoxical since she practised what we would now call conversion therapy on queer men, including Burlingham’s son (Mossop, 2025). We welcomed the newfound visibility of Freud and Burlingham’s partnership, and of other queer figures, in the ‘Women and Freud’ exhibition installed at the time of our tour.

Panel Discussion of *Freud’s Last Session*

The next day, we reconvened for an online panel discussion on the representation of Freud and Burlingham’s relationship as straightforwardly lesbian in the film, *Freud’s Last Session* (2024).

Raluca Soreanu introduced the discussion. She suggested that approaching the history of psychoanalysis through the perspective of a partnership between two women – rather than through the figurehead of Sigmund Freud – could rewind, redistribute and readjust its history. What might psychoanalysis have been, if it had dealt differently with queer and trans psychoanalytic trainees of the past? What might psychoanalysis still be in the future, if it deals with non-normative sexuality or trans identities differently?

Patricia Gherovici opened with the story of a supervisee who declared, on learning of Anna Freud and Burlingham’s relationship, that ‘psychoanalysis is lesbian!’ She explored the inherent queerness of psychoanalysis and its potential to oppress. She playfully substituted female pronouns into Freud’s (1935) famous letter to the American mother of a gay man: ‘I gather […] that your [daughter] is a homosexual […] Many highly respectable individuals […] have been homosexuals, several of the greatest [women] among them’. Gherovici proposed a future for psychoanalysis that acknowledges its errors and moves forwards: a transition or even a sex change.

Noreen Giffney explored her associations to images and themes from the movie, ranging from psychoanalyst Pearl King, to Irish saints, to her own ‘queer encounters’ at the Anna Freud Centre during a previous event on queer theory and psychoanalysis. Giffney concluded that when psychoanalysis is seen as needing protection, something is split off, denied, and othered. This defensive impulse underlies psychoanalysis’ historical attacks on homosexuality and its similar attacks on transgender identities today.

> **“Zeavin highlighted the important role of [Burlingham’s] children – all of whom were patients of Anna Freud – in the development of psychoanalytic theory, and its unexplored effects on them”**

Harriet Mossop spoke of the desire to seek lesbian ancestry in the archive of Anna Freud and Burlingham’s relationship. Using Laplanche’s concept of the enigmatic message, Mossop suggested that instead of solidifying Anna and Dorothy’s puzzling relationship, we might allow it to affect us, acting as an enigmatic and stimulating force that generates new ideas. She emphasised the importance of not knowing in the clinic, given psychoanalysis’s history of demanding to know about a patient’s gender or sexuality.

Finally, Hannah Zeavin studied the gaps and inaccuracies in *Freud’s Last Session*, including the absence of Burlingham’s four children who were teenagers at the time. Zeavin highlighted the important role of these children – all of whom were patients of Anna Freud – in the development of psychoanalytic theory, and its unexplored effects on them; Mabbie Burlingham died by suicide in the house that is now the Freud Museum. Analysts’ children – including Melanie Klein’s – were often their first patients.

Our lively audience discussion considered feminist accounts of Anna Freud, histories of working mothers, and how we might build queer and trans spaces in psychoanalytic trainings and institutions. In the current political climate, which is making queer and trans lives increasingly difficult, we were grateful to create this queer space with the Freud Museum, an institution at the heart of psychoanalysis.

Agnes Meadows is a researcher who has written an article on Dorothy Burlingham’s archive. She completed an MA in Psychoanalytic Studies at Birkbeck.

Harriet Mossop is a PhD student and Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex, and Research and Development Officer in The Centre for Anthropology and Mental Health Research in Action (CAMHRA) at SOAS. She is researching erotic transference between female-identified patients and psychotherapists. She is a co-founder of the Queer Encounters Network www.queerencounters.org.

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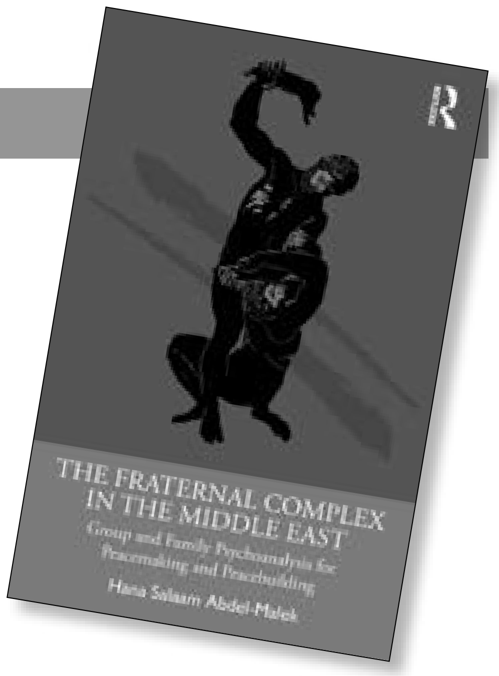
Politics and Society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THE FRATERNAL COMPLEX IN THE MIDDLE EAST
Group and Family Psychoanalysis for Peacemaking and Peacebuilding
Hana Salaam Abdel-Malek

Fratricidal Wars in the Middle East

Hana Salaam Abdel-Malek

In *The Fraternal Complex in the Middle East: Group and Family Psychoanalysis for Peacemaking and Peacebuilding* (2025), I conceptualised the nation-state as a large family, endowed with its own skin-ego, narcissism, and psychic apparatus. I argued that the attainment of sovereignty initiates a metaphorical process of separation-individuation, akin to an infant's psychological development. However, when a nation fails to undertake the psychic work of primal mourning – the ego's renunciation of total possession of the object and the restructuring of object relations – it struggles to define its borders and sustain a coherent national identity. Lacking such differentiation, the nation remains enmeshed in incestual group dynamics marked by defensive, closing ideologies and fraternal rivalries rooted in the archaic fraternal complex (Kaës, 2008).

