

What has Zionism done to Psychoanalysis?

“We begin by tracing the recent history of those organizations that are dedicated to the premeditated butchery of civilians.” Harvey Schwartz



Can psychoanalysis contribute anything at this juncture?

We have entered the starvation phase. The aggression by land, air and sea continues too. British-Palestinian theatre director Tanushka Marah cuts through the life-denying rhetoric, telling us:

This is hell. It is what every moral theory, religion and cautionary tale warns against. This is the worst of our humanity. This is the “never again” moment in history. This is a genocide of the Palestinian people.¹

Our politicians tie themselves up in knots trying to look recognisably human, while doing everything possible to avoid calling for peace. Meanwhile, to their chagrin, truly civilised voices from the Global South push the responsible organs of the United Nations to debate the legality of the Occupation, 57 years after it began, and to arraign Israel for genocide.

It is often claimed that psychoanalysis helps us to understand such extreme destructiveness, hatred and sadism, and is thus uniquely placed to help unpack the intractable ‘conflict’ between Israel and the Palestinians. It offers to identify the unconscious forces in play, with collective historical trauma, or traumas, held to be at the root of the problem. Commentators refer to ‘the return of the repressed’, and ‘identification with the aggressor’. Some approach it from a different angle, psychoanalysing ‘terrorism’, and political ‘extremism’.

Proponents of the discipline have offered their skills as honest brokers, believing that this can contribute towards reconciliation and peace. They herald their expertise in promoting dialogue,

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpMRkOZwGxM&t=3s>

mediation, mutual empathy, in working through unresolved grief and trauma, and diminishing mutual hatred through providing professionally contained encounters with ‘the Other’. Some still strive to hold this line, like missionaries of old focusing on the saving of souls rather than the protection of whole societies from catastrophic ruin. The Anna Freud Centre is one such, its concern for child welfare prompting an offer to bereaved parents and carers to make use of its [online trauma treatment programmes](#)²: as Canadian psychoanalyst, Judith Deutsch, [has suggested](#), a response “wholly incommensurate with the genocidal reality”³.

The evidence presented in our earlier report, [The Moral Bankruptcy of Psychoanalysis](#)⁴, documenting the profession’s response to the current crises in Palestine during October and November, suggests that psychoanalysis is in no state to play such a benign role. What was revealed was the extent to which Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism has infected the upper echelons of the psychoanalytic profession.

Rather than displaying confidence in the value of its enlightened contribution, the profession might do better to adopt an attitude of contrition, humility and bewilderment. In our view, its primary responsibility at this point is one of self-analysis. The critical question is not, ‘what can psychoanalysis do for peace in the Middle East?’ but ‘what has Zionism done to psychoanalysis?’.

Business as usual

Regrettably, no such shift is yet visible within the international psychoanalytic community.

In December 2023, OFEK, the Israeli Association for the Study of Group and Organizational Processes, issued an invitation to colleagues to [a conference](#) within 48/Israel in February 2024⁵. Israel, states OFEK, offers ‘a unique ground’ for looking into the crises of the moment and their impact on clinicians. Visitors were not to worry about the ‘war’: *‘The conference will be conducted according to the guidelines of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Home Front Command to ensure the continued safety of residents.’* Were the organisers right to assume that visiting psychoanalysts would be calmed, knowing they were being protected by a force engaged in slaughtering tens of thousands of civilians a mere taxi-ride from their hotels?

The combined Mental Health Networks issued a [‘Don’t Go’ request](#)⁶ to the international mental health community. In response to this campaign⁷, the [Tavistock Institute for Human Relations](#)⁸ (TIHR), in London, part of an [international network of associations](#)⁹, affiliated with OFEK, replied with a statement entitled: ‘Why we work with Israel-based OFEK and in countries where there is conflict and war’. It included the following explanation:

TIHR is an apolitical, not-for-profit organisation with a stated mission of providing opportunities for learning and study for the purpose of bettering working life and conditions for people within their organisations, communities, and broader societies.

² Statement from Anna Freud on Israel-Gaza at: <http://tinyurl.com/y837wav3>

³ <https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/11/17/palestine-genocide-regressive-response-from-major-mental-health-organizations/>

⁴ <https://ukpalmhn.com/resources/ukpalmhn-statement-the-moral-bankruptcy-of-psychoanalysis/>

⁵ <https://ofekgrouprelations.org/en/intgrc2024/>

⁶ <https://ukpalmhn.com/resources/dont-go-to-the-recalculating-conference/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.tavistockinstitute.org/tavistock-community>

⁹ <https://ofekgrouprelations.org/en/related-organizations/>

As such, we do not engage in boycotting activities, but rather, even in the darkest moments of life, the TIHR aims to provide places and spaces where, despite all atrocities and cruelty, it is possible to connect as humans.

