Psychoanalysis and Taking Sides: Two Moments in the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement

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Hannah Segal’s essay, “Silence Is the Real Crime,” poses a challenge to the institution of psychoanalysis that has yet to be met. Considering the specific role of the psychoanalyst as a working practitioner faced with the facts of injustice and the abuse of human rights, she states the following:

I think we have a specific contribution to make. We are cognizant with the psychic mechanisms of denial, projection, magic thinking, and so on. We should be able to contribute something to the overcoming of apathy and self-deception in others and ourselves. When the Nazi phenomenon was staring us in the face, the psychoanalytic community outside Germany was largely silent. This must not be repeated. Nadezhda Mandelstam said: “Silence is the real crime against humanity.” We psychoanalysts who believe in the power of words and the therapeutic effect of verbalizing truth must not be silent. (Segal 1987, 127)

These are strong words coming from a woman with a distinguished record of service within the International Psychoanalytic Association, and for all the apathy and ambivalence invoked, there is something quite fundamental about the ethical and political demand that psychoanalysis as a particular institution faces. I would suggest that it has to do precisely with the question of continuous commitment to both thought and action, and not turning away from facts that are sometimes undeniable. But this may sometimes require taking
sides and, as Stephen Frosh suggests, critical engagement with the idea of analytic neutrality (Frosh 2007).

Many critics of psychoanalysis have concentrated on its failures to address anything beyond the “know thyself” of the individual mind. The knowledge that psychoanalysis proposes would appear to be primarily of a private, apolitical nature, in which the only ethics available is an ethics of truth, and the only truth possible is one that recognizes self-deception as a basic human condition. From the point of view of demands for a political and ethical vision, the fault lines of psychoanalysis, as understood in this manner, appear to be present from the outset. It is significant that among the earliest critics of Freud were Marxist intellectuals such as Bakhtin and Voloshinov, who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s. While the psychoanalyst as a clinician aims to listen to the analysand’s free associations with evenly suspended attention and a neutral stance, and the space of the consulting room may be one of privileged privacy, the exchange between analyst and analysand is also inevitably social and political through and through, and some of Freud's earliest companions were well aware of and actively promoted social justice via the establishment of free psychoanalytic clinics (Danto 2005). Moreover, as this chapter will argue, psychoanalysis as a practice is inseparable from the question of psychoanalysis as a specific institution, which inevitably locates such an exchange. Furthermore, it is a matter of its institutional geography, which was originally largely co-extensive with western colonialism, and now can be seen to be associated with economic globalization, especially given the rapid spread of psychoanalytic study circles supported by supervision-by-Skype, for example in China. In 1981, when Derrida wrote his landmark essay “Geopsychoanalysis: ‘...and the Rest of the World,’” he argued that “the Association’s main geographical areas [were] defined as America north of the United States–Mexican border; all America south of that border; and the rest of the world” (Derrida 1991, 199). He went on to argue that the loosely defined inclusiveness of that formulation, “rest of the world,” functions as:

A title, a name and a location shared by the roots of psychoanalysis and everything which, since it lies beyond the boundaries of psychoanalysis, has yet to be opened up to it—all expectations in this regard being legitimate; a sort of Far West or no man’s land, then—but also a sort of foreign body named, incorporated and circumscribed ahead of time by an IPA Constitution, rehearsing, as it were, the psychoanalytic colonisation of a non-American rest-of-the-world, the conquest of a virginity parenthetically married to Europe. (Derrida 1991, 201)
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The IPA’s statutes still divide this territory into these three main geographical areas, though the phrasing is slightly different: Europe (plus Australia, Israel, and India); Latin America (the Western hemisphere, excluding the United States and Canada); and North America (the United States, Canada, and Japan). It makes for a very strange rearrangement of the map of the world, revealing and concealing so much. One can argue that the disavowals of psychoanalysis have much to do with the inability of its theories to adequately account for the material conditions within which our psychic selves evolve. One may even say, in light of the above, that it is blind to the very shape of the world, but also to the multiple histories of colonization, conquest, trade, oppression, and dictatorship, which nevertheless insist on escaping their concealment. With sufficient attentiveness, awareness, and interest, these can indeed be read into this list of continents and nation states, both those named and those not. There are so many potential stories to be told, which may include the vicissitudes of the deployment of psychoanalysis in Southern Africa, Lebanon, Iran, Egypt, and Palestine. Some of these stories have begun to be explored; yet there remains much silence even amidst an apparent discursive opening up.

