

## **Introducing *Psychoanalysis and Politics* – A conversation with Lene Auestad and Jonathan Davidoff<sup>1</sup>**

**Conducted and edited by Steffen Krüger**

Even though the *Psychoanalysis and Politics* group has existed for only three years, it has already become a veritable institution within psychoanalytic and psychosocial studies. True to its straightforward title, the group is engaged in the border regions of the two disciplines. With its two organizers, the Norwegian philosopher Lene Auestad and the Mexican psychologist Jonathan Davidoff (who both live in London), *Psychoanalysis and Politics* has reached far beyond national and cultural borders; a trick not easily done within an interdisciplinary field that is relatively little known outside Britain. A member of the Nordic Summer University (NSU), an open access, democratic forum for intellectual debate, Auestad was invited to organise her own group under the forum's auspices. This invitation resulted in the birth of the group and its first three-day conference in Copenhagen in March 2010. "Reflecting my research interest in the theme of prejudice, this conference bore the title: Exclusion and the Politics of Representation,"<sup>2</sup> says Lene Auestad in recapitulating the first steps in establishing the project.

Jonathan Davidoff, who presented a paper at this first symposium, subsequently joined Auestad as co-organiser. Since then, the plan has been for the *Psychoanalysis and Politics* group to convene biannually, but in 2012 a third date had to be added, because of the many responses to its calls for papers. Additionally, the publication of the first conference volume (Auestad, 2012) has marked the beginning of the *Psychoanalysis and Politics* book series; and a special

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<sup>1</sup> [psychoanalysis.politics@gmail.com](mailto:psychoanalysis.politics@gmail.com)  
[www.facebook.com/psApol](http://www.facebook.com/psApol)  
[www.psa-pol.org](http://www.psa-pol.org)

<sup>2</sup> This is also the title of the first group publication, edited by Auestad (2012, London: Karnac).

issue of the *American Imago*, scheduled for late 2013, will further solidify the group's position within the field of the psychoanalytic study of socio-political conflict.

In light of this positive reception and the fast pace with which the group has outgrown its original setting,<sup>3</sup> the time seems ripe for a first round of stock taking and thorough reflection on *Psychoanalysis and Politics*. – What are the project's roots and whereabouts; what are its further aims and objectives, its inner dynamics and – yes – politics?

By way of producing such a statement, Lene Auestad, Jonathan Davidoff, and I – Steffen Krüger, a member of the group since early 2011 – agreed on the interview format as a well-suited vehicle to transport the open, dialogical form that we thought characteristic of both the group's cultural-political outlook and the overall feel of its symposia. It is in this sense that I can surrender my editorial authority at this point and round off my introduction with a substantial outtake from the interview, the rest of which readers will find below. Thus, Auestad writes about the group's work so far:

“There is a thread running through our conferences in the sense that the questions which each of them raises are derived from discussions we have had at previous conferences. For example, while the first symposium discussed acts of denigration and demonization, the following one was about the reverse side of such acts, specifically: idealisation and the idealised, pure object. This latter conference, Nationalism and the Body Politic, (Norwegian Psychoanalytic Institute, Oslo, March 2011), addressed the revival of neo-nationalist policies in different countries, as well as the fantasies connected with them. In the autumn of 2010, when we developed the outline of this symposium, there were frightening signs of such developments in many countries, and there was strong resistance to raising these issues. Curiously, as we now know, the terrorist attacks in Oslo by Anders Behring Breivik took place a few months after that; the situation, with hostile debates around immigration and multiculturalism, has now

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<sup>3</sup> The organizers are planning for the group to become a fully independent organisation. For this purpose, *Psychoanalysis and Politics* was registered as an association, a non-profit organisation, in Norway in 2012, with the organisation no. 998 503 221.

exploded in Norway. The following conference, *Narrativities and Political Imaginaries*, held in Sweden in summer 2011, continued exploring this theme, with a special focus on the use of literature and film.

