



## **The Future of the American Psychoanalytic Association**

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The debacle over Dr. Lara Sheehi has revealed painful fissures and polarizations in the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA), and it remains to be seen whether our organization will survive. And if it does, it remains to be seen whether APsaA can still function as a viable professional organization for psychoanalysts and analytic psychotherapists. I fear that APsaA is transforming itself into a social justice organization, driven by progressive and woke politics, and sharply deviating from its historical mission to promote psychoanalytic education and support the professional work of psychoanalysts and analytic psychotherapists.

Regarding the question of whether Dr. Sheehi should have been invited to speak: Although she is responsible for deplorable anti-Israel vitriol (including prejudiced and profane comments on her Twitter account), I think that the organization could have digested the fallout from a controversial presentation and the reactions by many APsaA members who would have been offended by views they felt were anti-Semitic. In retrospect, I think that this would have been less damaging for the organization. But I say this now only in hindsight, seeing what erupted in our organization as a result of not inviting her to speak. That decision caused individuals who share Dr. Sheehi's anti-Zionist politics (and who are largely unaware of her offensive and profane anti-Israel discourse) feel unsafe in APsaA. And then, the situation quickly cascaded to make additional APsaA members who identify with other vulnerable minority groups feel unsafe in APsaA as well. I wish to clarify, however, that I really do not blame APsaA's President at the time, Dr. Kerry Sulkowicz, for his decision to disallow her invitation until after the U.S. Department of Education completes its investigation into allegations against Dr. Sheehi for anti-Semitic conduct as an educator at George Washington University. This was, actually, a reasonable decision and well within his purview as a President of the organization. I am profoundly disappointed with the APsaA Board members who pushed for his resignation. That all of this would turn into such a mess for APsaA could not have been foreseen, and in my opinion is also evidence of a flawed organizational leadership structure (which I have also commented on recently). But I do not want, here, to focus on what went wrong with Dr. Sheehi or our organization's governance woes. I wish, instead, to explain why APsaA should not transform itself into a social justice or political action organization.

As a career psychoanalyst, I have been fortunate to provide psychoanalytic treatment for many patients and analytic psychotherapy for many more. The special privilege of this work is its intimacy with people who make themselves vulnerable to us, which provides us with a uniquely close view of what makes human beings love, hate, attach, and fear. Like many other analysts, I have devoted thousands of hours to teaching and training therapists and analysts, sometimes paid very modestly and

sometimes as a volunteer. Like many others, I have volunteered countless hours of my time and expertise for APsaA. My loyalty to APsaA is as a professional membership organization whose mission, as I have always understood it, is (1) to support psychoanalysis and analytic psychotherapy as a profession, (2) to help psychoanalysts and their local institutes thrive professionally and educationally, and (3) to foster the creation of a professional psychoanalytic community. That's what APsaA's mission was when I joined, and what serves as the basis for my continued support and work on the now embattled organization's behalf.

I really do admire people who believe they can change the world. This includes people who believe they can redeem the world from racism and inequality. But as a psychoanalyst, I believe that I can only help change the world one person at a time. If I had wanted to tackle the world's problems on a more global scale, I would have pursued a career in public policy, public service, or elected office. The world remains racist, sexist, phobic, polarized, abusive, murderous, and ravaged by bloody wars. But our world is also tender, loving, creative, and beautiful. We need to help our patients navigate and cope with the real world they actually live in. We cannot change the world for them. Our patients, when healed, will need to face a world that is still broken. To repair the world is a religious or political act, not a clinical one. And I assert that preserving the boundaries between political advocacy and clinical treatment is of utmost importance for our ability, as therapists and analysts, to stay sane and professional.

Like many of you, I am trying to recruit therapists into our training programs where they will learn about every facet about the unconscious, about sex and aggression, love and hate, narcissism, and relationality. (And I would like to think that I could also help them learn about gender, but I must confess that I don't think we as analysts, or the entire mental health field in general, have a good handle on it yet. I don't think we yet fully understand what trans- and non-binary identities actually are, or how to adequately distinguish between various manifestations of these phenomena in order to provide responsible and sound clinical information to our patients and their families.)