Furthermore, in its persistent privileging of individual processes of repetition working through, and mourning over social ones; and/or modeling social processes on individual or narrowly familial ones, psychoanalysis has often been content with a kind of memory work that indicates, as Dominick La Capra (1998, 8) puts it in a different context, “a failure of constructive will and diverts attention from the needs of the present and the necessity of attempting to shape the future.” In the present study, however, I wish to relate two instances of psychoanalytic practice conducted during specific socio-historical moments: South Africa in the 1930s and Brazil in the early 1970s. In both cases, the “political” could be seen to insist in a particular way, pushing the analytic relationship to its ethical limits. Moreover, the violence of social relations runs through each case as the trope that disturbs complacency.

Are We Colleagues?

The Psychoanalyst and the Witch Doctor Under Colonialism

The first story I wish to tell is that of Wulf Sachs’s therapeutic encounter with John Chavafambira in 1930s South Africa. Chavafambira was a migrant worker from Southern Rhodesia and the descendant of a long line of witch doctors, and this encounter formed the basis of a book Sachs published in
1937 under the title *Black Hamlet*, re-published more recently with a substantial introduction by Saul Dubow and Jacqueline Rose (Sachs 1996).

Sachs was an unconventional figure in the history of psychoanalysis and the first person to practice psychoanalysis in Africa. Of Jewish Lithuanian descent, he was brought up in St. Petersburg and trained as a doctor in Cologne and then London, before he emigrated to South Africa with his family in 1922, eventually specializing in psychiatric work. He began reading Freud, which led him back to Europe in 1929 to train in Berlin with Theodor Reik, and he later became an affiliate member of the British Psychoanalytic Society.

Sachs returned to Johannesburg seeking to consolidate the institutional basis of psychoanalysis in his adopted country and spread a general understanding of Freudian thought; he assembled a small group of like-minded colleagues to help him in this endeavor. As a whole, his project involved an explicit challenge to the hierarchical assumptions of colonial psychiatry with the help of psychoanalysis’ own universal categories, and in this he can be seen as a somewhat less radical precursor to Frantz Fanon (Borossa 2007). For example, Sachs (1933) published an account of his work with African patients in an asylum in Pretoria called “The Insane Native: An Introduction to a Psychological Study.” Here, he adopted a Freudian model of psychosis in order to insist on the similarity between the psychology of the European and the African subject in a state of madness and, by extension, in normality. In defending his view of the universal nature of the human psyche, Sachs was coming up against the basic foundations of colonial psychiatry as a discipline which set for itself the task of understanding “the nature of the native mind;” which from the outset was believed to be different from the European mind, and which took for granted the “imperfectability” of the colonial subject (Vaughan 1991). For example, B. J. F. Laubscher, a psychiatrist who worked in South Africa at the same time as Sachs and also used Freudian concepts in his book *Sex, Custom, and Psychopathology: A Study of South African Pagan Natives* (1937, 84–85) argued in its pages for the affinity between the psychotic European and the “normal” African. Sachs was also at odds with the official politics of a society that was legitimating itself through the separation and hierarchization of races, and the idea of the inferiority, even the innate pathology of the indigenous population.