> **"siblings fantasise about returning to an undisturbed maternal womb, eliminating rivals, and monopolising the maternal space"**

When separation-individuation threatens the fragile cohesion of the collective, the nation defensively regresses to an incestual, pregenital, and narcissistic mode of functioning, characterised by the avoidance of conflict and primal mourning (Racamier, 1992). Within this dynamic, sibling relations are governed by manipulation, domination, and a denial of the other's separateness. Violence against the sibling is not simply an Oedipal displacement of hostility toward the parent but instead emerges from the more primitive drive to expel the rival and monopolise the maternal object (Kaës, 2008). In this archaic form of the fraternal complex, conflict becomes a life-and-death struggle in which the preservation of the self demands the obliteration of the other, now perceived as a mere part-object.

As individual differences become unbearable, the emotional landscape divides into perverse coalitions against a constructed 'enemy', creating a disordered and alienating power structure. Instead of a paternal law that protects while prohibiting, the group is governed by a primitive, talionic law – an archaic retribution system that imposes prohibitions without providing security (Racamier 1995). The ideology that was once structuring becomes a closing ideology (Kaës, 2016), an unyielding paranoid belief system that excludes any form of doubt, difference, or alternative viewpoints. Resistant to primal mourning, this ideology consolidates individual identities into a collective mass, diminishing personal judgement and imposing rigid dogma. In this process, the group generates an all-powerful idol, a psychic prosthesis against anxiety and fragmentation, sustaining fantasies of omnipotence, while conspiracy theories protect the group from collective shame and humiliation (Kaës, 2016).

The fraternal complex, which organises unconscious dynamics governing sibling relations along a horizontal axis, distinct from the verticality of the Oedipal structure, diverges from the Oedipal-symbolic configuration characterised by rivalry alongside identification, and instead takes an archaic form where hatred, envy, and jealousy dominate (Kaës, 2008). Here, siblings fantasise about returning to an undisturbed maternal womb, eliminating rivals, and monopolising the maternal space. The sibling is experienced either as an extension of the self or as an intrusive part-object that must be expelled. This logic fuels murderous sibling rivalries, evoking primal myths such as that of Cain and Abel. The law of the mother (Mitchell, 2023) fails to prohibit sibling incest and murder or to instate an internal conflict between desire and prohibition. Traumatised by the newborn's arrival, the older child suffers a narcissistic wound upon realising that the sibling is not a self-extension, but a separate, autonomous other – threatening to dethrone them and provoking feelings of loss, displacement, and aggression.

The longstanding conflicts between Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Syria after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, may speak to these states' experiences of separation as a form of abandonment by their 'dead mother' Empire. The individuation process might have reawakened unresolved traumas and revived narcissistic anxieties, triggering fears of annihilation linked to intrauterine and birth experiences (Hopper and Weinberg, 2018), leading to violent clashes that compulsively repeat past traumas. Without a cohesive national identity, these states regressed into a state of incohesion. Conflicts over land reflected the unresolved psychic task of differentiation and enacted the archaic fraternal complex – each side competing for exclusive possession of the maternal space. Citizens of these nations functioned as part-objects, acting out unconscious fratricidal fantasies. To avoid psychic fragmentation, these states transformed their foundational ideologies into closing ideologies, with identity absorbed into the collective, requiring full loyalty and excluding others. This is evident in both Israeli and Palestinian societies, where territorial disputes have hindered the formation of constructive sibling-like relationships. Both sides have disavowed the positive aspects of their histories, attacking the processes that could foster connection.

> **"Both sides have disavowed the positive aspects of their histories, attacking the processes that could foster connection"**

Hezbollah and Hamas play paradoxical roles within the Lebanese and Palestinian familial dynamics, functioning as both scapegoats and messianic figures. They embody the family's incestual tensions and internal struggles while simultaneously representing a desire for a cohesive national identity. Hezbollah's ideological alignment with Iran's wilāyat al-faqih (the guardianship of the Islamic jurist), currently under Khamenei, and Hamas' ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood can be understood as manifestations of unconscious fantasies of returning to and dominating the maternal space – a dynamic also evident in right-wing Israeli governments, currently led by Netanyahu, representing Zionist ideology, a central doctrine in the formation and development of the State of Israel. These groups enact the archaic fraternal complex, striving to restore a unified, omnipotent state through primary narcissism. In contrast, a strong, stable ego-nation-state requires clearly defined territorial and psychic boundaries.

To transform the longstanding conflicts in the Middle East, the warring groups must abandon their closing ideologies and accept their symbolic castration – renouncing the fantasy of total possession of the motherland. This necessitates working through sibling trauma (Mitchell, 2023) and integrating the law of the mother. Only by mourning the loss of total possession and accepting differentiation can these nations establish stable identities and build a future no longer dictated by the past, where fraternal bonds are reconfigured within the symbolic and Oedipal fraternal complex, defined by the interplay of hatred, envy and jealousy, on the one hand, and love, ambivalence and identification with the other sibling, on the other, rather than by archaic fratricidal fantasies that characterize the archaic fraternal complex.

Recognising the dynamics of separation-individuation and the archaic fraternal complex provides psychoanalytically oriented mediators and peacemakers with a valuable tool for understanding land-related disputes. Acknowledging the unconscious forces at play can facilitate dialogue that transcends rigid identifications and destructive repetition.

