



Under Siege: Political Activism and Psychoanalysis

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Many observers today believe that American psychoanalysis is in crisis, and that the future of the profession is hanging in the balance.¹ Recent debates in both the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsA) and the American Psychological Association (APA) testify to the character and intensity of that crisis, and if J. Oliver Conroy's June 2023 account in *The Guardian*, "Inside the war tearing psychoanalysis apart," is any indication, awareness of that crisis is now reaching mainstream media. Conroy does not fully grasp the issues at stake, but acknowledges that some observers believe that psychoanalysis will survive as a therapeutic practice, even if the APsA may not survive as a viable organization. Others, however, believe the talking cure itself is in danger, that it is being irreparably politicized. In the APsA, an acrimonious debate in the Association's Board meetings and on its listserv over the leadership's decision to remove a George Washington University psychologist from the APsA's June 2023 annual meeting led to the April 2023 resignation of its President, Kerry Sulkowicz. We will return to that matter below, after putting these developments in a broader historical context.

There are several dimensions to the current crisis; more, indeed, than we can do justice to here. Nevertheless, there are several issues that cannot be ignored. To begin with, let's recall that from its inception, psychoanalysis sought to increase the individual's self-knowledge and capacity for rational choice, operating on the assumption that these would help free the patient from morbid fears, inhibitions, obsessions and compulsions, from baffling psychogenic symptoms and from character traits rooted in arrested development. Insights from the analytic work were then applied to ameliorating persistent problems in the patient's interpersonal relationships. Let's call this the traditional model.

By contrast with the traditional model, Critical Social Justice Theory (CSJT) is a much more recent approach which insists that the patient's psychological growth depends chiefly on their acquiring insight into their "positionality" vis a vis oppressed racial and sexual minorities, and the (White, male, heteronormative, cisgender) privileged social groups that oppress them. Once acquired, the insight they presumably gain into the structures of oppression that prevent them from thriving supposedly enables patients to overcome their sense of powerlessness and passivity and become active agents of social change. So instead of exploring family history and the lingering reverberations of early childhood experience or adolescent identity struggles on adult development, CSJT-oriented analysts tend to locate the source of patients' suffering chiefly in "systemic" social and political trends.

But what exactly is Critical Social Justice Theory? According to most observers, it is an approach that evolved gradually from the Liberation Psychology of Ignacio Martín-Baró, but which became intricately intertwined theories with ideas and positions derived from

¹ Thanks to Kerry Sulkowicz for several conversations about the developing crisis in the American Psychoanalytic Association.

Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) and decolonialization movements. While all these movements originated in the late 20th century, they only coalesced in their present form in the 21st century, transforming university curricula in various domains and disciplines.²

Meanwhile, in fairness to traditional psychoanalysis, it is important to note that Left leaning theorists have always acknowledged the importance of overarching social, economic and political trends in shaping their patients vocational and interpersonal worlds. In the early 20th century, Otto Gross, Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm were all sharply critical of capitalism, “the patriarchal-authoritarian character” and the ways in which these thwarted the struggle for democracy, for racial equality, sexual freedom and women’s rights. But the more overtly political they became, the more theorists like these tended to become outliers, with the result that many were expelled from Freud’s inner circle and the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA). Gross, an anarchist, was expelled from Freud’s inner circle in 1911. Reich, a renegade communist, was expelled from the IPA in 1933. Fromm, a Marxist humanist was expelled from the IPA in 1954.³ No doubt they were expelled because the leadership of the IPA shared Freud’s hostility to communism and anarchism and abhorred the politicization of the psychoanalytic profession. Beyond that, to be sure, they also wanted to cultivate an appearance of bourgeois respectability to ensure that wealthy and middle-class patients would continue flock to their clinics.

That said, despite their expulsions, Reich and Fromm developed loyal followings of their own, and continue to exert a powerful (if seldom acknowledged) influence on psychoanalytic social and political psychology. And they were only two of the better-known theorists in the 20th century who sought to integrate psychoanalysis and “socioanalysis”. In a similar vein, Karen Horney called attention to the cultural underpinnings of Freud’s patriarchal views on female development and moved psychoanalysis in a more feminist direction. Though not a trained psychoanalyst, Franz Fanon was a Marxist psychiatrist who was versed in psychoanalytic theory, and the first to experiment with “socio-therapy” for the victims of racist and colonial violence. And there were many other, lesser-known figures operating on the margins of the profession who sought to bring psychoanalysis to ordinary, working-class people and to members of oppressed minorities during the 20th century.

² A common problem that plagues many discussions of CSJT is the tendency to conflate and confuse Critical Social Justice Theory with Critical Theory per se; a striking misconception shared by adherents and critics alike. Unlike Critical Theory, which draws on the legacies of Kant, Hegel, Marx and Freud, Critical Social Justice Theory is more deeply influenced by postmodernism, a philosophical orientation that Critical Theorists in the Frankfurt School lineage are extremely critical of. Moreover, Critical Theorists do not share the tendency toward the passive acceptance or tacit approval of Islamist militias and regimes that is now prevalent on the postmodern Left. For further discussion of this point see Daniel Burston’s paper “Critical Theory, Left Wing Authoritarianism and Anti-Semitism” in *Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis: From the Frankfurt School to Contemporary Critique*, edited by Jon Mills and Daniel Burston.

³ For an account of Reich’s expulsion from the IPA, see Wilhelm Reich’s posthumous published interviews with Kurt Eisler in *Reich Speaks of Freud*, translated by Therese Pol, Penguin: Harmondsworth, UK, 1975. For an account of Fromm’s expulsion see Paul Roazen’s paper “The Exclusion of Erich Fromm from the IPA”, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, vol. 37 pp.5-42, 2001.

By now, most clinical training programs recognize the importance of social forces in patients' lives and incorporate instruction on how to recognize their effects into the curriculum. Moreover, for the last twenty years there has been basic recognition that practitioners should be aware of their own biases or assumptions regarding race, gender, and ethnicity. Even though individual clinicians may fail to meet that challenge, the American Psychological Association's *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists* (2003) have promoted it. The 2017 edition became notably more insistent, invoking "systems of power, privilege, oppression, social dictates, constraints, values, and negative perceptions of marginalized societies", urging that psychologists understand them. At that point, we were edging closer to a definitive mandate about how therapy should be informed by a more politically charged set of principles. And we could perhaps see the outlines of contemporary CSJT on the horizon.