“In the course of these initial conferences it occurred to us that there is a link between neo-nationalist revivals and a lack, or failure of mourning. Especially the paper that Margarita Palacio gave in Oslo, “Between Fantasy and Melancholia: Lack, Otherness and Violence”, raised the question of what it means in a political context to say that someone needs to work through their losses. That again inspired us to think further about these issues. The conferences on “Shared Traumas, Silent Loss, Public and Private Mourning”, at the Swedish Psychoanalytic Society, Stockholm, in March 2012, then at Brandbjerg College, Denmark, in August 2012, and, finally, at the British Psychoanalytic Society, London, October 2012, approached that subject from a wide range of different cultural settings and political contexts. In turn, the conference, “Eruptions, Disruptions and Returns of the Repressed”, at the Finnish Psychoanalytic Society in Helsinki in March 2013, took The Arab Spring, the UK Riots and the Occupy movement, as well as the recent violent right-wing attacks in Europe, as its point of departure. Here we questioned how to evaluate and think about these phenomena, and also to what extent these events challenge the limits of psychoanalytic conceptualisation. So, looking at the way our symposia have developed, one can say that there is an inner logic to the development of the themes as well as an outward-directed one; a need to think about what is happening now.” (Auestad, 2012–13, interview with the author)

In closing my introduction, let me briefly emphasise some of the aspects which Auestad listed as central concerns to *Psychoanalysis and Politics*. These are: the attentiveness to inner and outer, mental and cultural mechanisms and their interplays – mechanisms of exclusion and elevation, repression and idealisation, to the dynamics of narrative lines, contexts, associations, to processes of working upon the various layers of meanings and their investments, the anxieties with which they are protected and defended, as well as the intensities with which

these meanings are often threatened, transformed, sometimes shattered. While each of us pieces these aspects together in unique ways, shaping the peculiar dynamics of each of our psychic realities, the manifold framings and interplays of these interior dynamics, in turn, form the social realities against which, in a dialectical loop, our psychic ones are made and remade. I would like to think that, to a substantial degree, the psychosocial as well as cultural-analytical sensitivity which goes into the planning of the conferences of *Psychoanalysis and Politics* can be taken as representative of the group's orientation as a whole. Having thus jumped head-on into the interview, here is the rest:

Steffen Krüger:

Lene, you are a research fellow both at the philosophy dept. and at the Centre for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities in your hometown, Oslo, Norway; you are living in London. And Jonathan, you are a psychologist and honorary psychotherapist at the West Middlesex Hospital, doing your PhD in psychoanalysis at University College London; you are from Mexico City. – Actually, it is only now, in presenting the two of you in such compressed form, that I realize how poignantly the two of you, as the organizers of the *Psychoanalysis and Politics* group, represent the combination of psychoanalysis and politics through your interests. Could you tell me more about your academic and personal paths that led you to an interest in the combination of psychoanalysis and politics?

Lene Auestad:

At first I could say that these interests, to my past disappointment, do not really combine in the institutions I am affiliated with. I found philosophy to a large extent turned inwards, focused on technical matters rather than being engaged with the outside world; scholars who study the Holocaust to be mostly averse to explanations that take the unconscious into account; and psychoanalysts often seem reluctant or afraid to take a stand in political and social issues – such a stand perhaps being seen as a retreat from a 'safe' objectivity.

To me, psychoanalysis and philosophy were always parallel interests; I picked up "The Interpretation of Dreams" and Sartre's "Le Mur" at 14, and later thought I would start to study philosophy, because I was rather sick of school, which was mostly about passively learning 'facts'. I saw philosophy as a discipline that was about actively taking a stand, as containing a self-critical reflectivity I found lacking elsewhere. What I missed in philosophy, and continued to look to psychoanalysis to find, was what you might call a phenomenologically accurate, highly developed sensitivity for describing concrete situations, situated - conscious and unconscious - subjectivity.

I might add that, since my mother was an analyst in Norway who led a clinic working with children, adolescents and their families, serving parts of Oslo in the public health system,<sup>4</sup> I took political engagement as part of psychoanalysis for granted. From time to time local politicians wanted to cut down on the services, and my mother and her colleagues would regularly turn up to lecture them on how these cuts would affect their patients, and persuade them to change their minds. Therefore, this link between individual suffering, public policies, as well as small and large scale social systems – how there is a shared responsibility for symptoms or pain that may just look individual – is something I think of as self-evident.

Steffen Krüger:

Did your mother also inspire your reading? I.e. did she suggest things you should dig into and discuss them with you?

Lene Auestad:

As I remember it, she did not really tell me what to read; it was more the case that I hungrily went through the bookshelves at home and asked what the books were about, though she did talk about her reading, and I enjoyed discussing with her. Actually, she

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<sup>4</sup> Mentalhygienisk Rådgivningskontor, Drammensveien, Oslo.

was inspired to become a psychoanalyst because of her aunt, my great aunt, Nic Waal, who founded child analysis in Norway, and combined her interest with a strong political engagement. Trained in Berlin, Nic's story goes back to the early days of psychoanalysis, illuminating how there were conflicts from early on as to whether psychoanalysis should engage with social and political reality or attempting to be more "salonfähig" by remaining aloof, detached and "neutral".