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Endeavouring to Hold an Inclusive Workshop on Israel-Palestine

Arturo Ezquerro and María Cañete

Group analysis was developed in the context of fighting for survival, during the Second World War, by the German Jewish psychoanalyst Siegmund Heinrich Fuchs. He had to flee his country of birth to the relative safety of the United Kingdom to evade an order from Hitler to surrender his passport. Upon his arrival in London, he changed his name as he believed it would maximise his chances of survival; many members of his family were exterminated in the Nazi death camps. He did not write or talk about Holocaust trauma and chose to be named Foulkes until his death in 1976. His quietness on this had a bearing on group-analytic culture and his early followers were largely quiet about political context. From 1943 to 1945, Foulkes treated vast numbers of soldiers in groups at Northfield Military Hospital, as psychiatric casualties in the army increased on a massive scale. With care and patience, he designed an inclusive, democratic and powerful psychotherapeutic tool based on psychoanalytic understandings, as well as relational benefits from communication and dialogue amongst group members. His technique was not a direct application of psychoanalysis to the group, but a novel form of therapy, in the group, and by the group, including its conductor.

> **“Reflecting on trauma was a core element of our workshop’s group task”**

This is the approach we learned during our training at the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) in London in the early 1990s. The focus was mainly clinical and, to some extent, organisational. Sociopolitical context was minimal. Having said that, a few group analysts attempted to integrate group analysis with John Bowlby’s attachment theory. Group attachment became an important component of group-analytic thinking and practice. We also learned that the basic collaborative nature of the primigenial human group, serving survival, changed with the permanent settlements of the neolithic, which started in the Middle East. From that point on, human groups developed a new form of attachment to land, which contributed to war-making and was particularly problematic when sacred value was attributed to the homeland (Ezquerro and Cañete, 2025). It should be noted that, in Genesis, the Lord intimates to Abraham: ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land that I will show you’.

Until recently, dealing with the Israel-Palestine conflict has been taboo in the group-analytic literature. However, on 7th October 2023, many group analysts, including us, condemned Hamas’s terrorist attack in Israel. Major institutions of Holocaust and genocide studies determined that their mission required them to speak out, and published statements expressing ‘solidarity with the many Holocaust survivors who helped build the State of Israel, where they could finally live in the freedom and security they deserved after centuries of persecution, and ultimately genocide’ (USHMM, in Cohen, 2024). On 9th October 2023, the Israeli government dictated the continuous bombing and siege of Gaza: ‘No power, food or fuel; everything is closed.’ (Gallant, quoted in Fabian, 2023). This state-based terror, collective punishment and murder of civilian Palestinians was in breach of the Geneva Conventions, which indicate that the deprivation of basic necessities, such as food and fuel, are *prima facie* war crimes. Many individuals and institutions that had signed statements condemning Hamas stayed silent. As mental health professionals and citizens, we thought we had a moral duty to speak out. In the next few months, we wrote several open-access articles and repeatedly requested a humanitarian ceasefire. Some people valued and supported our efforts, whilst others criticised our work and tried to silence us.

> **“When the nature of trauma is so horrendous and desecrating, as with the Holocaust and the ongoing Nakba, traumatic experiences cannot be properly metabolised”**

We attempted to work through this polarisation and we explored the possibility of convening the first event on the intractable and asymmetrical Israel-Palestine conflict in the history of the IGA. We wanted to encompass all the different viewpoints and parties involved in this complex issue. It certainly was a huge challenge. As we co-constructed the programme, we employed basic group-analytic thinking on communication and dialogue, and aimed to be inclusive, taking the risk of inviting colleagues with huge ideological differences and narratives to be together in the same room; some had in fact stopped talking to one another. In the summer of 2024, we submitted a proposal for a full-day, in-person workshop, in which different perspectives and experiences could be shared with a view to promoting dialogue and mutual understanding, in the service of institutional harmony, sociopolitical justice and peace-making. In December 2024, the IGA gave the green light to this workshop which would be held on 29th March 2025. Several colleagues told us that the event was 'ill conceived' and should not go ahead because the focus was political rather than clinical. Others perceived it as a 'normalising' event that perpetuated colonialist narratives, and did not support it either. We felt like giving up but decided to persevere.

"Encapsulated unresolved trauma can push individual and collective minds to regress to levels that limit the capacity to think about conflict in a manner required for effective peace processes"

Although the workshop was originally designed and advertised as an in-person event for professionals, we subsequently made it open to the public and hybrid for the morning sessions, which were recorded, to allow for broader participation, whilst keeping the afternoon large-group session, which was not recorded, for in-person participants only, to protect the confidential space that had been agreed with the first group of registrants. We were proactive and personally invited people from outside the IGA. Despite the initial uncertainty, we had 120 attendees: about a third were group analysts; a further third came from other mental health professionals; and the remaining third were members of the public, including people with a political background. We are most grateful to our group-analytic colleagues Sue Einhorn, Gabrielle Rifkind and Dick Blackwell for their invaluable support for this project. They brought together expertise on trauma generated by sociopolitical violence, as well as on international conflict mediation and Middle East history.

We shall now outline some of the main points delivered, as well as offering group-analytic insights. To start with, context was emphasised. The 7th October terrorist attack, in the *foreground*, occurred against a *background* of many decades of settler colonialism, oppression, political violence and deprivation of the human rights of the Palestinian people. Foreground and background are key to group analysis. It was argued that it is not possible to properly understand this endless asymmetrical conflict without considering the history of colonialism in the Arab world and antisemitism in Europe, where the problem started well before it was 'exported' to the Middle East. Reflecting on trauma was a core element of our workshop's group task. According to Professor Ofrit Shapira-Berman, a scholar of Israeli trauma, the horrendous 7th October injury is Israel's biggest trauma yet, not only because of its objective magnitude, but also because it echoed past traumas, particularly the Holocaust.