However, the remarkable thing about this moment in history is that the number of CSJT-oriented clinicians has now reached a critical mass and, as a result, they are mobilizing to completely "flip the script" on adherents to the traditional model. Instead of marginalizing radicals and activists, as was formerly the case, the new trend in psychoanalysis is to normalize and empower them, and to marginalize and sometimes vilify analysts or therapists who still adhere to versions of the more traditional models and methods of treatment. Needless to say, Freud himself would never have approved this new direction, as his efforts to expel Gross and Reich from the psychoanalytic milieu and his polemics against Marxism made abundantly clear. But that fact alone should not deter psychoanalysts from changing course, if circumstances warrant. And let's be frank. Whatever else we can say about it, traditional psychoanalysis has long had a diversity problem. Granted, broad recruitment strategies have been increasing for some time now, beginning decades ago with recruitment of women and gay people to most psychoanalytic training programs. A wide range of liberal faculty, not just those committed to CSJT, contributed to that recruitment work, but more needs to be done, because the recruitment and training of Black candidates still lags far behind. But this state of affairs, while unfortunate, does not require us to condemn the psychoanalytic profession as a whole as a vehicle for White Supremacy.

Unfortunately, however, there is now considerable conflict within psychoanalytic and psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy institutes and training programs, which are witnessing increasingly sharp and frequent internal conflicts over the rules, roles and protocols that govern clinical training and organizational structure within their credentialing bodies. While these conflicts are usually addressed at the manifest level, if one peers beneath the surface, these organizational upheavals often have the hallmarks of intergenerational conflicts erupting to the surface, and a deepening "confusion of tongues" provoked by changing definitions of terms like racism and White supremacy, sex and gender, and so on. And while these generational sources of conflict are sometimes acknowledged in passing, they seldom get the sustained scrutiny that they deserve in the heat of the moment.

Moreover, and more importantly, these intense and acrimonious exchanges are fueled by the disparate perspectives that CSJT-oriented and more traditional analysts and therapists bring to bear on the sources of acute and chronic interpersonal conflict. Put simply, by virtue of their training and education, more traditional analysts are apt to interpret intense,

prolonged and seemingly intractable interpersonal conflicts – including those that occur between analysts and their patients, analysts and trainees, and analysts of different ethnic backgrounds – in terms of transference and counter-transference, unmet childhood needs, unresolved conflicts stemming from the Oedipal period (and before) and secondary gain of one sort and another. In short, they seek to render interpersonal conflicts intelligible in light of the developmental histories of those concerned. By contrast, CSJT oriented analysts and therapists construe most conflictual situations or relationships in group settings – including those between training analysts and analysands, therapists and patients, and between older and younger analysts - as the micro-social replication of patterns of systemic racism and unequal power relations that favor the more powerful (or senior) analysts, who are often White, and which they prefer to repress or disavow. The clash of interpretations that arises in situations like these are reflected in Kerry Sulkowicz’s unusually blunt appraisal of the developments that preceded his recent resignation as President of the American Psychoanalytic Association. He wrote:

“Most APsA members are generally progressive politically, including myself. I don’t think we have many on the political far right. But what I would describe as the illiberal, extreme left in APsA has gotten a grip on the Association and asserted its exclusive occupancy of the moral high ground, despite representing a relatively small portion of our membership. I worry about the impact this faction is already having, far beyond leaving me with no viable choice but to step down from this role. They exert a chilling effect not only on conversation, but on thinking, with reflexive accusations of unconscious or systemic bias at the first hint of questioning or criticism. And they have needed to find a scapegoat, ideally a white male representing authority and privilege, someone to bring down, as a symbol of their aims. These members seem to want to transform APsA from a professional organization into a primarily political activist organization. All of this seems antithetical to the mission of APsA and to core psychoanalytic values of listening, understanding and abstaining from moral judgment.”

Needless to say, Sulkowicz’s appraisal of the circumstances leading to his resignation was hotly contested by many members of the APsA. Whose appraisal was right? That depends on your point of view. After all, let’s be honest. Race-related interpersonal conflicts are quite prevalent in our society. They occur in families, the workplace, the schoolyard, the neighborhood, NGOs, political and religious organizations, and the sports and entertainment worlds. Psychologists often help patients deal with race-based interpersonal conflicts, and racism has been a deciding factor in American life for hundreds of years, where structural racism remains widespread. When patients encounter racially based problems in their daily lives it is necessary to contextualize them in an understanding of structural and unconscious racism. But it is far less useful to impose that social model on problematic interactions among colleagues, especially when it damages collegiality and robs those accused of racism of the benefit of the doubt.

Besides, when all is said and done, race is *not* the primary, let alone the sole determining factor in all conflicted social relationships or interactions. Many other factors may come into play. That being so, we need to acknowledge that both the traditional and the CSJT hermeneutic paradigms for rendering internecine conflict intelligible have considerable strengths and weaknesses. Applied judiciously, the traditional psychoanalytic approach can

shed considerable light on the protagonists' "inner" worlds, and the unconscious motives and fantasies that inform and accompany some of the accusations and complaints directed at the 'elders' in psychoanalytic organizations. Applied carelessly, however, it can also be used by these same elders to trivialize or dismiss genuine problems, grievances and concerns of the members. Conversely, the newer CSJT-oriented paradigm obligates people to think about their relationships to their social, political and economic environments and how these distort human subjectivity and human relationships. But because of its focus on the present day and the "outer" world, CSJT can also ignore, overlook or minimize the "inner" or intrapsychic dimension that often accompanies conflicts like these. Indeed, the crisis of psychoanalysis is attributable in part to the fact that each side is alert to the downside of the other party's explanatory models and biases, but often oblivious or defensive regarding the drawbacks of their own.