Sachs’s significant book, *Black Hamlet*, was the result of his wish to follow up on the thesis of his article by undertaking a full study of a typical black African person in order to demonstrate the affinity between his patient’s psychology and that of the European. His patient Chavafambira was a migrant worker from what is now Eastern Zimbabwe and was the last in
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a long line of ngangas, or witch doctors, though he was living in hardship in Johannesburg. The title of the book reflects the parallel that Sachs draws from the familial position of Chavafambira and the story of Hamlet. With his father’s death, his mother married her dead husband’s brother as was customary, and Chavafambira found himself in a situation of intense rivalry with his uncle, who like his father was also a nganga. His dilemma was his need for vengeance in the narrow context of the family. Sachs (1996, 236) defines his suffering as a form of Hamletism “a universal phenomenon symbolising indecision and hesitancy when action is required and reasonably expected.” However, the text, written of course by Sachs, is also presented as the story of an unfolding dialogue between the two men: the psychoanalyst and the witch doctor, based on “a kind of interchange of medical knowledge” (74). Such an exchange, however, is circumscribed by the power relations of analysis (Sachs is mainly in the position of patient), and relativized by the fact that the two discourses are not on a par, particularly as they unfold under social circumstances of profound social discrimination. It was at that very time that a series of segregationist laws were being introduced, preparing the terrain for apartheid. Sachs was certainly sensitive to this and to the practical circumstances in which his patient/interlocutor was forced to live, and he was also attentive to what Chavafambira revealed to him about the limitations of psychoanalysis. Their relationship reached a crisis point after Chavafambira’s arrest and torture as a suspect in a murder of twins.

He tried to explain to the detectives, but in vain. The stout one probed further and further, refusing to be satisfied. It seemed to John as if these white people put their meddlesome hands into his very thoughts, ruthlessly tearing and digging out information. The two of us, the detective and myself, thus fused in John’s mind into one voice, one set of features, separated and regained their individuality, approached each other till they reminded him of a picture of Siamese twins that he had seen in one of my books. Slowly, one would be superimposed upon the other till the detective and I became one; and then instantly they would spring apart again and become two, widely separated, entirely distinct. It was a terrible thought. (Sachs 1996, 213)

It was a terrible thought indeed, the fusion of the torturer and the psychoanalyst, which Sachs could not deny—in the context of their analytic relationship, taking place as it did, at that particular time and place—and, in fact, he could
only reinforce it as Chavafambira sought to break off their dialogue, which he now found unbearable. Tellingly, Sachs decided “to interfere and break down his resistance” via psychoanalytic theory (explaining the aggressive instinct to him, and so on “until I won . . . and the months that followed were the most successful of our relationship” (Sachs 1996, 214–15). The victory, however, was not as it first appeared, the victory of an immutable psychoanalysis, for the continuation of the dialogue was dependent as well on a transformation in Sachs’s conception of his role as a psychoanalyst. This he now understood as inseparable from the need to address the practicalities of Chavafambira’s life, something which he increasingly did, encouraging Chavafambira’s education and politicization.

Outside the consulting room, Sachs became active in left-wing politics and journalism. Sachs revised his text in 1946, republishing it under the title Black Anger; excising passages where the analyst could be seen at his most patronizing in his superior conduct towards the witch doctor; and emphasizing the importance of Chavafambira’s own politicization. In both versions of the text, “inaction” is presented as the disease and politicization the “cure,” although it is still clearly Chavafambira whose inaction stood to be “cured.” Furthermore, as Jacqueline Rose clearly points out, the implicit demand on Chavafambira is to renounce his ancestral vocation in order to participate in a universalist Enlightenment project, one in which psychoanalysis clearly has its place (Dubow and Rose 1996). However, Sachs’s conclusion in the revised and expanded Black Anger is striking, as he notes the change in his patient/interlocutor, Chavafambira, and by implication in himself.