In order to show some of the dangers of unresolved, untreated trauma, a clinical case study about a Holocaust survivor, who was extremely isolated sensing that she was 'at war' with herself and with the world, was presented. The patient gave consent to share this. She experienced deeply ingrained hatred and a strong wish for revenge, feeling that, if she could, she would bombard the towns and cities where the children and grandchildren of the Nazis lived. She then felt guilty, became severely depressed, made a serious suicide attempt and nearly died. Fortunately, she was rescued just in time and, having rejected treatment for several decades, she eventually accepted, and benefitted from, a combined programme of individual and group-analytic psychotherapy. Being gradually able to communicate with other group members, and feeling accepted and wanted by them, helped her to experience secure-enough group attachment, which was key to her recovery.

This clinical case presentation paved the way to thinking about how encapsulated Holocaust trauma has been transmitted from one generation to the next and is still present, in different ways, in the social unconscious of large parts of Jewish communities – particularly in Israel, where many children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors live. The workshop group also considered that for Palestinians the Nakba that started in 1948, when the State of Israel was constituted, is not a memory, but a continuous frightening experience, due to the never-ending traumatogenic context of the last eight decades, which keeps shattering the social unconscious of the Palestinian people as a group. It is highly problematical to talk about healing in a situation like that. It would be necessary, not only to repair wounds from a historical context, but also to make genuine group efforts to expose and bring to an end a perverse dynamic of continuing assault and further injury. Real peace cannot be accomplished while Palestinians are denied their human and political rights.

When the nature of trauma is so horrendous and desecrating, as with the Holocaust and the ongoing Nakba, traumatic experiences cannot be properly metabolised. In psychoanalytic and group-analytic terms, individual and group minds may attempt to repress or dissociate the trauma. This can be described as a form of encapsulation, a wrapping up of the wound with a view to hiding it from consciousness. To a large extent, the Israel-Palestine conflict might be seen as a tragic example of what happens when encapsulated traumatic experience is reactivated. Encapsulated unresolved trauma can push individual and collective minds to regress to levels that limit the capacity to think about conflict in a manner required for effective peace processes. Moreover, traumatised groups tend to choose a particular type of leader who promises to save them from their predicament and, upon failing to do so, finds scapegoats among them or creates external enemies. Sadly, this contributes to the entrenchment of conflict. Intractable conflict often involves insidious and continuing distortions, as well as silencing processes, which cause damage to group culture. This form of complex cultural trauma must be addressed for healing of larger or national group trauma to emerge.

"we endeavoured to expose silencing processes that are an attack on thinking, feeling and knowing"

Healing collective trauma is a most complex and challenging task. It requires a co-ordinated group effort of working through painful, overwhelming experiences, which involves remembering and making sense of defined events. This process necessitates a benign group attachment culture that can include a range of diverse and often opposing emotions, as well as true collective forward-thinking and knowing. At the workshop, we endeavoured to expose silencing processes that are an attack on thinking, feeling and knowing. We were illuminated by Nimer Said's (2025) construct of the 'Gaza numbness syndrome', which he, a Palestinian Israeli citizen and member of the International Dialogue Initiative, published a few days previously. It painfully makes a lot of sense. According to Said, the scale of suffering in Gaza has become almost unspeakable, because language has been torn away or silenced. In his view, this 'syndrome' refers to a psychic state of collective dissociation, moral paralysis, and emotional shutdown in the face of unrelenting horror. And it spreads to institutions and entire societies, consciously or unconsciously, turning away from what must be known. This is the result of systematic silencing. In this way, numbness becomes a political project that manifests through the criminalisation of Palestinian voices, the reframing of facts as opinions and of historical grievances as controversial:

> 'Words like *occupation*, *apartheid*, *ethnic cleansing*, or even *Palestine* are stripped of legitimacy, turned into red flags in institutional policy, or eliminated altogether… An entire architecture is erected to prevent the global public from knowing and, more dangerously, from feeling. Emotional overload is weaponized. The endless flood of graphic images, dismembered children, collapsing buildings… slowly produces the opposite of empathy. It produces apathy. And then, into this vacuum, the machinery of denial sets in... The killing of journalists, the destruction of hospitals, the starving of children… all this becomes *alleged*, *unverified*, *regrettable*, but never named for what it really is: deliberate, unforgivable, criminal.' (Said, 2025)

At times, workshop participants experienced strong emotions that were really difficult to handle. But, in group-analytic terms, we managed to keep the communication going. And this was done *in* the group, and *by* the group, including its convenors. Silence did not have the final word.

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Interview

Psychoanalyst: Clinician and Citizen

David Bell interviewed by Deborah L.S. Wright

David Bell (DB) and Deborah Wright (DW) discuss themes in Bell's work including psychoanalytic theory and politics, psychoanalytic neutrality and his recent work on Gaza.

> **"I began university in 1968, a heady experience marking the beginning of my politicisation"**

DW What attracted you to specialising in psychiatry after your medical training and how, why and at what point did you get into psychoanalysis?

DB As a medical student, R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1965) made a long and lasting impression upon me. Laing discusses Kraepelin's rendering of a psychotic patient's language to illustrate the 'meaninglessness' of the patient's speech: 'he has not given a single piece of useful information' (p. 30). Laing showed that by changing perspective one could hear everything the patient said as both communicative and meaningful – in part it was a commentary by the patient of his experience of being displayed that opened a door for me. But I was so bitterly disappointed when I undertook a psychiatric placement as a medical student that I completed my medical training with great uncertainty as regards my future direction.

