



## **Uncertainty and Psychoanalysis: A commentary on Burston and Nelson**

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What follows are some comments in relation to the manuscript by Burston and Nelson on the current turmoil in APsA. I am not familiar with the ‘death by a thousand cuts’ details of this particular conflict, nor with the organizational cultures, or with the characters involved. So, my comments are based in large part on the interpretation of events provided by the authors. As a member of IPTAR- but not a psychoanalyst - and with decades spent in academia, I have some familiarity with the vicissitudes of change efforts and the considerable heat and animus that can be generated.

We must acknowledge that professional psychoanalysis and the organizations that reflect its interests have always been political entities. Here politics is defined as decision-making about who gets scarce goods, such as therapy slots, quality supervision and status, and whose perspectives and rights are acknowledged, enforced or marginalized. To act on or to eschew certain actions in the social sphere is to take a political stance, and therefore to assert power in a Foucauldian sense (Koopman, 2017).

Therefore, to marginalize acknowledging the impact of politics on how we theorize, who we treat, and how much they pay, are still political acts. One way of understanding the current organizational turmoil is to ask which political constituency is perturbed and why? Which constituencies feel threatened and think their possible marginalization should lead to the decline of psychoanalysis? Therefore, this struggle offers an opportunity to understand the dynamics of the various political communities within organizational psychoanalysis.

Those who disrupt the normative and seemingly apolitical narrative, help bring into clarity the center’s historical ambivalence, if not fear of overt political activism (Samuels, 1993; Dalal, 2006). This is due in part to the threat it constitutes to hyper-individualism, status and, of course, income flow within a capitalist therapeutic model. Therefore, we observe the production of far too many psychoanalysts, who as candidates are stripped of any robust political sensibility and are urged to focus on technique. This is a continuation of a longstanding rejection of psychoanalysis’ position as a disruptive social force by the traditional American psychoanalytic elites. That position has been by default consigned to the English departments of academia, and additional precincts of Otherness.

Professional psychoanalysis is increasingly focused on the production of analysts who are proto-therapeutic algorithms, woefully underinformed by the sociocultural sensibilities that are an inextricable feature of our client’s psyches (Holmes, 2016). It is only a matter of time before Artificial Intelligence begins generating a menu of ‘good-enough’ interpretations to address insurance-informed diagnosis of existential pain.

Work that focuses on the conflicts generated by political activism will not be a reimbursable category.

The inquiry presented by Burston and Nelson tends to recapitulate two long-standing trends in the war for position within organizational psychoanalysis. Denial and retreat as seen in the 1950s when organizational psychoanalysis took a marked conservative turn and distancing from the socio-political (Zaretsky, 2016). The second approach is the never-ending attack aimed at proclaiming the irrelevancy and imminent death of traditional psychoanalysis.

These approaches, while in varying degrees an inherent feature of change efforts, can obscure and make it challenging for clear-eyed and pragmatic change agents to operate. At the same time, it is part of the process for the disrupters to challenge the oftentimes disingenuous and conservative change efforts of a seemingly liberal status quo. Psychoanalysis' liberally inflected traditional center often engages in a type of gradualism that masks a capitalist-inflected effort to protect a culturally insensitive and private practice model. Such an approach is proving to be not in the long-term interest of professional psychoanalysis.

In its initial stages, politicized change efforts can present as pure and non-negotiable. Any attempt at compromise will be framed as having dire and irreversible consequences, such as, in this case, the demise of psychoanalytic organizations and of 'the talking cure.' In other words, the death of psychoanalysis as we know it. This of course discounts the historical resiliency of psychoanalysis and its repeated refutation of a death foretold (Mitchell, 1993).

In true post-modern style, what is really under attack is 'mainstream psychoanalysis' conservative organizational center with its caste of exalted clinicians, boundary-setting theoreticians, and its exclusion of the disruptive Other. An observing Freud would be ambivalent about this state of affairs given, his start as an insurgent, but tempered over time by his own boundary monitoring and excluding tendencies. Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm among others, who theorized about a socially informed psychoanalysis, would smile at the current state of affairs, given their own expulsion from the traditional high caste.

The issue is not whether there exists a 'Left leaning' constituency within psychoanalysis, the issue is the resistance to it by the traditional center. Further complicating the struggle for the center, is the Left's historical tendency to marginalize persons of color, while, of late, either seeking to speak on their behalf or recruiting a certain kind of person of color who will not challenge the Left's racism and classism (Mendes. 2015).

The approach of many institutes led by liberals, who came of age in the turbulent sixties, is to wall off their core traditional Freud-infused curriculum, from socially oriented perspectives while offering an optional and often not well thought through diversity inflected course. This hardly constitutes a substantive transformation of that curriculum. Burston and Nelson demonstrate their ambivalence regarding curricula progress when they note, "By now, most clinical training programs recognize the importance of social forces in patient's lives and incorporate instruction on how to

recognize their effects into the curriculum.” Yet they also observe the far from adequate outcomes regarding efforts at diversity. Here the challenge is not just diversity by pigment, sexuality and cultural background but also diversity of ways of thinking about psychoanalysis.

While the issuing of mandates, letters of solidarity and culturally informed guidelines are all for the good, Burston and Nelson overestimate the impact of these efforts on the training and consulting models that are at the heart of professional psychoanalysis. Here is the irony of psychoanalysts underestimating the resistance to change, and resisting the examination of cultural conflicts within their midst. Often unexamined is the left-of-center therapist’s own conflicts between their public political stances and their private class positions.