He was no more merely a nganga to give them what inspiration they could derive from shells and bones and herbs. John by now had become an effective protagonist. . . . He addressed small groups . . . pointing out the dangers of violence, which would lose them the sympathy of the many whites who for once stood solidly behind them. . . . He was looking beyond towards a new vision—a bond with his people in America. . . . And thus it was that this story, which was to have been about John the subject of a psychoanalytic study to be read by a limited number of scientists, became the story of John, the man, written to be read by everyone. (Sachs 1968, 323–24)

But would it work if some of the terms were transposed? What changes could be deduced in Sachs himself? It could be an interesting exercise to revise the
quotation in order to explore whether psychoanalyst and nganga may be inverted, and whether it may speak to Sachs’s own increasing politicization and activism. Could it be something of a rallying call for a psychoanalytic practice that could withstand disavowal and the politics of denial?

[H]e was no more merely a psychoanalyst to give them what inspiration they could derive from evenly suspended attention, interpretation and empathy. Sigmund/Wulf/ had become an effective protagonist. He addressed himself to groups pointing out the dangers of violence, which could lose them the sympathy of the many non-europeans who for once stood solidly behind them. . . . He was looking beyond towards a new vision, a bond with [his] people in the rest of the world. . . . And thus it was that this story, which was to have been about John the subject of a psychoanalytic study to be read by a limited number of scientists, became the story of John, the man, written to be read by everyone.

But let us refrain from too much optimism, however, and reserve judgment for such an expansive move. Nevertheless, I believe that a utopian possibility may be seen to be opened up within this particular socially situated analytic interaction.

Silence Is the Crime: The Psychoanalyst as Torturer and the Institutional Politics of Denial

The second story that I will turn to now concerns the ethical and political choice to act made by one particular psychoanalyst, Helena Besserman Vianna of Brazil. At great personal cost and danger to herself, she chose to speak out and to continue speaking out in the face of the explicit, concerted, and far-reaching institutional efforts to uphold a politics of denial, namely the tacit protection of doctor and psychoanalytic training candidate Amilcar Lobo, who was part of a military torture squad (Chavafambira’s nightmare vision incarnate). The story of the repetitions of institutional silencing was the specific subject of Besserman’s book, Do Not Tell: The Politics of Psychoanalysis In the Face of Dictatorship and Torture, published in the original Portuguese in 1994, made available soon after in Spanish and French versions, but still not available in English. A review by Peter Hildebrand was published early on, however, in the Bulletin of the British Psychoanalytic Society, and in 2005, a special issue of
the *Psychoanalytic Review* on “Politics and Psychoanalysis” allowed for substantial space for the story recounted in the book. This was also recorded in detail in Lucia Villela’s article, appropriately entitled “The Chalice of Silence: The Case that Refuses to Go Away,” which was published alongside lengthy responses of members of the IPA leadership involved in the events, namely Wallerstein and Etchegoyan. A very recent article in the journal *Psychoanalysis and History* also engages closely with Besserman’s book in the context of a more general examination of the deployment of psychoanalysis under conditions of political repression, especially in Brazil (Rubin et al. 2016).

But let us now turn to the story that Besserman tells, which it is worth recounting again here, even though it will be impossible to do justice to its complexity. Besserman makes a point of de-centering the scandal of Lobo, the analyst-torturer, as an example of a specific case of the perversion of a profession, which like medicine is built on an ethics of trust (see Harris and Botticelli 2010). Rather, she places Lobo in a longer history of psychoanalytic institutional politics. Let us try to follow her story, the beginning of which she situates in 1930s Europe and the decision made by Ernest Jones with Freud’s agreement to salvage the practice of psychoanalysis in Germany under Nazi rule. This involved tacitly supporting the continuous operation of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Society led by its Aryan members while their Jewish colleagues were forced out and persecuted. Werner Kemper was one such analyst who continued to work throughout the war; he was a collaborator and member of the Nazi Party rather than a secret resistant. In the immediate aftermath of the war, neither Kemper nor any of his German colleagues were asked to account for their activities (a reckoning would come later) (see Frosh 2005). In fact, Kemper reinvented himself as a militant Marxist, and along with Mark Burke, a British analyst who had been a major in the Royal Army medical corps, he was sent to Brazil by the International Psychoanalytic Association as a training analyst. Ideological and temperamental differences between the two led to a split within the Rio de Janeiro Society, which divided into Rio 1 (Kemper’s group) and Rio 2 (Burke’s). By the mid-1960s, both men had left Brazil.