I began university in 1968, a heady experience marking the beginning of my politicisation. Soon after I completed my medical training, the colonial fascist government of Portugal fell [in 1974], resulting in independence for the Portuguese colonies. The resulting flight of Portuguese doctors, teachers and technicians created an urgent need for foreign nationals. Through friends who had been supporting the ruling party [in Mozambique] FRELIMO, during the armed anti-colonial struggle, I was recruited to work there and be part of the building of a socialist society. Working as a doctor in the countryside, I participated in the local struggles to build a 'people's health service'. It was here I first encountered directly the brutal nature of colonialism – its appalling legacy. It was an enormous privilege to participate in that moment of real human possibility.

DW Were you thinking about doing the psychiatry training then?

DB When I returned to the UK, I worked as locum in psychiatry and around that time applied to the Maudsley. However what I was taught in those early days made no psychological or epistemological sense to me; a peculiar physicalist understanding of psychiatry lacking any real interest in the subjectivity of the patient's experience, beyond its usefulness for diagnosis. But I was fortunate to befriend there a philosopher, Derek Bolton; we met for what I called my 'epistemological psychotherapy sessions'. Derek helped me hold on to my view that what I was being taught – for example that meanings of symptoms were not relevant –indeed was, philosophically, nonsense.

> **"I was very profoundly affected by Freud's deconstruction of 'so-called normality'"**

When working on the acute disturbed ward, I looked after a young woman patient who suffered from hysterical psychosis. We took her to be seen by Dr Murray Jackson, a psychoanalyst working in the psychotherapy department. Murray met with her for about one-and-a-half hours and during that meeting she became sane but filled with rage. As I took her back to the ward, she smashed a window screaming, 'I'm not going back there!' I assumed she meant the locked ward but, no, she meant to see Dr Jackson. That is, she had, at least at that moment, felt safer on the locked ward than being in touch with what was going on inside her. I was able to see her regularly and maintain some of the contact Murray had established.

This was a transformative moment. To borrow Bion's terminology, it was as if I had had a 'preconception' of what I wanted to do, how I wanted to think, but could not name it, formulate it. What I witnessed in that consultation was the 'realisation' of my 'preconception'. Now I recognised what it was I had been looking for. A year or so later I was accepted to work on Murray's ward, providing psychoanalytically-informed treatment to all the patients under our care.

Soon I started my own personal analysis.

DW When did you move towards the idea of training as an analyst?

DB There were by now many pathways to that decision, but fundamental was my own analysis. Then during my nine months' placement in the Maudsley psychotherapy department, I was enormously influenced by Michael Feldman, Murray Jackson, and Leslie Sohn.

It had now become clear to me what I wanted to do and so I started my training at the British Psychoanalytical Society (BPAS); shortly after starting, I was appointed to the four-year senior registrar post in the Maudsley Psychotherapy Department.

Looking back, it all looks rather linear, but it did not seem like that at the time. But one thing was clear from the beginning: my interest in psychiatry centred upon my interest in human subjectivity, its depth and complexity. I was very profoundly affected by Freud's deconstruction of 'so-called normality', his capacity to show us we are both much madder and saner than we realise, that our patients belong to the same human world of experience as the rest of us.

Looking back at the very early days in psychiatry I recall an important lesson that stayed with me. Joan, a very angry woman in her forties, felt like a slave to her husband, and filled sessions with complaints about the misery of her life with him. I was naïve and sympathetic to her – seeing myself as politically feminist – and so I somewhat unwittingly sided with her against her husband. She left him but, far from being liberated, she broke down. Now, in her sessions she talked of her love for her husband; when ironing his shirts, she had been filled with tenderness and love, thought of him wearing them during the day. Of course, it was more complicated, but this was an aspect I had not allowed myself to see, at some real cost to my patient. I learnt here the importance of the analyst's neutrality, the fundamental commitment to exploring the patient's world in all its contradictions and complexity.

That reminds me of a lighter moment, when I was at the Maudsley. Annie, an angry socialist feminist, treated me as 'a contemptible bourgeois' – a rather painful experience! It was during the time of the miners' strike. I had a badge on my case that said 'Coal Not Dole' but was always careful to ensure it was not visible. One

Interview

day I 'unwittingly' left my bag positioned so that she could see the badge. She looked at it, was silent for a moment and then remarked with a smile, 'Well that's not going to get you off I'm afraid,' a comment that was both humorous and insightful.

> **"The relation of an ideology – religious or otherwise – to a society has a symmetry with the relation of a symptom to a person"**

Another lesson from the same period: I could sense the generalised fear of collapse in a last group session before a long break. I said, 'I think there is a fantasy of the group's disintegration over the break'. One of the members, a burly man in his forties fixed me with staring eyes and said, with some passion, 'It may be a fantasy to you doc, but it's f****** reality to me'. I would not use the term 'phantasy' in that way again.

The end of my senior registrarship coincided with my qualification as a psychoanalyst and my appointment as a Consultant at the Cassel Hospital where I remained for seven years. I enjoyed that enormously.

DW Can you tell me what led you to set up the Fitzjohn's Unit, the specialist service for the most complex and severe adult cases referred to the Tavistock?

DB My time working with Murray Jackson kindled my interest in working with severely disturbed patients and that of course continued at the Cassel. So, when I moved to the Tavistock in 1995, I was determined to keep this work alive in this new setting – and that became the Fitzjohn's service. Patients were seen twice a week for two years and afterwards could go on to a group for a number of years. I ensured that the psychotherapists were all qualified, very experienced clinicians. I retired from the Tavistock in 2021 but am pleased to say that service continues doing very well. The service received the BPC's Innovative Excellence award in 2024.