The recent more aggressive commitment to CSJT as an imperative cause can also have troubling consequences for therapy itself. While CSJT therapists can be expected to show sympathy for patients' experiences, history, and self-identified problems, they can encourage—or even impose—broad social explanations for these matters that leave patients with few options for truly differentiated self-understanding and even fewer options for changing their circumstances. In the course of treatment, analysts normally keep their initial thoughts and impressions about the sources of their patients' misery and confusion in check, treating them as hypotheses to be tested through a process of patient and deepening collaborative inquiry. A successful therapeutic alliance requires that the therapist be empathic, and therefore open to understanding the client's world as the patient or client understands it. There is an appreciation of how each individual patient's history develops through a complex set of interactions with the family and social milieu. But a therapist who sees primarily in CSJT terms may find this model difficult or impossible to honor and seek instead to impose an oppressor/oppressed binary filter on his or her perceptions, rendering nuances and the patient's unique perspective on the world invisible or irrelevant. As Cambridge, Massachusetts, psychiatrist Henry J. Friedman wrote on the APsA listserve, "The APsA has stood for a psychoanalysis that liberates patients from the prison of their unconscious conflicts and provides relief through insight and the power of the analytic relationship." What the CSJT advocates "seem to deplore," he explains, "is a psychoanalysis that is patient centered, that works with patients to discover the sources of their unnecessary emotionally conflicted basis for suffering."

Nevertheless, prompted by growing unrest among its members, the APsA Board attempted to defuse a potentially explosive conflict (that culminated in Sulkowicz's resignation) by affirming the validity of *both* these hermeneutic paradigms simultaneously. In a letter to the membership dated March 27, 2023, the Board wrote that "the intrapsychic and the social context are inseparable and contained within every clinical interaction, whether consciously addressed or unconsciously enacted. We, as psychoanalysts, further acknowledge that racialized enactments are ubiquitous and unavoidable and cause pain. As psychoanalysts we hold the stance that working through and the work of repair are necessary when they occur to make it possible to find a way forward," and asked that members vote to affirm the principle.

Granted, analysts may address their patients, trainees or colleagues in ways that are colored by unconscious racial biases, and these problematic exchanges need to be addressed when they occur. But though both approaches are valid, perhaps, adding that the two hermeneutic models are “inseparable” and contained “in every clinical interaction” seems somewhat contrived, and risks oversimplifying or glossing over some potentially serious problems. Why? Because in the present climate, when a patient, trainee or colleague alleges that their analyst or colleague is manifesting unconscious racial bias, the accuser’s personal grievances, developmental issues, and the role that secondary gain may play in producing these aggrieved feelings often recede into the background. Similarly, the emphasis on the “ubiquity” of these problems will likely create – indeed, is already creating - a climate where there are a good many “false positives”, i.e. situations where the motives and utterances of analysts accused of racist bias have been misconstrued, but where they nevertheless capitulate to their accusers’ claims for fear of being shamed or discredited by their peers for not taking the work of anti-racism seriously. The result? The analyst’s acknowledgement of unconscious complicity in racist ideology will lack authenticity, and the dynamics that shape the accuser’s “lived experience” of the analyst beneath the level of consciousness go largely or completely unaddressed; an outcome which derails the analytic work, as traditionally conceived. If this state of affairs persists for long, many competent and gifted clinicians are likely to withdraw from psychoanalytic organizations and will be tempted to abandon the profession altogether.

Meanwhile, no doubt, critics will object that prior to the advent of CSJT, there were an equal or perhaps greater number of “false negatives”; instances where racist bias among analysts remained invisible or rationalized through the traditional model as the result of something else. And they would be right to do so, of course. A lily-white professional body cannot be trusted to address these problems satisfactorily. The pertinent question at this point is: Are the replacement of numerous false negatives with a plethora of false positives a solution for (or somehow preferable to) the status quo ante?

Opinions will vary on this point, of course, but we suggest that a rising tide of false positives is *not* a genuine solution to the problems posed by the earlier excess of false negatives; at least not in the long run. Indeed, one can’t dispel the suspicion that this new trend attests to excessive zeal or a hasty and oversimplified approach on the part of many who are most invested in bringing unconscious racial bias to light. Could a wave of false positives nevertheless be preferable somehow to the previous predominance of false negatives, as many analysts today would likely maintain? We remain skeptical. But arguably, this remains to be seen, and depends on how long this trend persists, and whether there is a sufficient number of seasoned clinicians remaining with the courage to address this problem. Meanwhile, however, many CSJT advocates refuse to consider these risks or even to discuss them constructively with colleagues. The field cannot evolve productively without genuine dialogue and debate, but CSJT advocates too often adopt militant demands for compliance from other therapists. This pattern of group coercion has spread widely in the mental health professions. Vigorous and sometimes vehement proponents of politicized therapy now dominate many association listserves, while their critics (and potential targets) keep their heads down.

Thus far we've surmised that the traditional model has a very flawed record on issues of diversity, but that the new CSJT paradigm, which started gaining traction in 2017 and escalated in 2020, is problematic in ways seldom evident to those who adhere to it, and which thus far, at any rate, are largely unaddressed. In the meantime, traditional analysts fear that the adoption of a CSJT perspective will lead to the loss of many valuable insights into patients' unique developmental pathways and the intrapsychic sources of interpersonal conflict, and the best way to address them therapeutically. Their fears on this score can be quite justified, because in the absence of a really viable synthesis or integration between the older hermeneutics of suspicion and the newer one – the APsA Board notwithstanding - the new paradigm, which is currently in the ascendent, may sweep the old one away altogether, or encourage its adherents to merely pay lip service to the older one for the sake of appearances. The potential drawbacks to the CSJT approach are reflected in the impact of one of a newly famous and controversial representative of this trend who has become a public figure, namely, Dr. Lara Sheehi.