Jonathan Davidoff:

I first encountered psychoanalysis as a psychology student. I believe I studied psychology in the first place because I wanted to help people; I had in mind clinical psychology from the outset. I also relied on an intuition: wanting to understand how people are and the reasons for it. Later on I was to discover – through psychoanalysis – that the answer to the question “why did you study what you studied” could get complicated.

The tradition of psychology as a discipline in Mexico, where I come from, is deeply rooted in psychoanalysis. Therefore psychoanalysis was almost a natural discipline to engage with. I found psychoanalysis to be a fountainhead of knowledge and inspiration for me. Having studied in Argentina as well meant that the psychoanalytic heritage of psychology was further emphasised for me. Indeed, the Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition is inextricably linked to philosophy, and I guess that was my gateway into it. That and, of course, a personal interest or disposition if you will. Sociology and politics, being social sciences in a constant dialogue with psychology, thus came in dialogue with psychoanalysis in a quite natural form in my personal path. In Britain, I studied Philosophy and Psychoanalysis at the University of Essex and trained as a Psychodynamic Psychotherapist at the Tavistock Centre. These further enriched my psychoanalytic knowledge and experience and contributed to my belief in the fruitfulness of the dialogue between social sciences and philosophy. Currently I'm a PhD

candidate at UCL, where I believe this dialogue between psychoanalysis, philosophy and the social sciences can be further explored.

I think I have always been interested in exploring different perspectives; “otherness” has always been quite magnetic for me. Perhaps that is one of the reasons I have moved to different places at different times. Intellectually, it has been interesting to go and “meet the stereotypes”: the Lacanian and rationalist Argentineans and the Object Relations and empiricist Brits. Of course only to find out that the stereotypes are nothing more than that and that such a “meeting” is always postponed; yet a difference between these “stereotypes” confirms them nonetheless.

Steffen Krüger:

What seems to be prevalent in both your career paths is your involvement with socially produced suffering on micro and macro scales, with otherness, as well as processes of othering. Clearly, it is on these themes that the social-therapeutic focus, if you will, of our symposia lies. How do you think can a psychoanalytical perspective contribute to these themes – or even more pragmatically put: How can it contribute to remedying these shortcomings and injustices? And how might this involvement feed back into our understanding of psychoanalysis?

Jonathan Davidoff:

Overall, my personal view is that psychoanalytic theory, the method of psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic mindset can contribute to the enrichment of the disciplines with which these come into dialogue. The focus of psychoanalysis on the unconscious, the discontent, the repressed and the non-commonsensual, in my view, broadens the scope of any object of study. The reason for this being that whilst other disciplines situate themselves in the realm of the logical, the self-assertive and the sort of discourse that posits itself as rational, psychoanalysis brings into consideration that which escapes this realm. This, in my view, pushes further the self-set boundaries established by social sciences and, in many cases, philosophy.

However, when it comes to suffering I believe things can get a bit thorny. If one were to understand social or political injustice as part of *civilisation's discontents*, then I would say that the remedy, if we were to speak of remedies, is to learn to accept it as part of existence. This is not to say that social and political action should disappear or that they lack purpose. Nevertheless, if through psychoanalysis we have learnt anything about civilisation and its discontents, it is that we are bound to remain discontent, because civilisation implies relinquishment, which we dislike. Furthermore, civilisation entails disillusionment too, for instance, that of civilisation (society, or social justice if you will) not being perfect. The question that remains open for me is: does it follow from this knowledge that the revolutionary spirit should disappear? Does accepting discontent mean that changing reality is pointless?

When it comes to individual suffering, the story is also different in a way. I would say psychoanalysis works very well in transforming neurotic suffering into real suffering. Psychoanalysis can deal with other kinds of individual sufferings as well, such as trauma for example, and can definitely help the individual to work through, mourn or reposition him/herself differently in the face of suffering. On the other hand, I believe that the desire for mental health and happiness that a subject may have at the beginning of the analytic process is bound to be disappointed. This is part of the analytic process as well. So I would say that coming to terms with this and working through disillusionment in this sense is part of the process. Again, the question that remains open is the extent to which one as a person can or should aim for self-improvement or self-realisation, knowing that this process will intrinsically entail disillusionment and disappointment.