Do we want analysts and therapists to learn more about how race, power, and wealth inequality impact the mind? Of course we do. Does learning more about history and culture help us empathize with our patients, and sensitize us to experiences of aggression and exclusion that we might not be attuned to otherwise? Yes, of course it does. However, the psychoanalytic situation can never be a "safe-space" in the way this phrase is now widely used in progressive political discourse. Analysis is certainly not a "trigger-free space", and there are no trigger-warnings conveniently or clearly offered by the unconscious for analysts or their patients. I authored a chapter on the psychoanalytic treatment of anti-Semitism. My anti-Semitic patients all suffered from what we would eventually see, through their analytic treatment, to be very understandable reasons behind their irrational hatred of Jews. These patients learned to love me. But more importantly, they also learned to hate me as a human being, rather than as a dehumanized Jew. We aim to create an analytic space where it is safe to be triggered and to analyze those triggers and the unsafe emotions they conjure and which interfere with our ability to function.

I strongly disagree with some influential members of APsaA who assert that we should turn to Postmodernism or Critical Race Theory (CRT) as part of a paradigm shift for contemporary psychoanalysis. (“Critical Social Justice Theory,” CSJT, is probably a better and more inclusive term for this political ideology, though the former term, “CRT,” is still more widely in news media and therefore more familiar to the public.) I have been studying poststructuralism and critical social theory for the last decade. Yes, woke politics and CSJT are one legitimate outgrowth of poststructuralist thought and critical social theory. But I don't think this political ideology will last, and I don't believe it has changed or will actually change anything in our society. Marxism was also a powerful political ideology designed to end inequality, but it did not change human nature, and it really has not survived as a political or economic system. Marxism essentialized economic status and adjudicated everyone's place in the eternal, dialectical struggle over exploitation and ownership (and in the Soviet and Maoist articulations of Marxism, of course, this became murderous and genocidal). But CSJT essentializes race, class, and gender in a manner very similar to how Marxism essentialized economic status. CSJT adjudicates people as oppressors or victims based on these essentialist designations of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Reasonable thinkers can disagree about the degree to which this is a helpful way to organize our thoughts about power, class, gender, and human rights on a macro scale in societies and populations. But, as I will explain, this is a political ideology which paints populations and societies with a broad brush, and is not an approach to psychology which makes any attempt to understand the unique, complex mind of an individual human beings. Such a simplified and essentializing approach is incompatible with psychoanalytic understanding, and should not become part of APsaA's priorities as an organization.

Why Critical Social Justice theory is not, and cannot be, a branch of psychoanalytic thought deserves its own lengthy essay or monograph. Briefly, here is the problem: At first glance, CSJT might present itself as potentially allied with psychoanalytic understanding in the sense that it asserts that the human being is motivated by powerful forces which are unknown to him or her. In other words, it sounds like a dimension of the unconscious. However, unlike CSJT, psychoanalysis asserts that unconscious motivations and conflicts become known only by studying an individual human being's complex web of thought associations, noticing when the content of those associations is too distressing for conscious awareness, seeing how those associations are disrupted or otherwise defended against, listening to and decoding the unconscious meaning of the person's dreams, and paying close attention to the other myriad manifestations of the dynamic unconscious that analysts are trained to identify. In psychoanalytic thought, each person's dynamic unconscious is a unique reservoir of the patient's wishes, urges, fears, needs, and other motivations. Hundreds of hours of this type of close, individual attention allows the analyst to empathize with and resonate with unique, complex, and deep reservoir of wishes, urges, fears, needs, and conflicts. The most disturbing and difficult aspects of these conflicts are often protectively identified into the analyst or therapist, who must digest these emotions, reorganize them in his or her own mind, and share them back with the patient in a way that can be understood, contained, and emotionally integrated. In our contemporary clinical perspectives, the analyst certainly still has a special role in this process, but no

privileged authority over knowledge or truth. It is the patient who is the ultimate judge of whether the analytic process is working toward a more profound understanding of the patient's inner life. The truth of analytic understanding is demonstrated by whether it enables the person to become more emotionally free, present, self-aware, calmer, healthier, and better able to love, work, and play, in the way he or she wishes to, and with better adherence to more mature and compassionate values and beliefs.