Lara Sheehi is the 2023 President of Division 39 of The American Psychological Association, and since 2016, has been an assistant professor of Psychology at George Washington University in Washington, DC, where she graduated with a doctorate in Psychology in 2010. Her husband Stephen Sheehi is the Sultan Qaboos bin Said Chair of Middle Eastern Studies at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia. The Sheehis coauthored *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* (2022) and have recently appeared together on several online interviews (now available on YouTube) to publicize their book. Since then, Lara Sheehi rose to national prominence when StandWithUs, an NGO that combats antisemitism, filed a Title VI complaint with the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of the Department of Education (DOE) on behalf of several of her Jewish students in January 2023, claiming she had bullied, belittled, and marginalized Jewish graduate students in the required diversity course she taught there in the Fall semester of 2022, and that GWU had failed to address the students' complaints appropriately.⁴ Sheehi retaliated by filing charges of racism against the students. GWU dismissed the charges against Sheehi and pursued those against the students, who were subjected to a Kafkaesque "reconciliation" process that required them to submit detailed confessions admitting their conduct was unacceptable. Unless they confessed, apologized and suggested pathways to self-improvement, their certification as clinicians would be in jeopardy. Yet they never received either satisfactory due process or a professionally credible account of their supposed deficiencies. Faced with summary judgment and a threat to their careers, they sought assistance from StandWithUs (SWU). When the DOE complaint became public, Sheehi quickly declared that her conduct with the class was exemplary, denied that any of her public

⁴ For a substantial analysis of the Sheehi case, including a detailed review of her social media activity and her publications, see Cary Nelson's "Joyous Rage: Antisemitic Anti-Zionism, Advocacy Academia and Jewish Students' Nightmares at GWU."

comments were antisemitic, and insisted that she was being “silenced” for one reason only, because she is a queer Arab woman of color.⁵

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) immediately leapt to Dr. Sheehi’s defense, supporting her accusations of anti-Arab racism against SWU, protesting angrily when GWU hired Crowell & Moring, a large international law firm, headquartered in Washington, DC, to launch an “independent inquiry” into the matter. They needn’t have worried! Crowell & Moring, who routinely protect their clients’ interests, exonerated George Washington University and Lara Sheehi, saying that there was no evidence of antisemitic bias or improper classroom conduct in this case.⁶ Thus far, George Washington University has refused to release Crowell & Moring’s report to the public, although on March 27, 2023, the President of GWU at the time, Mark Wrighton, released a summary of the law firm’s “findings” that is riddled with factual errors and deliberate obfuscation.⁷ Sadly, it is not clear whether or to what extent these flaws reflect problems with the original report, or with Mark Wrighton’s interpretation of it. Either way, the university’s unwillingness to share the full report with the public is cause for concern.

Meanwhile, on March 16, the ADC’s Executive Director sent Sulkowicz and the APsA’s president-elect Daniel Prezant a letter demanding that the Association’s nearly 3,000 members be directed to retain all documents and communications “in any manner” related to Lara Sheehi. The leadership did not reply to the letter, though they did share it with their

⁵ See Lara Sheehi’s “On Targeting An Arab Woman.” Sheehi is a member of the Druze people, many of whom do not designate themselves as Arab. Those who do often see “Arab” as a linguistic, rather than an ethnic, designation.

⁶ Crowell and Moring have offices in the United States, Europe, MENA, and Asia. They employ about 600 lawyers and represent clients in a number of industries, including defense, aerospace, healthcare, and IT. Crowell & Moring’s own descriptions of its legal work include:

- Lead counsel for a pharmaceutical company in multi-jurisdictional litigation involving allegedly tainted pharmaceutical. We favorably resolved part of the litigation while we are aggressively litigating the remainder to meet client objectives.
- Serve as national coordinating counsel for a chemical manufacturer and a telecommunications company in asbestos litigation.
- Creatively litigating our clients’ most important projects and interests in the federal and state courts, whether by defending key regulatory permits or approvals from attacks under the environmental statutes, affirmatively seeking to clear the path for the next phase of an important project through preemption litigation, or pursuit/defense of remediation cost recovery and contribution actions, particularly those involving high exposure, complex megasites or remedies, or federal government liability.
- We also counsel several leading universities, helping to assess and resolve complex employment issues that arise in the higher-education setting.

⁷ See Cary Nelson’s “GWU Law Firm Delivers What It Was Paid For” for a detailed analysis of the “findings.”

unwieldy 50-member governing board.⁸ It was apparent to many of them that the ADC letter was part of an intimidation strategy.

While the ADC and Crowell and Moring manned the barricades on Sheehi's behalf, all hell was breaking loose on the listserves of various psychoanalytic organizations and training institutes, including (but not limited to) Division 39 of APA and The American Psychoanalytic Association. Sheehi's defenders outnumbered her critics in these heated (and often lengthy) exchanges but whereas they formerly objected vehemently to Crowell and Morey's pending investigation, charging that it was motivated by institutional racism, they now embraced Crowell and Moring's report as vindication of Lara Sheehi's innocence; proof that she was being harassed by agents of Zionism.⁹ Moreover, they objected strenuously to the fact that, in light of the controversies surrounding her, the Executive Board of APsA did not invite Lara Sheehi to speak at APsA's annual conference. Nevertheless, as Mark Sexton observed on the APsA listserve:

“ . . . when EXCOM (the executive committee) non-invited Dr. Sheehi . . . some members . . . understood this as a result of unconscious racism. This was seen as a primary cause, a fact, and not a possibility, and no other motivating factor was considered valid. This judgment then generated questioning reactions from members who held a multidetermined view, that unconscious racism may be motivating this decision but so might other conscious and unconscious thoughts. The social as primary members were hurt by these challenges and saw this as further evidence of unconscious racism and pressured leadership to resign. Members who were accused of unconscious racism as fact and not as a possibility were also hurt. My thesis is that the core issue generating these opposing interpretations and reactions seems to be different beliefs regarding whether psychic life and organizations are multidetermined or primarily determined by social factors.

If the "social turn" means a recognition that social determinants exist in a dynamic interaction with all other conscious and unconscious determinants then this is an important corrective to psychoanalytic theory. However, the social as primary perspective is not a corrective. It replaces uncertainty and complexity with certitude and replaces a non-judgmental attitude with moralism . . . I may be accused of

⁸ The APsA hired a consulting group to evaluate its governance practices. The report strongly advised reducing the size of the board, but people were not willing to give up their seats so the recommendation could not be implemented.