The other thing to say is when I was working for Murray, I took on a schizophrenic patient. I don't know how much I helped him, but I learned a lot and this among other things led me to develop my epistemological interests. It had become clear to me that at a kind of 'meta level' there were profound congruences in terms of mode/forms of thought between Marx and Freud. I have in mind, for example, the principles of genetic and historical continuity: a breakdown in the individual or society appears as a new event, but closer inspection discloses what was long imminent, but hidden. Economic crises may appear out of the blue but, again, make manifest deep structures, fundamental conflicts and contradictions normally more hidden. The relation of an ideology – religious or otherwise – to a society has a symmetry with the relation of a symptom to a person. Both Marx and Freud recognised how the fetishization of objects lends them magical powers. John Strachey, in his introduction to Osborn's *Freud and Marx* (1937), likens Freud to Moliere's M. Jourdain, who learns that without realising it, he had been speaking prose all his life. Freud, in Strachey's analogy, talked dialectics without ever using the term.

DW There are a lot of themes concerning *belonging* in your work. In your paper 'Primitive Mind of State' (1996), you write about long stay hospitals, the myth of 'care in the community', and discuss the meaning of the word 'asylum'. I remember working with patients in the mid 1990s who had been placed in the community and missed the institution terribly. In 'First Do No Harm' (2020), you write about adolescents not being at home in their bodies.

DB It is a bit much to expect an adolescent to be at home in their body – but it is especially difficult for girls.

DW Why do you think it is especially difficult for girls?

DB There are many factors , but the increasing misogyny in our culture, in conjunction with more individual factors, supports the internalisation of a hatred of femininity, which then expresses itself as hatred of their female sexual body.

DW I know you recently came to the end of your term as Chair of the Applied Section of the BPAS.

DB I have been involved in interdisciplinary studies all my professional life and this role was extremely enjoyable to me. I might say however that I think 'applied' is really not the right term. We do not 'apply' psychoanalysis to a cultural object, it is more that we engage in an interdisciplinary conversation that centres on that object.

> **"it is remarkable how the events in Gaza are misconstrued as if taking their origin from the Hamas attack, scotomising the long history that precedes it"**

My engagement with Marx and politics has helped me enormously when confronted with terrible harms being carried out in the service of ideologies, particularly my involvement in exposing the irreversible harm done to children by so-called 'gender affirming' care. More recently I and colleagues have been trying to overcome what we see as kind of silencing in relation to events in Gaza/Israel/Palestine. We noticed how our organisations were quick to make public comments about Ukraine, Black Lives Matter, the Hamas attack, but have been remarkably silent about Palestinians. My own personal break with Zionism extends back to 1967. That war, followed by the occupation which illegally continues, was a turning point for many Jews of my generation.

I have been part of a group, Psychoanalytic Voices for Palestine, seeking to provide a context where we can talk and raise awareness. In line with what I said earlier about historical continuity, it is remarkable how the events in Gaza are misconstrued as if taking their origin from the Hamas attack, scotomising the long history that precedes it. Discussion within our organisations has been very difficult, particularly because of the wilful conflation of opposition to the actions of the Israeli state, with antisemitism. I have also discussed what I see as a misuse of the concept of analytic neutrality: this refers to the clinical situation which is quite distinct from the psychoanalyst's responsibilities as a citizen. The call for the analyst to be neutral in the face of this genocide is the call for him to be a bystander – this constitutes, in my view, a perverse misuse of the concept of analytic neutrality. In my paper, 'Some Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Events in Gaza' (2024), I suggest that the language used to describe Israeli military campaigns, 'Mowing the Grass' and 'Operation Home and Garden', suggest a combination of the fantasy of pleasurable domesticity, whilst expressing, at one and the same time, sadistic pleasure in its reality – mowing down human beings.

Note: Any clinical material has been heavily disguised in order to preserve complete anonymity of patients.

Dr David Bell is a psychoanalyst and former President of the British Psychoanalytical Society. He is a member of Psychoanalytic Voices for Palestine (https://ukpalmhn.com).

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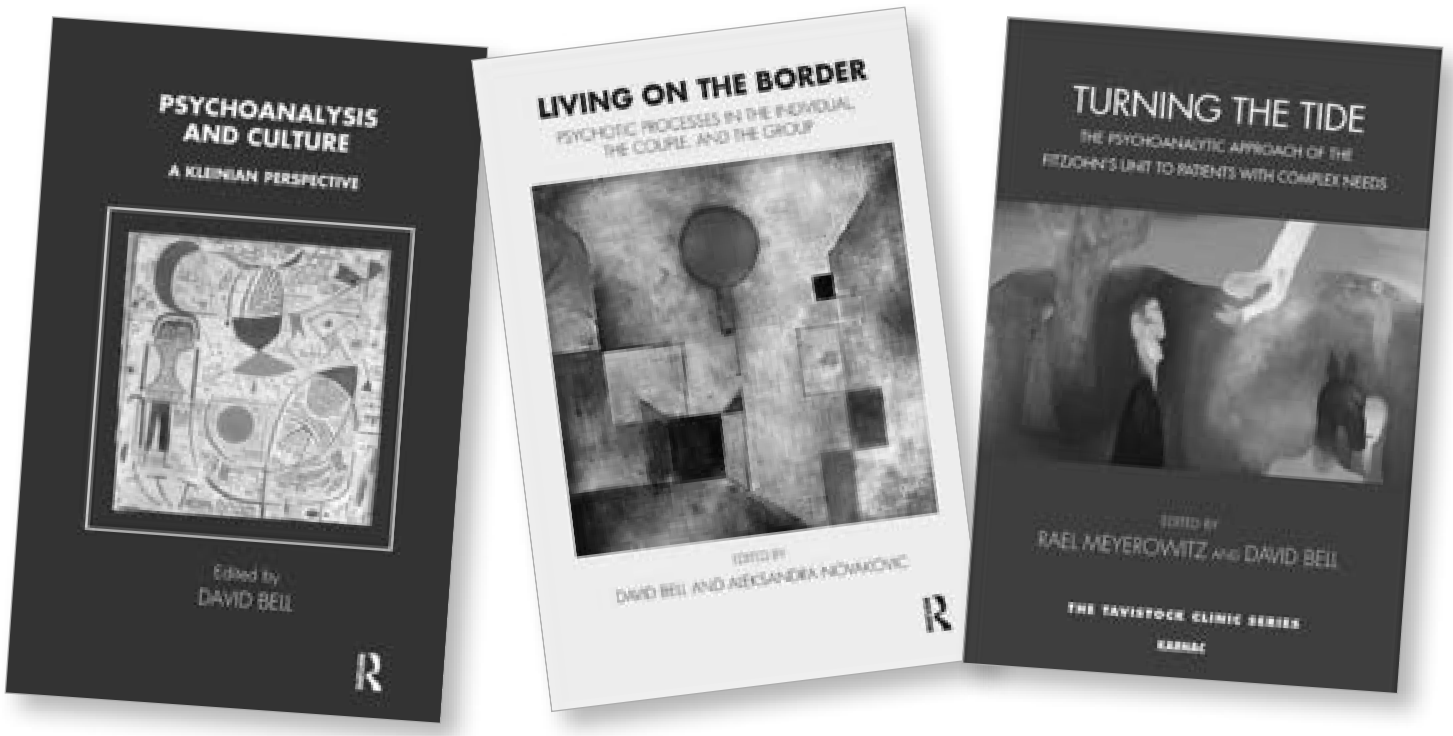
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Review