In that context, it would be interesting to know how Burston and Nelson arrived at the assertion that “... the number of CSJT-oriented clinicians have now reached a critical mass and as a result, they are mobilizing to completely flip the script ...” At this point in the evolution of theory what we have is the simplistic binary model where the intrapsychic trumps the social (Critical Social Justice Theory/CJST), which must now be reversed, where the social trumps intrapsychic work. An interaction between both is necessary, but in the initial clash of narratives, neither side is willing to give substantive ground.

For the traditional center, this often speaks to defending a status position that is ill-informed and incurious about alternate narratives. It defends the known, which is the basis of its power, and attempts to kill off the insurgents. We all know the seemingly depoliticized version of this father-sibling cage fight, but we might well ask, are we condemned to repeat it? Here is the bittersweet irony of an enactment by psychoanalysts with seemingly little insight. Who analyzes the analysts?

In other words, the traditional psychoanalytic organizational model with its adoption of one perspective and the marginalization of others is doomed. As Burston and Nelson note, however, CSJT will also struggle to articulate an agreed upon position beyond the fact that social factors inform the working of the psyche (Samuels, 1993). So, in addition to resistance from the center, there will be a fight for position within the CJST community. There will be those who simply wish to be the new center, and will attempt, a la Freud in his day, to impose purity tests that will not tolerate dissent. There will also be opportunism, as self-selected leaders will wrap themselves in emphatic, but politically unsustainable CJST positions. They will claim to speak for all members of a given community such as the Black or LGBTQ communities. Such self-appointed leaders often will not tolerate diversity of thought, therefore disparaging those who challenge their perspective. Such resistances will derail any fruitful dialogue between insurgents and traditionalists. That in turn will weaken the organizational authority of psychoanalysis and might well severely limit CJST's ability to be a force for change. While avoidable, there is a long tragic history of the Left's use of circular firing squads.

What will hopefully evolve will be psychoanalytic affinity groups that might agree on a broadly defined common position. They will hopefully respect and over time adopt some of the techniques, if not the perspectives of other psychoanalytically

informed groupings. Some of these groupings will be truly hybrid and will build on preexisting work that attempts to meld psyche with social. Such work is messy, nuanced and done in quiet spaces. While facilitated by the struggle between the traditional center and the insurgents, it eschews absolutist positions and an adversarial stance. Fueling such an approach is a confidence in what one calls the deep unconscious. This is the awareness that we want what we want, that there are possibilities and necessary constraints on such a position, that are in part located in the social.

When you have titanic ideological struggles, scenarios will present themselves that elicit intense emotional responses. Analysts ideally can absorb the rage, manage their own, and get a sense of the overdetermined nature of the underlying conflict. About the Sheehi affair, otherwise thoughtful individuals have struggled to manage their rage in the service of understanding the conflicts. Under the best of circumstances, it is incredible difficult to contain the pain and the rage that are generated when issues such as religion, nationalism, ethnicity, race and gender are in conflict. As Burston and Nelson note, the Holmes Report (American Psychoanalytic Association, 2023) attempts to surface the unconscious enactments that make such change work so difficult. Very few organizations have structures and procedures in place to manage the intense affect generated while discussing such issues productively, with the goal of improving functioning. In addition, uncertainty abounds, making it exceedingly difficult to define specific sustainable acts that will satisfy ideologically diverse constituencies. For some of these entities, organizational competency and unity are not high on their agendas. This is even more difficult where, in the case of the APsA, you have a governing board of fifty persons.

These dynamics may be troubling to the large - mostly White - but quiet community of practitioners. They are open to new perspectives but cautious about positions that are either overly enamored with change or that are seemingly dismissive of their professional trajectories, a dismissal of their lived experiences. Justifiable criticism can be directed at the traditional psychoanalytic model with its marginalization of the social, but 'old models' don't die but tend to live on as part of the repertoire of therapists. Therefore, it is for the insurgents to make the case as to why therapists should adopt aspects of the new model. This needs to be done respectfully, and acknowledge the well-meaning, if halting, struggles to create hybrid models. Here tactical sensitivity is the midwife of ideological change (Powell, 2018).

Refreshingly, CSJT brings a diversity of perspectives but, as Burston and Nelson note, that very diversity presents it with two challenges: It must avoid attempting to create a hierarchy of perspectives where, say, class trumps race or heterogeneity must defer to LGBT perspectives. That in turn raises the second challenge where the insurgents' task is not to capture the center but instead to facilitate the creation of a federation of perspectives arising from shared psychoanalytic perspectives.

Given the relentless cultural-driven emphasis on individuation, does this struggle offer an opportunity for a recommitment to holding in tension the uniqueness that makes us individuals alongside a base of our common intra-psychic givens, all of which are embedded in a racialist and sexualized capitalist culture?

Can we generate culturally informed theories, psychoanalytically grounded practitioners, and organizational structures that can contain and work with an infinite variety of cultural affinities: perplexed politicized Jews, aggrieved and enraged Palestinians, conservative Nigerian immigrants playing hide and seek with Blackness, an infinite permutation of sexual and gender identities and low-income Mexican refugees who do not speak Spanish or English? How do we recognize a fundamental psychoanalytic foundation while acknowledging the hybrid models being generated?

In such psychoanalytic models, how much weight do we give to the political at a given point in the process? What are the models for managing politically informed transference operations? How do we acknowledge and mourn the marginalization of traditional status granting, but now outdated models?

Can we be compensated and gain enhanced respect by our ability to recommit to useful elements of traditional models but respectfully embrace healthy elements of insurgents' models? Here familiarity with Feminists and Black insurgencies, within political psychoanalysis, would be helpful (Adams, 2020; Chodorow, 1989; Mitchell, 2000; Powell, 2018; Stephens, 2018).

What will it take for the constituency of the thoughtful but relatively silent to step up? When will it be safe for them to do so? Is it safer to be a private revolutionary where you work on yourself but renounce any wish to chill with the big boys ... or kill them off?

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