CSJT by contrast, claims to know every person's motives based on an external and superficial examination of his or her intersectional identity of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Although this ideology claims that such identities are socially constructed, the way CSJT plays itself out is that these identities are actually treated as essential and deterministic, and the person has no say in the matter. His or her identity is not discovered or developed. Rather, it is assigned, by an external and dehumanizing system. If the person does not accept that he or she is an oppressor or a victim, as dictated by this objective intersectional rubric, CSJT cannot see this as an empathic failure on the part of its ideology; rather it is the person's defensive refusal to accept the reality his or her place in this intersectional, oppressive hierarchy. For example, a thoughtful, Caucasian person who lives a life devoted to equality and liberal values, but who does not accept the notion that he is personally participating in the oppression of people of color, is displaying "White Fragility." In other words, while psychoanalysis is based on empathic attunement to the individual person, Critical Social Justice Theory deliberately disregards the individual person's actual experience. The person's core identity and deepest motives can be deduced, on paper, without meeting or knowing him, without hearing his thought associations or dreams, and without knowing what it is like to be in a relationship with him. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that CSJT is "anti-empathic."

Of course, there can always be more reasonable and less reasonable postmodern discourse about identity than what the radical and simplified version offered by woke politics and CSJT. I have tried, in another setting, to define "White Privilege" in the most helpful way I can: "The responsibility and duty of citizens who are benefiting from injustice to make their communities and societies more equitable." I still believe in, promote, and try to live up to this ideal. But the more extreme ideology of CSJT prejudices people as "oppressor" based on their economic status, race, and gender, regardless of their actual behavior, political commitments, beliefs, or attitudes. I find poststructuralism, including wokeness, an interesting and important intellectual endeavor, but I do not believe it can ever be a helpful clinical resource. At an individual level, psychoanalysis is humanistic, but CSJT is dehumanizing. In addition, we have seen how haphazard and sloppy applications of CSJT in academia and corporate life are unhelpful and polarizing, and how they can often be seen as a type of power grab; I am not alone in this assessment, and those who share my skeptical view include distinguished liberal thinkers and academics. I believe CSJT will not be healthful for APsaA either.

The topic of reparations for slavery was brought up on the APsaA Members listserv by several contributors. As an American citizen, I happen to be in favor of exploring the possibility that reparations should be paid by the U.S. government to

American descendants of the African slaves. It would need to become part of our tax debt, and all Americans (including Americans of color, and including Americans like myself whose ancestors came to the U.S. long after slavery was abolished) would be required to contribute based on their income tax obligations. This is how just societies, when they acknowledge wrongdoing, operate. All members must pay. It is a collective obligation by the society, not a set of individual debts owed by individual guilty parties. This would likely open up a can of worms regarding how to identify descendants of African slaves, but I nevertheless would be in favor of doing this anyway because it be just, and I believe it could actually be reparative for our society. However, I would never ask the American Psychoanalytic Association to take a stand on reparations because such an endeavor is starkly outside the mission of a professional membership organization for mental health professionals. Also, I am aware of many other thoughtful and well-informed liberals and conservatives who are against reparations, for good reasons. I don't want to alienate half of my colleagues over a controversial political endeavor which is clearly outside the scope of our organization's mission. Reparations, as a political proposal, is within the domain of political organizations, political parties, election campaigns, and Op-Ed pages. APsaA is simply not the place for this. I want the APsaA I have contributed to remain a place where people of different political orientations can work together for the sake of psychoanalysis as a profession.