Steffen Krüger:

Both of you point to philosophy and psychoanalysis as parallel, sometimes even tautological, interests. Lene, you mention reading Freud's "interpretation of dreams" and Sartre's "Le Mur" at an early age. Was it already here that you began criss-crossing the borders of their respective ways of reflection? And then you mention phenomenology in connection with psychoanalysis – a combination that seems to be



very much alive in your two recent book publications: an essay collection on Hannah Arendt (in Norwegian with Helgard Mahrtdt: *Handling, Frihet, Humanitet*, 2011) and the first collection of contributions from the Psychoanalysis and Politics group (*Exclusion and the Politics of Representation*, 2012). Where do you see the connection between the two and how do you combine them in your thinking?

Lene Auestad:

In philosophy I became interested in ethics/political theory, the branches that are more concerned with real life, and then often found that these lines of thought were in need of an adequate psychology – which psychoanalysis can supply, to consider what actually motivates human beings. Part of my fascination with Arendt is that she is a thinker who is motivated by political experiences, takes them very seriously, and then re-evaluates, re-thinks the Western tradition on the basis of that. In fact, this is the opposite of the 'top-down' approach which is characteristic of most philosophy. I see psychoanalysis as providing very accurate and sensitive phenomenological descriptions of situations, interactions, emotions and unconscious intentions, thus offering a concrete point of access to human reality that philosophy often lacks. If we think for example of Freud's description of his grandson's *fort-da* game:

*"The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'da' ['there']. This, then, was the complete game – disappearance and return." (Freud, 1920g, p. 15)*

It gives an accurate account of a detailed situation, and questions what is going on here, so it offers careful attention to the nuances of something very concrete, taking place

before Freud's eyes. At the same time, you could say, it is concerned with something much more mysterious, absent and invisible; with unconscious fantasies and affects against the background of which these actions make sense. So I find psychoanalytic thinking very valuable in so far as it offers descriptions that expand what we think of as the domain of human experience – conscious and unconscious. In that sense it is an empathic discipline concerned with enlarging the humanly meaningful – and I think it is far less so when it offers concepts that remain very remote from experience – that you could say are at once un-phenomenological and unempathic in the sense that they would not add anything meaningful if you were to try to apply them to yourself.

As I see it, psychoanalysis has the virtue of a situated sensitivity and imagination as a fruitful basis for thinking, though I have become more critical of its frequent tendency to think of itself as taking up a 'view from nowhere'. Coming to Essex to take courses in psychoanalytic studies<sup>5</sup> made me realise how a lack of cultural and social sensitivity can be a crucial flaw. In a course about groups with observations analogous to infant observations, we were three participants, one from Italy, one from Congo and myself from Oslo, and the group leader said that studying the university there would be ruled out as it would be far too familiar. In fact we had all just arrived and felt very alienated; I think we shared a sense of that – and the group leader did not understand what we tried to express or where we came from at all. Based on some of that, I have, in recent years, started to think much more about how socially engaged psychoanalytic thinking needs to reflect much more about how one reflects a particular cultural and social position. In a Gadamerian formulation; to think about one's situation as that which limits one's possibility of vision – in order to be able to, by listening, see some more.

Steffen Krüger:

And you, Jonathan, what was your first encounter with psychoanalysis outside the consulting room?

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<sup>5</sup> Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex, UK.

Jonathan Davidoff:

I guess the first time I ever understood anything psychoanalytically, or at least so I thought at the time, was when I was in high-school and looked into a psychoanalytic reading of children's fairy tales. It was a simple and youthful task, but I believe that the interpretation of fairy tales such as "The Sleeping Beauty" really woke my curiosity for psychoanalysis. It was not until much later that I began to develop a stronger interest in understanding different phenomena psychoanalytically. Although now that I think of it, one could say that little has changed since my first attempt; a devotion to an alternative reading of things.

Nevertheless, I believe the first text I read that engaged psychoanalytically with social, political and historical phenomena was "The Labyrinth of Solitude" by Mexican writer Octavio Paz. That book was my first encounter with a psychoanalytically minded analysis of Mexican identity. It made so much sense to me at the time that I suppose my own intellectual interests were somehow attracted to it. I first read this book at University whilst studying psychology and it described what one as a Mexican knows intuitively about things in general, in an explicit and succinct way. It made so much sense, and it opened a possible avenue for thought. Later on, I began studying philosophy as well, and having had a background in psychoanalysis already, meant that I would engage with philosophy through a psychoanalytic lens. So, for instance, when studying the notion of myth in philosophy, its logic, structure, etc. I remember finally understanding why Lacan called that version of our childhood and familial history "family myth". Making connections like this one felt like revelations to me. In the case of the myth, the understanding of how a speech act like a myth constitutes the past, yet at the same time the past constitutes it, felt like a discovery of something important.