In 1964, general Castello Branco, with the support of the United States, took power in Brazil, inaugurating a military dictatorship that lasted nearly twenty years. Like other places in the region, notably Argentina, the regime used tools of repression including violently crushing dissent, imprisonment, torture, and murder. It was in this context that Leo Cabernite, an analysand of Kemper with close ties to the military, acquired considerable institutional power within Rio 1. Between 1971 and 1974, he became a training analyst to
Amilcar Lobo Moreira, a medical doctor who was also a torturer employed by the secret police. An underground newspaper, *Voz Operaria*, named Lobo as part of a government torture squad. In fact, his activities were an open secret. Helena Besserman Vianna forwarded this article together with a handwritten note to Marie Langer, herself a key left-wing figure in Latin America, for publication in the Argentinian journal *Cuestionamos*. Langer then forwarded both the article and the note to Serge Lebovici, then the president of IPA, demanding an investigation into the matter and that the IPA clarify its position; in other words, Langer demanded the IPA take sides. Instead, the article with the hand-written note was sent to Cabernite as Lobo’s analyst. As a consequence of this, a government graphologist identified Besserman Vianna, who had also drawn attention to herself by publicly and scandalously asking Bion how he would respond to an analytic candidate who had “committed atrocities against others” during his famous Brazilian lecture tour (Bion 1980, 175). In effect, Besserman Vianna’s choice to act, to speak out, to take sides, put her at risk. The IPA as an institution did not respond to Langer’s demand. In fact, the institutional prevarications, many years of investigations, and ethical inquiries of one sort or another, were such that even in 2005, at the time of Villela’s article, “the Lobo case and the events that followed have been the focus of splits and controversies that are partly solved, and then forgotten, and then repeated again” (Villela 2005, 806).

Derrida’s “Geopsychoanalysis: ‘… and the Rest of the World,’” which was invoked at the beginning of this paper concerns itself above all with the act of naming. It was originally a talk delivered to a meeting of French and Latin American analysts in Paris at the invitation of Rene Major, a friend and ally of Besserman Vianna, who also wrote the preface to the French translation of Besserman Vianna’s book. Derrida specifically addressed the IPA’s need to formulate a neutral condemnation of human rights abuses. As the consensus statement put it, in “parallel with other international organizations, the IPA is aware of the violation of human rights occurring in certain regions of the world. . . . The IPA equally condemns the violation of human rights, citizens, scientists, and of our colleagues in particular” (Major in Besserman 1996, 13, my translation). As Major puts it,

This declaration neglects the properly symbolic inscription of the violation; effaces through its formal abstraction the reach it could have coming as it does from an international organization legitimated by Freud’s thought . . . it annuls the act of nomination (which links the
name of a country to proper names to a particular politics), all of which is guarantor of an ethics of speech. Furthermore, its corporate nature weakens or corrupts its universalist intentions. (13)

In other words it is inaction, not taking sides, turning away from a specific situation, which is detrimental to the psychoanalytic project, and which thus finds itself curiously bracketed off from the world in the name of a misunderstood ethics of neutrality.

Although the truth about Lobo became officially known by the early 1980s, it is ironic as well as detrimental to her safety, that for years the only one named was Besserman Vianna herself. It is fitting to be reminded here of the title of the book in which she made the story public: *Do Not Tell*. This can be read in the context of the events that are recounted in it as a perverse interpretation of the ethical stand that protects the boundaries and privacy of the analytic encounter. Lobo himself went public and published an account of his activities in 1989. But as far as the IPA and Cabernite’s role in actively dissimulating the activities of Lobo, it fell to Horacio Etchegoyan to initiate an ethical enquiry, which began as late as 1994 and which eventually led to Cabernite’s exclusion from the IPA (Villela 2005; Rubin et al. 2016).