To respond to frequent topic of postings on our listserv: While I certainly don't believe that all criticism of Israel is an expression of anti-Semitism, I do find it awfully unpleasant and bizarre to read angry posts on the APsaA Members listserv about the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, comparisons of Israelis to Nazis, or links to news articles about the again raging Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One influential member has called for APsaA to take an official position squarely against the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's "Working Definition of Anti-Semitism" because it "silences criticism of Israeli human rights abuses against the Palestinians." Is ridding APsaA of Zionists or adopting formal positions against Zionism now a psychoanalytic priority for APsaA to take on? If it is, it will certainly alienate half or more of our organization, including me. Is this where we are headed?

To respond to another recent trend in our organization: There is a sentiment being expressed by some very vocal APsaA members, and I am not exaggerating, that psychoanalysts are a bunch of wealthy, privileged snobs, who "live in nice houses," who "never volunteer in soup kitchens" or work with the homeless, who travel to fancy places for psychoanalytic conferences, and who are entirely out of touch with the real world problems of real people. (Actually, the way it was expressed on the listserv was that "...our heads are so far up our asses..." and many people were unaware that this was a quote borrowed from Lara Sheehi.) As a matter of fact, many members of our organization, including myself, *have* volunteered at a soup kitchen which provides food for the homeless. (My synagogue is part of a rotation.) I also spend seven hour per week providing psychopharmacology treatment for indigent and seriously mentally ill individuals at a Federally Qualified Health Center for an underserved community, where I have helped build a psychiatric department. I disagree that living in a nice

home or traveling to the Bahamas for vacations makes analysts (or any other group of professionals) “out of touch.” Everyone in the world wants to live in a nice house. Every human being wants comfort and security. This is healthy, normal, and central to the human condition. We do not make the world better by not living in nice houses. We make the world better by giving more people access to nice houses.

Improving people's mental health is just one factor in helping people out of poverty, but the main reasons for poverty and increasing income inequality have to do with a regressive taxation structure which favors wealthy property owners, a lack of universal health care access, failing primary and secondary public schools, and an increasingly elitist college system (including so-called "public" universities). None of these are psychoanalytic topics. They are political issues. Not every worthy passion or righteous political cause is a subject of psychoanalytic inquiry, and not every social problem can be solved with psychotherapy. Arguably, global warming is the greatest crisis now facing humanity; but climate change is not a psychoanalytic concern, not within our scope of knowledge or expertise, and should not become part of APsaA's mission. We need to be highly disciplined with our passions and political impulses and faithful to our original mission when we set the agenda for our professional organization.

That my colleagues with whom I disagree so strongly have articulated their vision for ApsaA becoming a social justice organization has forced me to formulate my own thoughts on this topic. As I hope I have made clear, I really don't want APsaA to go down this path. I don't think it will make our organization more hospitable or inclusive. I think it has already exacerbated our polarizations and discord, and is starting to overrun what had been and still needs to be our core mission. My view remains that the vast majority of our membership want and need the American Psychoanalytic Association to remain a professional membership organization devoted to promoting psychoanalytic education and the professional lives of psychoanalytic clinicians. I think most of our members have no patience or time for incessant polarization and hostile debates over political ideology, and that's why many of them are not even subscribed to our acrimonious listserv. In fact, this past Spring, most of my psychoanalytic colleagues had no idea what has happened which prompted APsaA's excellent President to resign. They long ago had unsubscribed from the listserv because of all the infighting over the last 20 years about the Bureau of Professional Standards, the Certification process, and the Training and Supervising Analyst system. Likewise, most of my colleagues complain our workshops and meetings have been coopted by woke politics, resulting in a deterioration in their sophistication or usefulness. If APsaA embraces human rights and social justice as its central priorities, rather than promoting clinical psychoanalysis as a professional discipline, then I believe it will sink the organization, and that psychoanalysis and analytic psychotherapy will suffer.

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