In these words, the TIHR signalled its commitment to a 'business as usual' approach: the genocide has changed nothing. It has wheeled out the justifications routinely issued in the past by international mental health organisations to justify their inaction in the face of apartheid, criminality and state terror. And now they can do no more than wipe the tears from their eyes, as they contemplate continuing their serious psychoanalytic work just out of reach of the stench of decomposing bodies.

We ask whether meeting in 48/Israel, at events hosted by Israeli institutions which have never challenged the Occupation and the apartheid system within which they work, could possibly be an appropriate environment for mental health workers to come together and reflect on the current crisis?

Have ideological commitments subverted psychoanalysis?

In British public life, it goes without saying that 'our interests' will always coincide with those of the United States. The hegemon's power acts like an irresistible gravitational force, a Dementor, sapping the agency and originality of our political classes. But, relatively speaking, our acceptance of US suzerainty operates with just enough wriggle-room to protect a nation's self-respect. Obeisance to Zionism, by contrast, involves more glaring contradictions and has required far cruder forms of submission aimed at manipulating, or blocking, the free expression of public opinion.

The attempt to foist ethnic cleansing within an institutionalised system of apartheid upon societies that pride themselves, rightly or wrongly, on being guardians of 'civilised values', (taken to include racial equality, respect for the law, compassion and good neighbourliness), requires special measures. These have included the corruption of language, with the redefinition of what racism is and is not, and the subsequent introduction of quasi-legal curbs on free speech and other civil liberties. We have witnessed the gelding of the British Labour Party and the humiliation of academia. Schoolchildren are brainwashed and surveilled, while snipers are despatched to kneecap any wavering politician or wayward undergraduate or university teacher.

We are here concerned with the impact of this process on psychoanalysis.

In his lecture 'The Question of a Weltanschauung', Freud spelled out in the clearest terms his belief that the greatest threat to psychoanalysis was its susceptibility to succumbing to the dictates of an ideology, either religious or political. This, he said, would introduce a 'prohibition against thought', fatally corrupting the liberating mission of psychoanalysis. In our reports on the response of the psychoanalytic world to Gaza, we are documenting the debilitating consequences of a controlling caste, as it appears, for whom it goes without saying that all thought has to be brought into line with the ideological assumption of the Zionist movement, in defence of the Israeli regime.

We concluded our first report by critiquing a Statement called 'The rise of antisemitism in the wake of the Hamas barbaric attack', signed by the IPA's Prejudice, Discrimination, Racism Committee (PDRC). While clearly appearing on IPA headed paper, it has not been distributed by IPA member institutions, nor has it been uploaded onto the main IPA website. Its status remains obscure. However, it is still [prominently displayed](http://tinyurl.com/2wh2vekr) on the IPA's 'Off the Couch' website¹⁰, hosted by Harvey Schwartz, of whom more below.

¹⁰ <http://tinyurl.com/2wh2vekr>

Whatever the status of this document, its existence raises serious questions about the culture and inner workings of the IPA. Does the membership of this committee help us understand why the IPA has had nothing to say in response to the reports issued by [Amnesty International](#)¹¹, [Human Rights Watch](#)¹², [B'Tselem](#)¹³ and others, declaring Palestine to be an apartheid society – characterised, that is, by racial supremacism and systematic discrimination - ‘from the river to the sea’? These reports were issued shortly after the adoption of IPA [committed itself](#)¹⁴ to an active and energetic anti-racist policy.

It is astonishing, certainly, that a committee responsible (presumably) for implementing, and certainly acting within, its Anti-Racist Statement should become a platform for air-brushing out of history Israel’s decades-long aggression against Gaza, and slandering the worldwide movement for peace and justice in Palestine as a threat to the Jewish Israeli people?

Mira Erlich-Ginor was one of the signatories to the Prejudice, Discrimination, Racism Committee (PDRC) Statement. At the start of February, the IPA emailed notice of a group relations conference, ‘Exploring Irrationality in Self and Organisation’, once again under Erlich-Ginor’s name, this time in her capacity as ‘Chair of the Steering Committee, IPA in the Community & the World’. It comes to feel as if Erlich-Ginor is some kind of Foreign Minister for the IPA! The Conference Director will be Shmuel Erlich, one of her closest associates. It is unlikely, in our view, that the kind of irrationality that underlies the IPA’s paralysis in the face of a genocide could be profitably explored at an event overseen by those with views such as those glimpsed in the PDRC Statement.

Meanwhile, the IPA has published the recording of a conversation between Erlich-Ginor and Merav Roth, [Care of the Victims of the October 7th Massacre](#)¹⁵, chaired by Harvey Schwartz.

