

Hard to Swallow

In 1900 sponge divers sheltering from an Aegean storm dove off the island of Attikythera. They found a shipwreck. Amongst the treasures was a mashed-up ancient Greek analogue 'computer' made of bronze. The Attikythera mechanism tracked planetary movements, zodiac constellations, solar and lunar eclipses and even Greek sporting events. So absurdly complex was this astronomical calculator of Swiss clock refinement, that the analysing science historian Derek Price wrote in a 1959 paper: "It is a bit frightening, to know that just before the fall of their great civilization the ancient Greeks had come so close to our age, not only in their thoughts, but also in their scientific technology."

Price's incredulity tells us something about our prejudice. It's hard to imagine anyone from the ancient past as brainy as we think we are, despite the fact their neural capacity was no different from our own. Even if they did come up with democracy and philosophy and literature and modern mathematics, could they really make a thing so intricate and fabulous? Prejudice assumes the inferiority of peoples not in or of our place and time. Supposedly less intelligent, capable and 'civilised,' they are deemed exploitable. When 'inferior' peoples finally access the power and technologies with which they are often overpowered, exploited and subdued, they become a threat. Their claim for recognition, respect and equality becomes impossible to refute. The exploiters, put in touch with the fragility of their hegemony, fear a reverse of fortunes.

Some months ago I wrote an essay called *The Telling* for the British Psychoanalytic Council's tri-annual magazine, *New Associations*. It was never published. *The Telling* recounted a true-life therapeutic case study from the book *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*. The case study concerned a Palestinian man who went to see a Palestinian therapist about a lump in his throat. It was also about the therapist's Israeli supervisor and their seemingly inexplicable advice to end the therapy just as it was progressing. My characterisation of the supervisor was deemed a troubling straw man connivance, creating a pantomime villain with racist and antisemitic overtones. How could a sophisticated well-educated western-oriented Jewish-Israeli psychologist be blind to the insights developed between a Palestinian therapist and her Palestinian patient?

It turned out the blockage in the man's throat was associated with a humiliating incident at an Israeli checkpoint where a soldier told his young daughter, in her birthday party dress and needing the toilet, to piss herself in the car. The Israeli supervisor was faced, not only with the supervisee's obvious aptitude, insight and compassion in arriving at this association, but with the deleterious impact of a brutally oppressive State, of which they were a privileged citizen. It was then apparent that therapy could only continue in a bubble of psychoanalytic innocence oblivious to occupation and apartheid. Perhaps, I suggested, the supervisor's ego-identity - their sense of a good Israeli self - was too threatened. They must scotomize association between state violence and the patient's complaint, (replaced with 'anxiety disorder'), and ultimately delete the link by recommending termination. The Palestinian therapist's consequent persistence with the therapy was a risky and unsettling act of clinical and political resistance. It led to her and her patient experiencing a kind of liberating psychic awakening to the elephant in the room.

In his review of Barbara Walter's *How Civil Wars Start* (London Review of Books, May 26th, 2022) the writer James Meek is troubled. Whether describing Apartheid South Africa or post invasion Iraq, he finds Walter rendering civil strife as a spot of local bother in which the natives disappointingly exchange the promise of Liberty's flame for lethal bickering. And whilst western civilisation's culpability in stoking internecine conflict is always there lurking in the background, she

never quite squares it with her insistence that we've always been 'delivering freedom to a welcome population.' Referencing the Invasion of Iraq, Meek finds Walter's writing somewhat schizoid, like the white man's liberal idealism 'never hitched a ride on the back of revenge-hungry, racist isolationism.' It is as if, Meek observes, "cherished liberal causes – democracy, equal rights, tolerance – should not be associated with the grubbiness of inter-communal violence." It is as if there is no shadow to our positive self-image.

'America, is not unique in its sins,' insisted Eddie Glaude, Princeton Professor of African American Studies, in a spot on the American network MSNBC in 2019. 'Where we may be singular' he continued, 'is our refusal to acknowledge them, and the legends and myths we tell about our inherent goodness.' This, he added, was done 'to hide and cover and conceal so that we can maintain a kind of wilful ignorance that protects our innocence.'

New Associations' critique of *The Telling* was not shocking in its accusation of supposed bias and possible antisemitism - that naturally comes with the territory. It was shocking in framing the conflict quite free of historical context and moral truth. There are strong emotions on each side, I was told, as if one suffering peoples never, for whatever reason, took another indigenous people's land - and then cast some out, never to return, and left others second-class citizens and refugees on their own turf. It was as if the existential fears that traumatised Jews bore with them to Palestine were not, from the start, willingly hitched to a determined muscular Zionism and a settler colonial plan of conquest and supremacy. It was as if the coloniser had never cultivated a visceral racist hatred of the colonised alongside learning their language in school, coveting their culinary and musical traditions and welcoming their contribution to the national coffers. I know all this because I was a little Israeli boy. It was as if our partisan political and media support of Israel, this serial breaker of international law, never happened and never pointed to our own racist assumption that Palestinian lives matter less because Palestinians are people of a lesser God. Such wilful ignorance is dangerous, Eddie Glaude suggests. Especially so, I would add, in the therapeutic encounter where ones ethnicity, colour or indigeneity often marks subterranean pain, anger and anguish emerging from personal and communal histories of colonialism, enslavement, oppression and day to day discrimination.

In a somewhat perverse inversion of my own understanding and experience, I was told that it takes more courage to insist on a writer's thoughtful, balanced well-made argument, than to facilitate expression of obviously partisan views in New Associations. That suggests a proper psychoanalytic thinking space must exclude passionately held positions on issues of social justice when it comes to Israel. In fact, at present it takes courage to publish anything about Palestine in such a febrile and paranoid climate of censorship, with freedom of expression directly under attack. Accusations of cowardice are coming from both sides, the editor told me. The complainants have a point.

In back-and-forth correspondences with New Associations I was told - without irony, and in the middle of a genocidal onslaught that has left well over 50,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, dead - that the supervisor's characterisation in *The telling* was not credible; it was too 'extreme, unexplained and difficult to identify with.' This was contemporaneous to a May 2024 poll that found only 19% of Israelis thought the military response in Gaza had gone too far, and 34% felt it hadn't gone far enough. In 2015, renowned Israeli journalist Gideon Levy gave a talk suggesting his nation was like a person needing 'either medication or hospitalisation, because people who lose connection with reality might be very dangerous, either to themselves or to society.' The Palestinian psychiatrist Dr Mustafa Elmasri, who's just been killed in Gaza by this revenge-thirsty ethnostate, put it like this: 'some well-intentioned people hope that Israel will one day wake up

and realize the wrongs they've done to us. I can treat a patient's delusions with a high dose of antipsychotics, but I don't think that approach works on deeply ingrained cultural delusions or beliefs.'

It seems that for some in the psychoanalytic community naturally identified professionally, and sometimes personally, with a rich and sorrowful history of Jewish brilliance, sophistication, victimhood and persecution, this insane collective barbarism inflicted on the Palestinian people by Israel is just too mad to swallow.