⁹ This is not the time or place to describe these ongoing developments in detail. However, it is worth noting that the Office of Civil Rights at the Department of Education launched its own investigation into the situation at George Washington University on April 4, 2023, well after these internal conflicts first erupted, and that Kerry Sulkowicz, who was President of the American Psychoanalytic Association for two and a half years, decided to resign his post on April 7th, 2023, having rescinded – and then renewed – an invitation to Lara Sheehi to speak at a forthcoming conference in light of the DOE's pending inquiry and the controversies swirling around her. Renewing the speaking invitation to Sheehi was an effort to satisfy her allies and defuse the situation, but it failed. She resigned from APsA in protest.

enacting my own unconscious racism for holding these views and this certainly could be true, but only true as one of many conscious and unconscious influences. This leaves me in the very uncomfortable position of "uncertainty" as to my mental influences but as a psychoanalyst I must accept and struggle with this position since this is based on the psychoanalytic principle of multideterminism. As a psychoanalytic organization I believe we must also accept and struggle with this uncertainty and reject the social factors as primary perspective. To do otherwise is to reject a bedrock principle of psychoanalysis for the comfort of clarity and the moral high ground it affords."

Sexton has a point. Ever since Freud proposed his theory of the "overdetermination" of dream symbols and parapraxes, psychoanalysis has favored a multi-factorial rather than a mono-causal approach to the elucidation of unconscious mental processes. Moreover, for the past five decades, the prevailing consensus in the analytic community was that in the process of conferring greater self-knowledge, the analytic process renders analysts more aware and more tolerant of ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty, and less inclined to simplistic binary or "either/or" explanations. The proponents of CSJT sometimes seem to have forgotten this, especially when they attempt to explain complex and ambiguous interactions by invoking nebulous generalizations about "White culture" and "Black culture". After all, if we're being honest, there is really no such thing as "White culture", although there are a multitude of cultures among white-skinned people, globally speaking. Consider, for example, the obvious differences between French, German, Spanish, Italian and Greek culture, and the differences between each of these and the diverse cultures that prevail in the Anglo-sphere; England, Scotland, Ireland, North America, Australia, New Zealand, etc. (The same can be said of Eastern Europe, of course.) Also, consider, also the stark regional differences in cultures in one and the same country, e.g. the United States, Canada or Spain, as well as across continents. The term "Black culture" is equally problematic since there are a multitude of different "Black cultures" across different parts of Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas, and so on. Trying to force them all into a single binary – "White culture" versus "Black culture" – implies the opposite, namely, that these diverse cultures are actually monolithic and homogenous. This kind of simplistic and reductionistic thinking is a poor substitute for genuine analysis, and an insult to these country's inhabitants. And when "White culture" is contrasted disparagingly or disapprovingly to "Black culture", as it often is in CSJT circles, it is incipiently racist as well.

In any case, the acrimony that Sexton described in his message to the APsA listserve was exacerbated by a rapid announcement from the Holmes Commission strongly supporting Sheehi's claim that she was a victim of racism. The Holmes Commission, officially the Commission on Racial Equality in the Psychoanalytic Profession (CO-REAP), was created to operate independently of the APsA in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. The APsA appointed Dorothy Holmes as its head, and she herself chose both the Commission's 4-person "leadership team" and its additional 17 members. Its charge was to research and analyze racist attitudes and practices in the profession and the Association. The Commission released a preliminary report in 2021 accusing both APsA and the profession of structural racism and asserting widespread unconscious racism among the White members, thereby advancing the need for a social justice redefinition of APsA's mission. That lent considerable

force to the Holmes Commission's support for Sheehi's own view of her case, and had a chilling effect on those who were inclined to disagree.

In roughly the same period of time, the 2022 President of Division 39, Philadelphia-based clinical psychologist Joseph G. Schaller, asked the SUNY Medical University psychologist Siphon Mbuqe, to investigate the ways the Division "engages the racialized Other" by interviewing members of color about their experience. The resulting report, "The truth-of-being-different: The experiences of BIPOC in Division 39," was issued in January 2023. Though the Holmes Commission praised Mbuqe's work, it is sometimes marred by incoherence. For example, Dr. Mbuqe wrote: "Challenging the antagonistic articulation of clinical work versus just would signal the division of acknowledgment of the lived experience of marginalized communities."

Despite this shortcoming, Dr. Mbuqe's report testifies amply to the alienation of those he interviewed. The concluding recommendations begin with a heading in bold: **Embrace the evil within**. By "embrace" Dr. Mbuqe presumably means call out and confront, and to that end, condemns the "fundamental nature of social injustice, which is violence," but then less helpfully declares "violence is violence, you don't need to explain or analyze it. Just act". We are clearly far from any kind of rapprochement between traditional psychoanalysis or psychotherapy and CSJT.

That conclusion is reinforced by the Holmes Commission's final report, issued on Juneteenth 2023. It is a substantial 200-page document supplemented with an equally substantial series of appendices, concluding with the Commission's original listserve posts about the Sheehi case. Some of the report's recommendations are commendable, like expanding recruitment to get more POC applicants into clinical training, providing additional forms of financial aid so that economically disadvantaged students can afford training, and expanding course reading lists to include more work by minority authors. These are all well and good. But the report also warns against the damage done by race-based "microaggressions" without giving specific examples for consideration or acknowledging that some allegations of microaggressions are frivolous or off target.

Perhaps the report's major intervention is its embrace (in Chapter Seven) of a broad definition of involuntary "racial enactments" that includes exchanges in group debates. That moves the concept of enactments away from the micro-social level, the analytic dyad, to the organizational or macro-social level where, according to the Holmes Commission "many of the thoughts, feelings, processes, procedures, and organizational structures that surround and sustain racism have been pushed out of consciousness into the personal unconscious of individuals or the social unconscious of groups and institutions" (154). Presumably, the resulting enactments involving "dissociation, negation, denial, and scapegoating" (155) or "feelings of betrayal, erasure, deforming misrecognition, and the internalization of hatreds" (159) are best handled through extensive individual or group therapy when "the participants may be better prepared to use the enactments as opportunities for therapeutic work and conscious repair" (159). As the report points out, "working these issues through requires an enormous amount of painful emotional labor on the part of the collective" (160).