The webinar is advertised as having begun ‘by tracing the recent history of those organizations that are dedicated to the premeditated butchery of civilians’¹⁶. This refers to Schwartz’s introductory remarks: whether they constitutes ‘history’ as most of us understand the term, or debased propaganda, might be judged from the edited transcript below:

Welcome to today’s podcast... On October 7th of this year we encountered a new version of old story... It has to do with the premeditated butchery of civilians, and here we are again. It’s a long story, but we have many, many examples in our own lifetimes. We have, of course, Hamas on October 7th, premeditative butchery of civilians. More recently we have Isis/DASH in the 2000s; in the 1990s, the Hutus against the Tutsis. And of course in the 1940s we have many examples. We have the Einsatzgruppen. Their charge was not to fight the Russians, it was to slaughter civilians. Again, the premeditated butchery of civilians...

But there are differences. One difference ... is that the Germans, for the most part, sought to hide their crimes against humanity, and that’s different from nowadays. Hamas celebrates the burning of babies and the rape of grandmothers. These are occasions for unabashed rejoicing. Famously in the face of children being killed, candy is given to their children to let them know: this is the ego ideal we have for you, we want you to grow up to be a murderer like our heroes are murderers.

... So that’s familiar, but there is something new now.

¹¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en/>

¹² <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>

¹³ https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid

¹⁴ https://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/News/IPA_Anti-Racism_Statement_2021.aspx

¹⁵ <http://tinyurl.com/55x35fkx>

¹⁶ Ibid.

In the States and in Europe our neighbours are doing their own version of dancing in the streets. People march through the streets, chanting 'Death to the Jews'; Jewish stores are being marked; No Jews Allowed are signs that are going up. random Jews walking in the streets are being assaulted, in the States, in Europe. There are college professors who, when they first heard of the butchery of the innocents, said it was awesome, it was exhilarating, it was astounding. These are ostensibly civilised people, educated people, it was energising to hear about the mothers and grandmothers being murdered.

*So we are living in this dystopian world, day is night and night is day.*¹⁷

This last sentence is one that we would agree with, as evidenced by Schwartz's own words.

Here we see, once again, the brazen abuse of Nazi atrocities to block discussion of Israel's own. While the Zionist movement's re-definition of anti-Semitism declares it unacceptable to compare Israel's actions to those of Nazi Germany, Zionists themselves are addicted to labelling their critics, large and small, as Nazis wherever and whenever they appear. Why? Surely because they are desperately trying to retain and exploit their victim status as a means of diverting attention from the true character of their settler colonial replacement project in Palestine.

But, Schwartz insists, 'there is something new' here. He draws a qualitative line between the Nazis, who 'sought to hide their crimes against humanity' – so still possessing a sense of shame, a conscience (like us? Like other white people?) – and Hamas, who he relates to the farther reaches of Hell, even outdoing ISIS in its perfidy. We see this as a further expression of Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian racism here. (It may not be coincidental that the Germans are now, of course, the staunchest defenders of Israel's genocide.)

And then, along with them, we find ourselves! The global solidarity movement has revealed its true nature, reigniting anti-Jewish terror on the streets of Europe! 'No Jews allowed signs are going up'!

Schwartz's lacks the capacity for imaginative identification necessary to understand why anyone might have celebrated an act of resistance against Israel; his ideological investments cancel out whatever scope for self-doubt or simple curiosity he might otherwise have mustered. He has abandoned the instinct that surely informs the most basic psychotherapeutic work, the knowledge that if we look closely enough into even apparently aberrant behaviour, we will be able to account for it in human terms.

Here he suffers from a double blindness. In being unable to picture the reality of Palestinian life under colonial subjugation, he cannot begin to understand the nature of the society with which he identifies, and to whose crusade he has allied himself. By sugar-coating Zionism, he grants himself leave to remain unaware by its brutality, its racial arrogance, its capacity for massacre, and genocide.

No doubt panicked by the scenes across the world of large scale Jewish participation in the protests against Israel's aggression, he joins the Islamophobic Right in portraying these rainbow [celebrations of life](#)¹⁸ and expressions of grief and rage, as hate-filled opportunities to target Jews.

All Schwartz provides, in the end, is a telling example of how the psychological dynamics of colonialism requires the projection of its own barbarity into the people it colonises, and their allies. Psychological need dictates the embrace of myth, and the employment of radical psychic defences against facing or exploring external reality. Only by obliterating the humanity of the oppressed, at this particular point deafening and blinding oneself to the wilful murder and maiming, the planned

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ https://www.tiktok.com/@generalstrike/video/7329345173052247338?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7288262496384828960

starvation and disease, the unimaginable pain and loss of this, can the coloniser protect a version of the self as a morally upright citizen. It links to a psychoanalysis devoid of perspective, content to simply imbibe the assumptions of ruling elites - failing, therefore, to root itself in history and an understanding of social dynamics, where the 'external world' is understood to be constitutive of a social unconscious that itself needs to be analysed.