Commenting on the role of psychoanalysis, Villela (2005, 814–15) states:

Two of the main ethical problems faced by analysts are those of confidentiality and of neutrality. That is not the problem we are discussing here. An analyst cannot ever denounce a patient and break the confidentiality of the analytic relationship, and Dr. Cabernite would have been perfectly within his rights and within analytic ethics if he had limited his actions to helping his analysand confront his own existing doubts about his job and to seeing him through this tragically destructive part of his life. However, it is not acceptable for the president of an analytic society, or for any analyst, to permit the acceptance, let alone the training, of a candidate who is sworn to alleviate human suffering and instead contributes to the imposing of physical or psychological pain in the interrogation of any human being, including prisoners, whether criminal or political.

When Helena Besserman Vianna spoke at the Estates General of Psychoanalysis conference held in Paris in the summer of 2000, one of her last public appearances before her death in early 2002, she retold the story of her in-
volvement with the Lobo case. In her paper she insisted, as she did in her book, on the institutional filiations of silence and transgression at work, and on the chain that linked Kemper to Lobo. She called, in an impassioned way, for psychoanalysis’ active political engagement; neutrality and silence were not an option, she said, especially for psychoanalysts, since separation from the social and political arena was not possible, it was worst than a mistake, it was a waste (“gaspillage” was the word she used) (Besserman 2000). In other words, to separate out the private was one thing, but to then forget about the public sphere was something of a different order all together. One has to take responsibility for failing to act and for the consequences of that failure.

In a later interview given in 1996, Lobo again acknowledged that he did work with military teams in the interrogation of prisoners, but justified his actions by saying that his job was mostly keeping the prisoners alive, and so it was within the boundaries of medical ethics. Responding to Helena Vianna’s criticism of his actions, to her accusations that he had no shame for acts committed or witnessed, he wrote, “she seems to forget that Man has used torture and murder for thousands of years, ever since he organized in societies. Only a very short time ago, the Inquisition tortured and killed countless Jews, and a little over forty years ago, the German Nazi regime proceeded in the same manner. This is thus man in his total mental structure, and I am not ashamed to be one of them” (quoted in Villela 2005, 823).

The clinical and political meanings of “having no shame” are one thing and quite separate from a theorization of the aggressive instinct, and it may be worth here invoking Freud’s brilliant analysis of social violence in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* which argues:

[T]hat men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. Who in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion? (Freud 1929, 111)
After dozens of re-readings, this passage still takes my breath away. Freud succeeds in troubling certainties on two levels. He weaves together not only individual and group behavior—the responsibility for violence against the other operates clearly on both levels— but also the realm of material and psychic fact. There is no doubt whatsoever that human beings do rape, enslave, torture, and kill one another, but this violence also operates at the level of desire and fantasy, where the subject and object of violence exist in interdependent complementarity. The neighbor, Freud notes, tempts us to satisfy our aggressiveness. We all have a neighbor; we are all somebody else’s neighbor.

This is not an invitation to follow our desire without shame, but rather to understand precisely the responsibilities of interconnectedness. The wager of psychoanalysis is that silence and turning away have consequences, personal as well as institutional.

I am aware that what I present here does not lend itself to a conclusion, but rather to continued questioning. I have invoked two specific moments in the history of psychoanalysis, each of which in its own way places a demand towards the opening up or the extension to the remit of psychoanalysis. This extension may involve the recognition of the fundamental sociality and historical situatedness of our subjectivity, which by definition would move “the rest of the world” out of the margins of institutional disavowal. But recognition in itself is not sufficient, but it does involve persistently striving for a multiplicity of dialogues, not only the dialogue of patient and analyst, or those across many branches of the fragmented world of psychoanalysis, but also between psychoanalysis and other disciplines and practices from which it may learn. And in such a dialogue, it would, of course, make its own modest or immodest contribution. Such an extension of psychoanalysis would, at times, necessarily include the commitment to speak out, take sides, and act when the situation demands it, as it did in the two examples above, outside institutions, case by case, act by act.

REFERENCES