The Mirror and The Light: Fantasies of Mark Rylance as Thomas Cromwell, the Good Enough Advisor

Candida Yates and Siobhan Lennon-Patience

In Peter Kominsky's acclaimed BBC television series *Wolf Hall* (2015) and *The Mirror and the Light* (2024), Mark Rylance's highly compelling performance as Thomas Cromwell shows him to be a stabilising and containing presence for the often unpredictable and tyrannical Henry VIII, evoking, perhaps, the role of political advisors who must navigate the whims of authoritarian leaders. Adapted from Hilary Mantel's sympathetic reading of Cromwell in her *Wolf Hall* novels (2009, 2012, 2020), Cromwell is depicted less as the ruthless consigliere, known for torturing his enemies, destroying monasteries and despatching Anne Boleyn at the block before breakfast. Rather, what we mostly see through Rylance's subtle, softly spoken interpretation, is an emotionally intelligent court advisor on the side of social justice. We watch him deploying empathic listening skills when conversing with the King or advising anxious queens, princesses and courtiers trying to keep their heads when navigating the Machiavellian machinations of the Tudor court.

> **"In an age of unpredictable and authoritarian 'strongman' leaders, the fantasy of the wise advisor, who can guide and temper the behaviour of such men is attractive"**

A recurring image emerges of Rylance as Cromwell when he interacts with Henry VIII, formidably portrayed by Damian Lewis. Henry's moods, which can turn on a sixpence, rapidly shifting from charming to murderous, are met by Cromwell with the stillness and focused presence of a therapist. In these encounters, he gives Henry his complete attention, offering reassurance and emotional containment while remaining watchful, strategically anticipating Henry's next move. This approach and style of interaction not only highlights for us the tensions and power dynamics of their relationship. Cromwell's astuteness in managing the King's increasingly paranoid behaviour also showcases Rylance's immersive acting style. As is well documented, his method is inherently relational and collaborative, characterised by real-time listening and responding to his fellow actors, which deepens the authenticity and emotional resonance of his performance for audiences. Of his work, Rylance says: 'I didn't just want to be an effective actor… I'm trying to bring into the room something unconscious' (Marsh, 2022).

The viewer's identification with Rylance's Cromwell is made easier because the narrative and, in this context, the camera are positioned from his point of view, conveying for us a sense of his inner world. Furthermore, his impassive facial expressions facilitate the projection of our own wishes, thoughts and feelings onto him as an object of fantasy. When discussing her method as an historical novelist, Mantel emphasised that she did not want to pretend that her characters are just 'like us' (Shulevitz, 2020). However, when seeking to understand the contemporary attraction of historical dramas such as *The Mirror and The Light*, one can say that they also tell us something about ourselves, holding up a mirror to reflect the mood of a society and its structures of feeling at any one time.

As an object of culture and mind, what does Rylance as Cromwell represent unconsciously? When drawn to writing this piece, we reflected on our own transferences in relation to Rylance's Cromwell. Although we see him tasked with doing the bidding of a violent and fickle king, Rylance conveys for us a sense that he wrestles with his conscience, that he feels emotion at a deep level, serving as protector against the more tyrannical aspects of a narcissistic leader in the manner of the good father protector in a dangerous world. The theme of good and bad fathers is a recurring one throughout the series. He is shown to act as a benign paternal figure to several young women including Princess Mary and his newly discovered daughter, as well as protecting his own son and the young men he takes into his household. Cromwell humours the king by nodding impassively when he patronisingly describes him as 'the son of an honest blacksmith', whereas we know that in fact Cromwell's father was a dishonest and violent bully. Cromwell seems more himself when talking to the ghost of Cardinal Wolsey who represents a reassuring part of his inner world, a benign father figure in contrast to his own.