What individuals like Schwartz say and write is not our primary concern: they are entitled to their political opinions, and have a right to express them. What is deeply disturbing to us is that people holding such a hateful and vicious positions, so imbued with racism, can freely post on a website associated with the International Psychoanalytic Association.

Surely it is time for the IPA to decide whether it is committed to challenging racism or practicing it?

Where do we go from here?

We are in the midst of a genocide: a preventable, criminal, mass slaughter, that reveals not only the barbaric nature of settler colonialism, but also the depravity of the political and media culture of the Global North - the wealthy, powerful, 'democratic', self-appointed guardians of 'civilisation', guarantors of the 'rule-based order'.

Must psychoanalysis be party to this charade?

This is not the first time that the profession has faced dilemmas of this kind, yet perhaps little has been learnt from past experience. Canessa Fisher, reflecting on the responses of the psychoanalytic establishment to state terror in Latin America, writes:

Although psychoanalytic theory critically questioned the rules and conventions of early 19th-century Europe, its "preservation" is based on the submission and castration of the institution as a social space... a high cost was paid because of this and ... the acquisition of new, broadened, and deepened knowledge and understanding because of this confinement was, at best, inhibited and, at worst, forbidden.¹⁹

Canessa Fisher was writing about how, during the 1970s, the Chilean Psychoanalytic Association had identified with the Military Junta that had overthrown the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, and subsequently inflicted a long reign of terror over civil society. During the dictatorship, the majority of analysts:

struck a moral, political, theoretical, and clinical stance, which entirely disavowed the context of the violent military dictatorship in which it existed and practiced appearing to be "saving" or "protecting" the purity of psychoanalytic thought from the intrusion of environmental factors.²⁰

Today as well, this outlook condemns therapists to occupying the roles of bystander, collaborator and appeaser.

But the IPA is not an Israeli, or an American organisation: it is international, with chapters across the world. Does its apparent capture by the Zionist movement reflect the views, professional ethics and morals of its membership? Is it representative of psychoanalysts from South Africa, Turkey, the many Latin American countries, Lebanon and Tunisia? Were any of these groups consulted, asked if they agree that the association to whom they pay their dues should turn itself into a front organisation for an apartheid regime now committing genocide?

¹⁹ Fischer Canessa, C. (2016) Psychoanalysis and Dictatorship in Chile: A Non-Existing Relationship. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 26:476-485

²⁰ *Ibid.*

There are indications that rank and file mental health workers are mobilising to get their voices heard.

In December 2023, several hundred British psychiatrists wrote to the President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, protesting the bias evident in the contrasting official responses to the invasion of Ukraine, and the invasion of Gaza. Clinical psychologists too have organised in response to the crisis in Palestine. The Family Therapy Association of Ireland has published a letter calling for an immediate ceasefire. Members of the British Psychoanalytic Council have formed a group, issuing a Statement calling for 'an end to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza'.

There are two threads that recur in this agitation: a demand that the slaughter be brought to an immediate end, accompanied by expressions of dismay that the crisis has exposed the extent to which their professional bodies have become mired in anti-Palestinian racism and bias.

We have argued that this bias has two distinct consequences. As an influential section of civil society, psychoanalysis fails in its responsibility to uphold a critical, ethically-informed role in upholding and defending non-oppressive social relationships, that are also essential for mental health. As a practice dependent for its own vitality on the freedom to think, unencumbered by ideological baggage such as that necessary for the normalisation of settler colonialism and ethnic nationalism, it is inimical to the future prospects of psychoanalysis itself.

To return to the history, during periods of intense social dislocation, sufficient to penetrate the inner sanctums of reserved and conservative professional communities such as psychoanalysis, tensions have sometimes been impossible to contain institutionally. On occasion, radical, socially-engaged groups of clinicians have broken away from what they experienced as an authoritarian and reactionary mainstream, to form new societies committed to integrating a social awareness into their clinical thinking - as for example during the military repression in Chile and Argentina²¹. Rather than splitting in this way, we are hopeful that the disjuncture between official evasion and equivocation on the one hand, and public outrage on the other, which we believe to be replicated within the mental health professions, will have another outcome: the democratisation of our institutions, bringing their practice into line with their already stated commitments to racial equality, and their mission of understanding and alleviating mental distress.

²¹ Eg the 'Platform' group in Argentina, see Langer, M. (1989) *From Vienna to Managua*; Fischer Canessa, C. (2016) Psychoanalysis and Dictatorship in Chile: A Non-Existing Relationship. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 26:476-485