Steffen Krüger:

At our 2012 symposium in Denmark you said you have been part of the Psychoanalysis & Politics group since the first symposium. I can remember you saying “it was a lucky call for papers”. Does that mean that Lene developed the idea and you joined later? How did the group come together?

Jonathan Davidoff:

Yes, that’s right, Lene developed the idea along with others. I sent an abstract to the first symposium in Copenhagen in 2010 and presented a paper. Then after the symposium I was invited by Lene to become a coordinator. The group came together precisely like that: people who knew about the Nordic Summer University or who had an interest in psychoanalysis or in its relation with other disciplines answered the call for papers or simply attended the symposium. From then on, it has been the case of people simply attending the symposia, and that alone makes them part of the group.

But Lene and I had actually met before already – at the University of Essex, although each of us was involved in his own studies then. I was studying Philosophy and Psychoanalysis at the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies.

Lene Auestad:

I had set up a Bion reading group, where we read through his books from *Learning from Experience* to *Attention and Interpretation*, and this is where Jonathan turned up for the first time, bringing with him an article by Abraham and Torok, which I thought was interesting. He came and presented at the first conference in Copenhagen in 2010 and I invited him to become a co-organiser from the second one in Oslo in 2011.

Steffen Krüger:

How did you first conceive of the group; how did it come together? Was there a particular moment when you thought: Ok, I will do it myself then?

Lene Auestad:

I had participated in a previous group in the Nordic Summer University (NSU), about Cornelius Castoriadis. One of the coordinators, Ingerid Straume, a Norwegian pedagogue, suggested to me that I start a new group. That's when I came up with *Psychoanalysis and Politics*, in which I wanted to encourage and include contributions from different psychoanalytic directions. I also wanted it to be a meeting place for clinicians and non-clinicians; in fact, our participants come from a wide range of academic, creative and clinical backgrounds.

The central aim of the NSU is to further academic collaboration within the Nordic countries, with a view to introducing and developing new subjects that lack an established university seat in Scandinavia..The Nordic Ministerial Council, which finances it, is aiming for a closer collaboration with the Baltic States. About half of our participants have been from Scandinavian countries and half from other parts of the world.

Steffen Krüger:

Apropos the group's international character and orientation: both of you are from outside the UK but have (more or less) settled in London. Was it because of the psychoanalytic / psychosocial scene that you went to England? – The popularity of psychosocial studies, I think, says something about the relative strength and currency of psychoanalytic concepts in Great Britain.

Lene Auestad:

It was the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at Essex University that brought me to the UK in the first place. And it was only gradually, after having been in the UK for a while, that I discovered that other institutions also did research in psychosocial studies. I discovered and started subscribing to the journal *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*. Via a special issue on British psychosocial studies, I discovered and joined the UK psychosocial network and presented papers at two of their conferences (in 2010 and

2011); the first time I was very nervous as a foreigner/outsider coming to present. So the field of psychosocial studies is important (although not all of it is psychoanalytic) as a site for psychoanalysis as a non-clinical, but rather cultural, social and political interpretative resource. Also, I do think of British psychoanalysis as being special – I thought of that when we had our symposium in the rooms of the British Society (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Oct 2012). Of course the Scandinavian societies look up to the British Society – and I do so as well. Though the British Society is not specifically British, in the sense that it became a fertile soil for refugees from the European continent, when the centre of gravity shifted from central Europe to Britain. Another cultural reason is that British analysts come from many different professional backgrounds – there is no monopoly of 'the health professions', which posed a limitation in the USA, although they also received central European refugees from Nazism.

Politically, in Norway (and some other countries) they originally managed to include psychoanalysis in the public health service by arguing that mental health is as important as physical health, and that therefore everyone ought to have access to good enough service, which I think is praiseworthy in itself. But then the matter of 'marketisation' and government control enters in. A Norwegian analyst told me that they are required to hand in reports on how efficiently they work – and to exaggerate that efficiency. And as Svein Tjelta, the Norwegian training and group analyst, told us at the Psychoanalysis in the Age of Totalitarianism conference (London, 2012), psychotherapists are now also forced to give up on confidentiality – to hand in data about patients and diagnoses, which I think is even worse, since confidentiality is a cornerstone of psychoanalysis – indeed, the whole of psychoanalysis is undermined without confidentiality. So in Britain you have a situation where psychoanalysis is wholly private, and therefore does not have to answer to the government's demands, but then it is accessible only to the upper and middle classes, whereas in Norway psychoanalysis is accessible to everyone, but seems forced to sacrifice central parts of its essence, which is very serious. The third (the state) intervenes in the conversation of two consenting adults in analysis.