Unfortunately, however, the Holmes report lacks a substantive account or even a compelling description of what is involved in moving beyond using the term racial enactments “to designate those interactive sequences that embody the actualization in the clinical situation of cultural attitudes toward race and racial difference” (Leary 640) to address racial enactments “in group settings such as classrooms, listserves, and committee or organizational meetings” (257). But to its credit, it acknowledges the risks in doing so. According to the Holmes Commission, the resulting “cycles of emotional expression, reactivity, and group dysfunction can become explosive, collapsing, and traumatic, too often leading to the disengagement of the individuals and groups most in need of working through and healing from the pain of racism and its consequences” (161). The tacit implication of this remark is that those who don’t “get it” or “get with the program” lack the clarity, good-will and personal resolve to see the process through to the end - if there is an end. Admittedly, “healing” is held out as a goal here, but the group process that the Holmes Commission describes clearly erodes the trust and respect among group members, and leaves behind many casualties who believe that a cogent and well-intentioned critique or a particular position they’ve adopted has been deliberately misconstrued as a racist reflex. And while CSJT rhetoric may absolve people of personal responsibility for “racist enactments” in theory, in practice, being dressed down in a group setting like this *feels exactly* like an attack on one’s character.

After all, in any professional body where healing is the goal, there is usually an expectation that years of research, training and experience entitle members in good standing to the benefit of the doubt when differences of opinion arise, such that their judgement or reasoning, but not their motives, will be publicly questioned. This hope or expectation is profoundly undercut by the axiomatic belief that all White people are racist, and that any objections they may have to the feelings or beliefs of people committed to CJST automatically reflect unconscious racism. Why? Because once a statement or position is branded as an involuntary racial enactment it is deemed to be invalid and removed from the category of reasoned argument. No defense, no matter how cogent, is admissible in these circumstances. Thus, lofty aspirations for “healing” can mask moral judgments that are deeply divisive, and lacking in the spirit of charitable skepticism that should inform reasoned debate among mental health professionals. It is like trying to make ice by boiling water.

Sadly, it was in this spirit that the widespread concerns about Lara Sheehi’s as yet unadjudicated classroom conduct were dismissed by her supporters as racist enactments and denied any serious analysis or evaluation. To put all this in context, however, we need to back up, and to remember that even before she published *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*, Lara Sheehi used her public Twitter account - which is saturated with profanity, and which she has since taken down - to make statements like the following: “Palestinians have been telling us since its illegal inception that Israel is an ethnonationalist supremacist state whose very existence is built around ethnic purity to which they’ll go to any end to achieve’ (9/1/2019, 6:39 AM) and “FUCK ZIONISM, ZIONISTS, AND SETTLER COLONIALISM using Palestinian lives as examples of their boundless cruelty and power. Anyone who can’t yet get it, peddles ‘both sides’ bs and doesn’t denounce this persistent violence is complicit” (10/24/2020, 11:48:18 AM). Such statements go well beyond the “structural critiques of the State of Israel” that her defenders attribute to her.

If that weren't worrisome enough, she also used her Twitter account to argue that political activism is a moral imperative for *all* clinicians. In her Tweets, then, as well as in her book, she went well beyond offering the model of the therapist/activist as a career option, which many consider a matter of individual choice, and effectively *demand*s its adoption throughout the mental health field. Her call to arms combines a celebration of politicized therapy with intense animosity toward those who resist her agenda. As she declares in a 2022 interview, you “cannot be objective” as a clinician; you should “join the motherfucking struggle” (“Against Alienation”).

Furthermore, according to Sheehi, psychoanalysis – and by implication, perhaps, the entire mental health field - has to be radically transformed to save it. In Sheehi's view, psychoanalysis is complicit in the takeover, displacement, and even the genocide of indigenous peoples. Sheehi uses the concept of colonization to describe the invasive history of psychoanalysis and the term “decolonization” to describe the fundamental change psychoanalysis must undergo. No modest changes will suffice to repair the damage done. As she tweeted on January 9, 2021, “no decolonizing psychoanalysis without suiciding the entire field (cool by me).”

While puzzling and disconcerting to some, no doubt, Sheehi's use of the suicide metaphor here is also refreshingly honest. After all, you cannot “save” someone by inducing them to commit suicide. And if “suiciding the entire field” of psychoanalysis is “cool by me”, as she said in an unguarded moment, perhaps that is her real agenda? If not, the most charitable interpretation one can give her words here – in light of other statements, in other times and places - is that she is actually quite confused about her longer-term objectives. What are they, really? To salvage or destroy? It is impossible to be certain which is the case.

That being so, please note that the topic of suicide is an important one for the Sheehis. Indeed, one of the more unsettling themes of their book is their valorization of suicide. The examples they give are all Palestinian, and their argument, which leans on earlier political celebrations and manifestoes, is that suicide is a perfectly intelligible form of political resistance, rather than an expression of mental illness. As they say of one unfortunate case, a suicidal death becomes “simultaneously an act of desperation and suffering and an act of ‘willful disobedience’ His death is nothing other than a refusal of the status quo in Gaza and the rest of the nation” (84). “Suicide,” they conclude, “is not irrational but, rather a rational option against a condition of death that is already circumscribed by Israeli settler colonialism.”

Needless to say, a philosopher or a literary critic could easily make this kind of claim regarding suicide. Indeed, many have done so in other contexts. But on reflection, it is quite odd for a clinical psychologist or a psychoanalyst to do so, especially when these professions expend so much thought and effort in suicide prevention, developing suicide awareness, etc. So far, reviews of *Psychoanalysis Under Fire*, whether in popular or professional venues, have not addressed this thorny issue.

Nevertheless, according to the Sheehis, the forces that lead to psychological crisis and/or suicide among Palestinians are never primarily a patient's relations with family members or the mind-boggling inertia and corrupt machinations of the Palestinian leadership

which, quite apart from Israel's many misdeeds, is profoundly undemocratic, and holds much of the Palestinian population in subjection, *especially* in Gaza. No, no. Perish the thought. In every case, say the Sheehis, it is primarily the oppressive weight of the Occupation, which for them encompasses not just Gaza and the West Bank, but Israel proper as well. Reading between the lines, one can't help but wonder if the Sheehis are stealthily trying to normalize and justify the states of mind, the actions and utterances of the suicide bomber.