Socially and politically, there are parallels with the contemporary world. In an age of unpredictable and authoritarian 'strongman' leaders, the fantasy of the wise advisor, who can guide and temper the behaviour of such men is attractive. Since Cromwell, there has been a long history of male political advisors who are not always viewed as benign and containing. Recently in the UK, there are those such as Alastair Campbell, Dominic Cummings, and Morgan McSweeney, who, despite not holding public office as politicians, attract fascination and criticism as powerful figures who have been central in shaping political events and discourse. The malign influence of an amoral advisor was shown in the film *The Apprentice* (Ali Abbasi, 2024), where we see a young Donald Trump influenced by the unscrupulous lawyer and mentor Roy Cohn, who encourages him to deploy tactics such as lying counterattacks and a refusal to apologise. Donald Trump's advisor Steve Bannon recommended 'flooding the zone', a tactic used to overwhelm opponents and the media with constant chaos and confusion. This style of political manoeuvring disorients the opposition and contributes to feelings of anxiety more widely.

Is there such a thing as a good enough advisor and what might they look like? Set against the backdrop of our own complex and hostile world, one can see the appeal of Rylance's performance as a reassuring and containing figure. His portrayal suggests an ability to moderate the behaviour of a capricious King, making him less dangerous.

For historians, Cromwell's legacy continues to be contested. Rylance's nuanced performance as Cromwell addresses those ambivalences past and present on our behalf, drawing on his own therapeutic sensibility to bring what he sees as 'more acceptance of the darkness' (Marsh, 2022) that accompanies the light.

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Review

‘We need a boy who looks like this’: Reflections on *Freud’s Last Session*

Katja Heyer

‘We need a boy who looks like this. Do you fit the bill?’ The email from my son’s drama school caught my attention. It displayed a black and white picture of a young boy half smiling, looking slightly sideways into the camera, and I thought, ‘That actually looks a bit like him’. The next few lines really caught my attention: ‘We are casting for a Dublin based boy for a feature film entitled *Freud’s Last Session*.’ As a child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapist, I was intrigued and thought we should give this one a go. The drama school sometimes sent through casting calls, but until that moment we never paid much attention to them – I think because Lukas was nine years old and we had mixed feelings about him stepping into the public domain at such a young age. We had no idea that a few months later he would be playing the role of ‘Freud age 6’. The photo was of a young Anthony Hopkins who would play Sigmund Freud.

> **“We see a reality and a reality that is being denied”**

The day before filming began, we made a detour to a cast and crew Covid test centre on our way to school. When Lukas arrived at school afterwards his friends asked him why he was late and didn’t believe him when he said: ‘I had to do a Covid test, so I don’t kill Anthony Hopkins.’ For his friends, the reality of what was happening was too enormous to fully comprehend. When reality threatens to overwhelm the ego’s capacity to cope, it is often denied.

The movie is directed by Matthew Brown, based on a play by Mark St. Germain, and centres around a fictional conversation between C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud as the Second World War unfolds outside. C.S. Lewis appears to have written to Freud, perhaps to apologise for satirising him in his book *The Pilgrim’s Regress* where he says he describes Freud as ‘bombastic, vain, ignorant’ and states that, ‘I can’t apologise for challenging your world view when it completely negates my own.’ It is unclear why Freud invited Lewis to his home as he claims to have never read the book. Freud is at the end of his life dying from very painful cancer of the mouth, but still he smokes. We see a reality and a reality that is being denied. The threat of war and death overshadows the conversation as the two men debate the existence of God. We learn that, while they debate, children are dying.

> **“As I watched the movie, I began to feel as if I was in a therapy session”**

As I watched the movie, I began to feel as if I was in a therapy session where the client engages in an intellectual debate to defend against the intrusion of thoughts and feelings that are too enormous, too dangerous, too painful and threaten to overwhelm. As the debate unfolded, I was at times left feeling ill equipped, not good enough or intelligent enough to follow it. However, the flashbacks and subplot which appear to interrupt the main debate grabbed my attention. Here we see the vulnerabilities of both men exposed, and at times it becomes unclear who the patient is. They are moving between different worlds: the past and present, the conscious and unconscious, internal and external realities. We see the impact of the First World War on Lewis who fought and lost a close friend in the conflict. We see how these memories intrude into his current life, disrupting his sense of going on being. We also get a sense of the impact losing his mother at a young age and being sent to boarding school had on him. We see Freud being transported in memory back to a happier time when he received the renowned Goethe Medal, as well as unhappier times from his childhood growing up as a young Jewish boy and later as a father trying to protect his daughter from the Nazi regime. We also see glimpses of Freud’s struggle in accepting his eldest daughter’s death and the loss of his grandchild along with his difficulties in his relationship with Anna. There is a sense that the intellectual relationship he has with Anna is valued above all else, and he denies her intimate relationship with Dorothy Burlingham.

When the movie was released, many critics expressed dissatisfaction that it somehow did not offer something that was hoped for. They complained that the flashbacks and memories were an intrusion, a distraction from the central debate. I, however, experienced these ‘intrusions’ as helpful insights into what appeared to be happening between both men. They felt like glimpses into the unconscious, or snapshots offering another way of seeing things. My own feelings of inadequacy perhaps mirrored the deep inadequacies both Freud and Lewis are trying to deny and that were instead projected onto me, the viewer/therapist. The critical response suggests that feelings and memories may be experienced as unwelcome intrusions, similarly to how clients might experience such feelings and may use their intellect to defend against them. I was left thinking that my own interest in this aspect of the movie was perhaps particular to me because of my personal connection to it. Later I began to think that it was perhaps particular to psychotherapists who understand that we can never arrive at the truth of the human condition using our intellect alone. Clients who come to therapy thinking that somehow their therapist will give them the knowledge that will take away the pain of their suffering will be left feeling equally disappointed. In the movie we are invited into Freud’s den, and we are invited to dream. It is only if we can allow ourselves to dream and play that we can perhaps come to experience a new reality and find a different way of doing things.

> **“In the movie we are invited into Freud’s den, and we are invited to dream”**

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