Steffen Krüger:

In terms of theoretical orientation, would you position yourself mostly within the British tradition of object relations, then, or are you happily eclectic, so to speak? And, excuse a very childish question: Do you have a favourite psychoanalytic writer?

Lene Auestad:

I have several favourites, and not only from Britain. It may be counter-productive to start 'name-dropping', as it might give the impression that I do not appreciate others than the theorists I name. Rather, I could say that I am probably somewhat eclectic – although when I reach for new theoretical contributions it would be because of a sense that what you can say using this particular theorist has come to an end – that you are faced with a problem that he/she does not succeed in addressing (and not just for the sake of being eclectic). So I believe that each theorist should be given his/her due, while I also find that you sometimes need new or different thoughts for new or different situations or problems.

Jonathan Davidoff:

I very much agree. I am interested in the differences between psychoanalytic schools of thought, too. I find it fascinating that different schools of thought have emerged and thrived in different places of the world, each under particular social and political circumstances. The directions that psychoanalytic schools have taken in each part of the world is, I believe, related to the idiosyncrasy of the people that live in each of these places. This is true, to a degree, for every discipline. However, In the case of psychoanalysis, this is even more interesting given the close, almost inextricable relation between the theoretician's thought and his clinical work. What I mean by this is that the way that patients and analysts think and situate themselves as subjects is quite different in different parts of the world, and the psychoanalytic theory that develops therefrom takes very different directions in each case. This never ceases to amaze me.

To my mind, every psychoanalytic school of thought has strengths and weaknesses, aspects of geniality, dark and cryptic claims, as well as embedded metaphysical stands. It is difficult to really categorise them without making overly-generalised claims. In any case, I believe that being eclectic is important; different theoretical questions, patients and clinical settings may call for different theories to operate.

Steffen Krüger:

I agree with you on the importance of eclecticism. It was brought home to me when I read Mitchell's and Black's *Freud and Beyond* (1995), which seems to have become a standard here in Norway, where I live. In the book the authors introduce the most prevalent psychoanalytic traditions today not only by explaining the central theoretical pillars but also by discussing a clinical case study for each of the approaches that can be seen to call for the respective theoretical/methodological approach to treatment.

However – and this one is particularly for Lene – in spite of appreciating the emphasis you put on openness and respect for the range of psychoanalytic approaches, which I find all the more important in a field that has been ridden by schisms, I wouldn't think that your naming a couple of major inspirations would imply a lack of appreciation of other writers. Rather, it would point to a certain profile of/in your thinking and feeling, which, from a psychoanalytic perspective, can hardly be avoided. To my mind, even the schisms can be read productively in that they point to the personal involvement and strong reverberations of particular explanations of the workings of the mind and, ultimately, individual suffering. In this respect, I hope you won't mind me pushing you a bit for your favourites as well as your greatest hurdles, and of course the ambivalent middle ground, if you wish.

Lene Auestad:

Well, thanks for your provocation, Steffen. I appreciate Melanie Klein for her empathic manner of writing, in the sense that she is very phenomenological, describes



unconscious phantasy from within. She could be thought of as a representative of German expressionism, which I appreciate. Freud himself, of course, has a wonderful style of writing, analytical and also literary. Winnicott also remains a favourite, with his emphasis on the centrality of paradox and his careful descriptions of environmental nuances. It strikes me that all of these have a rather different style of writing. Another favourite, Bion, is different again, with his compact, partially frustrating style, while also being funny and clever, with an appreciation of the absurd. So from these it is clear that I am focused on Britain, though Ferenczi is yet another favourite, with his very sensitive clinical descriptions, his philosophical insights and his theories of trauma. Karl Abraham, with his stunning descriptions of part-object relationships, is another. Among the French, I think of Kristeva as being among the greatest living theorists. Other favourites are Abraham and Torok, and Jean Laplanche. Among Americans, I like Bruno Bettelheim very much, also for his cultural reflections. A living American analyst I enjoy reading is Thomas Ogden, a very creative writer in a provocative way, who sometimes makes the reader think "he is far out at sea" and then pulls the threads back together again in a brilliant way, so he pushes the boundaries and does so successfully.