Either way, the basic claim the Sheehis and other CSJT proponents press is that individuals cannot achieve real mental health without promoting radical social change. Therapists thus must focus on convincing troubled patients that they will never be at peace until the social order is repaired. Activism, not self-knowledge, is the only path to redemption. Clinicians become moral reeducators. As one writer puts it, CSJT turns "psychological conditions into oppressed identities" (85)¹⁰. We need to recognize, so we are told, that psychological problems from anxiety to depression to suicidal ideation result from oppressive power structures. Once this model is adopted, psychoanalysis becomes an arena for political conversion. But when the goal of understanding our complex inner worlds and relationships with others is thrust aside, reducing all interactions to instances of power dynamics between oppressors and oppressed, our understanding of the past becomes distorted and impoverished. Moreover, we lose much of our capacity to understand and improve future interactions with others. As Andrew Klafter, MD, wrote on the APsA listserve, "we need to help our patients navigate and cope with the real world they actually live in. We cannot change the world for them." To do that requires nuanced understanding of individual differences. As he put it, "as a psychoanalyst, I believe that I can only help change the world one person at a time."¹¹

So, it is one thing to deepen or expand one's clinical horizons by opening up to incorporate the social dimension. But to consider the traditional approach to treatment professionally unacceptable now, as CSJT advocates often do, damages the psychoanalytic profession. Sadly, the prospect of any meaningful rapprochement between the two perspectives is rendered even more tenuous by the Sheehi's intransigence, because the Sheehis deride the humanistic concept of dialogue as a means to conflict resolution. In *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*, they write that the concept of dialogue "presumes the possibility of (co)creating a neutral space" (123), adding that there is no neutral space, no real equality behind the fiction of dialogue, given that all relations are structured in terms of power. Indeed, "dialogue engenders paranoid schizoid functioning, cleaving and expelling healthy internal objects and identifications from one's psychic selfhood" (142), "replacing them with the selfhood of their abuser" (151). They even claim that the Israelis engaged in any actual or potential dialogue with their Arab neighbors (or patients) assume *a priori* that Palestinians "have no complex or nuanced internal world" (143).

¹⁰ Brett Alderman, "The Intoxicating Idea of Critical Social Justice—God-shaped Ideologies for God-sized Holes," in Val Thomas, ed. *Cynical Therapies: Perspectives on the Antitherapeutic Nature of Critical Social Justice*.

¹¹ Passages from listserve postings are quoted with permission.

To claim that Israeli analysts and therapists treating Palestinians or supervising their treatment hold such views, without proof, is highly irresponsible. As it happens, the Sheehis offer many such sweeping generalizations without a shred of evidence to support them. Other examples of this same tendency, which goes curiously unnoticed by her ardent supporters, include Tweets in which Lara Sheehi employs the acronym ACAB, which is short for “all cops are bastards”. Are they? Is there evidence? We refuse to believe that all men and women who work in law enforcement are malicious or dishonest; people of bad character. The fact that *some* law enforcement officers are indeed racist, sadistic or corrupt, and that policing in America is in urgent need of reform, while true, does not justify such a statement. Indeed, this is an example of the logical fallacy known as *pars pro toto*, in which the behavior and attitudes of a sub-set of people in a particular group are deemed to be representative of the entire group. Another, simpler way of saying the same thing is that this blanket characterization of law enforcement officers is a *negative stereotype*; one that does no credit to clinicians who claim to be combatting prejudice.

A more serious situation obtains with respect to Zionism. In their book and accompanying YouTube interviews, the Sheehis repeatedly assert that “all Zionists are mentally ill” and/or that “Zionism is a psychosis”. This is a deeply troubling, indeed anti-Semitic, claim, because somewhere around 80% of Jews worldwide are Zionists. So, in effect, the Sheehis are saying that the vast majority of the world’s Jews are mentally ill. No doubt some are, as a sub-set of any given population can reasonably be assumed to suffer from severe mental illness. That is more or less a given. But the vast majority? Where is the data to support such a sweeping conclusion?

Of course, the Sheehis and their supporters invariably object that one should not conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism per se. Actually, we agree. Not all Jews are Zionists. Not all Zionists are Jews. But while the two categories are not co-extensive, they frequently overlap, such that it is entirely possible (and increasing common) to be anti-Zionist *and* anti-Semitic at the same time, but to hide one’s anti-Semitic animus – from oneself and from others – beneath a veneer of “principled” anti-Zionism.

That being said, the claim that the vast majority of Jews are mentally ill simply by virtue of their religious or political beliefs is both untenable and antisemitic. And what is the upshot of such reasoning? That most Jews are not merely evil, possessing “boundless cruelty and power”, they are also insane. And just imagine the pandemonium that would immediately ensue if *any* mental health professional of note claimed that most Muslims are mentally ill. The Sheehis and their allies would pounce on this statement as Islamophobic and racist, *and rightly so*. But in the same breath, no doubt, they would vehemently deny that their characterization of Zionism is the least bit anti-Semitic. In adopting this breathtaking double-standard, the Sheehis demonstrate that they are using psychoanalysis for political purposes. They add to this that Zionists have a “psychotic” relationship with the land of Israel and declare that “psychotic thinking is at the heart of the logic of Zionist settler-colonial logic” (202).

One wonders why the Sheehis’ supporters in APsA and APA give them carte blanche to carry on in this fashion. After all, these statements trade in obvious negative stereotypes that should undermine their credibility as clinicians. And to grasp what is at stake

professionally, consider what the consequences would be if *most* clinical educators embraced the Sheehis' claim that Zionism is a form of mental illness. On the face of it, that should make most Jews very poor candidates for training in psychoanalysis, clinical psychology or psychiatry. Only Jews who have repudiated Zionism – or never embraced it in the first place – would stand a reasonable chance of getting training in these arenas, because committees that evaluate candidates for training would already be *prejudiced* against all Zionists. And this prejudice need never become a matter of policy to have an appreciable impact on the selection of candidates for training.