I would like to add that a major source of inspiration to me is the Frankfurt School tradition, writers who are not themselves analysts but philosophers using psychoanalytic thinking in a socially critical and fruitful way – above all Adorno, who is very much alive to me. Perhaps the greatest living philosopher, Judith Butler, also deserves mention here – a thinker who combines a very serious ethical engagement with psychoanalytically informed reflections.

Steffen Krüger:

And Jonathan, telling from what you said about travelling and 'meeting the stereotypes,' it appears as though you try to keep an arm's length distance between you and much of the theory that you use – an attitude which fascinates and puzzles me. Nonetheless, from your references it also becomes clear that you have a favourite.

Jonathan Davidoff:

Yes, my favourite is undoubtedly Freud. I am fascinated by his kind of geniality. I believe geniuses have existed in maths for a long time, or physics, or biology. But Freud was a genius in an area that did not properly exist before him. It is as if knowledge needed to grow to fit him, and usually it is one that needs to grow to understand knowledge, see what I mean? I also admire him as a man, I think he was brave. I can only imagine what for him meant to present his theory of infantile sexuality to the Viennese Victorian medical society. And also, I admire how he positioned himself as “a man of culture”, like a “true intellectual” without necessarily being employed as an academic. A true intellectual outside academia, I think that is remarkable. It is, I believe, one of the legacies of Freud to the psychoanalytic community, and the world: a model for an independent intellectual and academic profession that stems from an honest devotion to knowledge.

Nevertheless, I think that you meant that my favourite is Lacan, right?

Steffen Krüger:

Yes, that’s right.

Jonathan Davidoff:

I find Lacanian theory astonishing regarding its deep engagement with Freud’s thought. I believe Lacan was very much onto Freud’s thinking. Of course, then he developed his own ideas, of which some I find more useful clinically as well as theoretically than others. But I do think that, like Freud, Lacan was a genius. Having read quite a big part of Lacan’s writings and seminars, I believe that most post-structuralist authors really have built a philosophical career by unpacking what Lacan had already theorised in a very condensed form. I think Lacan is really the thinker that inspired all post-structuralist philosophy.

In terms of the influences that I have encountered, I believe that a very Freudian and Kleinian milieu at my University in Mexico and a very Lacanian environment in Argentina really set the coordinates of my compass. Essex University as well as the Tavistock have a strong Kleinian and post-Kleinian tradition, which of course influenced me greatly.

My engagement with Kleinian theory is the one that troubles me more, and therefore also makes me passionate. I came to understand Klein more deeply after having studied Lacanian theory, so I got biased there. However, it is becoming ever clearer to me that she is a great thinker and theorist, on a par with Freud and Lacan. Lacan criticised Klein's (and others') engagement with what he called "the imaginary" (i.e. fantasy). However, Klein's *phantasy* is not exactly Lacan's imaginary *fantasy*; it is, I think, more than that. Furthermore, as a clinician, engaging with the patient's phantasy is crucial. It is as if Klein's phantasies were a very detailed description of the script of Lacan's fantasies. In fact, I doubt that Lacan ever said that the analyst should do without primitive phantasies like the ones Klein described. The point I would like to make here is: how can one as a clinician or a theoretician do without any of these schools of thoughts without really missing something important? It is in this spirit that I believe the more eclectic the understanding of psychoanalysis, the better understanding of the patient, social, political or historical phenomena one can achieve.

Steffen Krüger:

It is striking how much you, Jonathan, argue from the perspective of the therapist/analyst and you, Lene, from that of the cultural critic. Again the combination of the two of you seems to make a lot of sense within the frame of the Psychoanalysis and Politics group. Yet what crossed my mind, Lene, is that, seeing that you come from a real psychoanalytic pedigree (you mentioned your grand aunt, Nic Waal), it is all the more interesting that you have chosen to get so close to psychoanalysis but not to become a psychoanalyst yourself. What kept you from it?

Lene Auestad:

When I was in Norway, aiming to become an analyst would have meant studying either medicine or psychology, since the training is not open to others, and I was more attracted to philosophy. In London, (where the training is open to people from different backgrounds, from the humanities, social sciences and other fields) I have explored more clinical thinking by taking first the Introductory Lectures series and then the Foundation Course at the Institute of Psychoanalysis. I liked the former more than the latter because there were more engaging intellectual discussions. So I very much enjoy intellectual exchange, and felt that there may not be enough of that for me in clinical training. Having said this, my own analysis in London has of course been very important to me, personally, and it also impacts on my thinking. So I do not see myself as advocating theory without practice, so to say, although I think it is important that the debates are open to 'pure theorists' as well as clinicians and that there are exchanges between them.

Jonathan Davidoff

In Psychoanalysis and Politics we have aimed to create an environment for dialogue and exchange, not only between psychoanalytic schools of thought, but also across disciplines. I believe that multidisciplinary is one of our most important principles. It is motivated by a true conviction of democracy, egalitarianism and the unyielding need to challenge our intellectual and personal comfort zones. I believe that multidisciplinary fora can be really enriching by preventing each of the disciplines to adopt an approach of closure of meaning, rather than one that would aim to unsettle established truths. This is why when Lene and I collaborate writing calls for papers, we are careful not to skew it to any school of thought or discipline too much. Yet, we strive to keep it multidisciplinary as well and include possible questionings that may come into play from different perspectives.

Lene Auestad:

Yes, to continue on from what Jonathan says about multidisciplinary and egalitarianism, I believe this is something that sets this forum apart from many other fora and that makes it worth doing. Hannah Arendt puts the point thus:

*If someone wants to see and experience the world as it "really" is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates and links them, showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk about it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over against one another (Arendt [1956-1959] 2005, p. 128).*

And to my mind the space we have created has given me an experience of what this means – a sense that there is a real openness and a desire to pose new questions together. She describes this situation's opposite in *Men in Dark Times* as "the result that all men would suddenly unite in a single opinion, so that out of many opinions one would emerge, as though not men in their infinite plurality but man in the singular, one species and its exemplars, were to inhabit the earth" ([1968]1983), p. 31). I should think this is a well known situation from many fora. Christopher Bollas describes this situation in an article in relation to psychoanalytic supervisory groups where the 'right' interpretations are rewarded and the 'wrong' ones silenced or unappreciated – though you could see this happening in all kinds of groups, that there is a pull towards conformity. By having symposia composed out of people who differ quite a lot intellectually; in terms of disciplines and directions and in being clinically or more theoretically oriented, and also geographically, I think we have managed to avoid this, which is a very refreshing experience.

Freud's characterisation of the 'I' as not being 'master in its own house' is and remains provocative on a personal as well as on a political level. In so far as they do not remain theoretical items, when they become current and concrete, and when they are close up, such things as saying or doing something other than the 'I' intended, the opening up of a territory of intentions and motivations beyond the surface ones, is indeed frightening and shocking. Psychoanalytic thinking, furthermore, carries the message that there is no 'quick fix' for personal or social problems, which is out of line both with the current political wish for short term psychotherapy designed to solve problems quickly and efficiently without thinking about the larger context within which they occur, and with politicians' desires for 'social engineering', for implementing solutions from above, thus desiring to forcefully reshape human beings. Human beings are willing to do a lot not to deal with pain, by attacking or stifling both self and other, and psychoanalytic thinking is concerned with pain, whether in a larger or a smaller way, more or less directly. Thus it can be provocative and unwelcome both in its perceived 'destructive' mode, of questioning the intentions or integrity of the 'I' or seemingly attacking a good or idealised object such as the nation-state – and also in what you might call its 'non-destructive' aspects; in its implicit stance against instrumentalization and manipulation, in favouring a long, slow, painful and difficult process of dialogical discovery from within. Thus psychoanalysis' respect for otherness is an enduring legacy that needs to be defended.

Steffen Krüger:

It being the task of the Psychoanalysis and Politics group to defend this legacy means that the “process of dialogical discovery” (Auestad) has to be kept intact also for the project of the group itself. In this respect, it is instructive to return to a passage in the interview. “Does accepting discontent mean that changing reality is pointless?”, Davidoff asks there (see above) and, somewhat irritatingly, he leaves the question hanging in mid-air – unanswered, discontent

provoking. Yet, the first call for papers issued by Auestad and Davidoff after this interview was conducted bears the title: "Action – a Limit to Psychoanalysis?", inviting "contributions that discuss the potential political role of psychoanalytic thinking and reflections on psychoanalytic understandings of action, activism, 'engagement' and 'neutrality'", as it reads in the description of the call.<sup>6</sup> To my mind, this is quite a powerful demonstration of the dialogical sensitivity with which the organisers approach their "discoveries from within", as well as the vitality with which they challenge their comfort zones. One can only wish for this legacy to endure, and readers are heartily invited to join in the effort:

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.psa-pol.org/?p=222> (last accessed: 03.07.2013)