So, what happens if most Jews are effectively screened out on the grounds that they are mentally ill because of their political and religious convictions? It would foster a broader cultural climate that is anti-Semitic in practice, if not in theory; in underlying intent, if not by conscious design – although this last possibility remains open as well. One wonders, how could Jewish graduate students possibly feel “safe” confiding their personal feelings to Sheehi in their required journals in the light of these publicly expressed views? And are mental health practitioners who support Sheehi passionately really willing to embrace trends which pose as “progressive”, but which promote attitudes towards Jews that were common before and during WWII? Where would such developments lead in the longer term?

Lara Sheehi makes it clear that an activist social justice commitment for clinicians must not only include anti-Zionism but make it the international political priority. In a videotaped interview for Jewish Voice for Peace, Sheehi says “This is my own urgent call to the clinicians among us . . . from the river to the sea . . . we must center Palestine in every effort. And we must support boycott, divestment, and sanction efforts despite threats and efforts to derail solidarity. This needs to be done not as an offshoot of our clinical work, but as a central working tenet of any clinical praxis that purports to be interested in alleviating the suffering of others.”

This is not an isolated instance. The Sheehis regularly endorse the BDS movement's efforts to boycott Israel and use psychoanalytic concepts to *pathologize* Zionism. Conversely, they go to great lengths to normalize, or at least de-stigmatize, Islamist movements and regimes, most of which are steeped in violence and overt anti-Semitism. So, let's be candid, shall we? Whether we are talking about Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Taliban, Isis or any of the other groups that regularly grab headlines, Islamist movements and governments tend to be theocratic, authoritarian, misogynistic, anti-LGBTQ+, and deeply anti-democratic both in theory and practice. At their core, they are very *opposite* of progressive in their fundamental goals and values. Nevertheless, many on the Left coddle or cozy up to them, and the Sheehis seem intent on transforming the passive acceptance or tacit support for many such groups into a full-fledged and unapologetic embrace of them, demonizing Zionism, even the most progressive varieties, while staunchly defending Islamism and deflecting or dismissing any criticism of Islamist groups as evidence of Islamophobia.

In a recent essay entitled “Critical Theory, Left-Wing Authoritarianism and Anti-Semitism” Daniel Burston notes that the Left's inability or unwillingness to acknowledge, much less address the massive human rights violations of Islamist groups is symptomatic of a kind of Left-wing authoritarianism; one that slips under the radar of most activists and many social scientists. The Sheehi's current popularity, and their supporters' unwillingness to

acknowledge the problematic nature of many of their statements, suggests that this worrisome trend is growing in psychoanalytic circles today. Whether anti-Zionism and CSJT will become completely fused in psychoanalytic circles remains to be seen. But the impact on clinical training would likely result in a serious loss of public confidence in both therapy and psychoanalysis itself.

Leaving the potential loss of credibility with the public aside, the tendency to insert anti-Zionist and CSJT priorities and perspectives into psychoanalytic discourse has already created considerable consternation and confusion within several psychoanalytic organizations, including – but by no means limited to – Div. 39 of APA and the American Psychoanalytic Association. It may also have revealed the contours of the CSJT playbook for taking over such organizations. Even prior to the Holmes Commission report, efforts to discredit the senior leadership who questioned Lara Sheehi’s political agenda or suitability to speak were frequently accompanied by seemingly conciliatory and curiously optimistic calls for “healing” to follow the conflicts in question. But as was later the case in the Holmes report, the concept of healing on offer here was quite distinctive. It seemed to entail a stark and non-negotiable precondition, namely, that the party deemed racist by some members of the organization submit an apology – the more abject, the better - and espouse a new-found (or renewed) commitment to the group’s brand of CSJT. But experience indicates that no matter how eloquent they are, such apologies are usually followed by demotions or “cancelling” in one form or another. Absent such acts of contrition, the guilty party can only expect to be expelled like a heretic or banished to the periphery of the group, where their presence is reluctantly tolerated by the others. Alternatively, members who fail to elicit the desired apologies and acts of contrition from those they deem racist may resign from the organization in protest.

Thus, in spring of 2023, when Kerry Sulkowicz resigned as President, APsA members received a series of letters on the listserv announcing individual resignations from the Association’s Board or its overall membership. The intriguing oddity of this situation had many observers scratching their heads and searching for explanations, because to all appearances, the opponents of the current leadership and direction of the Association (who were eloquently announcing their departure) had actually prevailed just a few days or weeks previously. But after Sulkowicz stepped down, the president-elect, Daniel Prezant, assumed the office, and despite the adoption of important reforms, several people of color declared that they *still* felt profoundly unsafe in the Association. Many demanded Prezant’s resignation as well!

At an individual level, the rash of resignations in the wake of Sulkowicz’s removal could be interpreted as effort to draw attention to the person’s acute sense of vulnerability and/or outrage, and by implication, of course, to themselves. Alternatively, on the collective level, it could have been a (conscious or unconscious) tactic to incentivize kindred spirits to redouble their efforts to attack, discredit and/or remove Daniel Prezant before allowing their remaining colleagues in the organization to woo and coax them back into the fold again. On reflection, this curious state of affairs was probably the result of both of these things, because if he remained in office, as the by-laws demanded, Daniel Prezant was widely expected to use APsA’s existing rules and precedents to constrain and limit the power of the anti-racist faction.

So, the question arises, what is the future of the American Psychoanalytic Association, and more generally of the psychoanalytic profession in North America? We do not possess a crystal ball, but common sense suggests that the future of the profession is highly uncertain and fraught with risk. We suspect that the next President of the American Psychoanalytic Association will be a person – and probably a woman – of color. And that may yet prove to be a good thing, provided the new President sees the necessity to create genuine dialogue between the two warring factions and creates a viable framework for doing so. But that may be difficult or impossible to do, because some members will be looking for passionate advocacy, not reasoned reflection or genuine reconciliation. Expectations will be high, and the rush to judgment will be unrelenting in what has become an increasingly racialized organizational environment. If the APsA fails to ameliorate its differences, further polarization and splitting will doubtless occur, damaging the profession's credibility and reputation, and creating yet another major schism in the history of psychoanalysis.

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