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# Sleeping Dogs: Psychoanalysis and the Socio-Political

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Psychoanalysis deals with what unconsciously mediates our relationship to reality. Our "ordinary clinical terms" (Holmes, this issue) include the press of drives and its fantasy derivatives, the history of early attachment and object relations, lifetime and intergenerational legacies; these are the elements that we assume shape psychic reality. As a discipline we are less likely to interrogate the profound and ongoing ways in which we are spellbound by ideology and are less likely to address racism, homophobia, misogyny, and privilege as central. What I hope to address in this discussion is why considering the socio-political is actually quite complicated for psychoanalysis.

## RESISTANCE TO THE SOCIO-POLITICAL

Holmes (this issue) identifies three key reasons that psychoanalysis maintains an institutionalized resistance to addressing socio-political issues:

1. As a group, we are still overidentified with our forefathers. The early theorists were struggling to establish the legitimacy of a new discipline during a time of tremendous world struggles. They feared that attending to the horrific historical realities of their time (World War II) would weaken their claims to objective, empiricist truths by appearing to be biased by subjective pain.
2. The hierarchical structures of our discipline—the rigid training norms and the particular ways the discipline operates as a guild (e.g., the waiver system)—put a cap on independent critical thinking. This limit has been playing out in a long history of silencing dissent and reinforcing tradition and conformity. The systemic oppression of plurality and dissent that Holmes describes is of course not specific to our field, but a political feature of many disciplines organized and supported by patriarchal norms of hierarchy and authoritarianism. It is important to acknowledge that these are the very social structures that legitimate our field.
3. We all share a human dislike of pain and horror, expressed through the tendency to avoid inconvenient truths through denial and projective identification. Destructive cultural realities and traumas are particularly difficult to deal with; they are *big*, multigenerational, and the suffering they cause to many is overwhelming. A psychoanalyst, like anyone else, is likely to want to avoid dealing with such pain. I may add here that this may be compounded by the fact that the psychoanalyst is mobilized by the wish to "help" and make a difference, yet in the face of massive political forces such as poverty and violent discrimination is immediately faced with

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her/his powerlessness; what is the work of a psychoanalyst "treating" a traumatized patient whose hometown was bombed, his family barely made it out, and he has difficulty finding work to support them? Holmes further refers to the analyst's reluctance to engage the frightening reservoirs of rage that wait behind the disavowal of discrimination. This is a big issue that deserves a separate discussion, but I would like to at least mention that working psychoanalytically with cultural discrimination and trauma has the potential of reversing the colonizing process that interpellates minorities to suppress their rage and thus uphold supremacist regimes (hooks, 1995). If unleashed, these powerful affects are not only frightening but have meaningful political repercussions that most analysts are in no way prepared to deal with.

## WAYS PSYCHOANALYSIS ENGAGES THE SOCIO-POLITICAL

Before elaborating on other factors that compound our inclination to burrow into the myth of private suffering, I think it would be important to ask: What do we mean when we talk about psychoanalysis engaging the socio-political? It would be hard to find a psychoanalyst who does not deeply care about the socio-political world in which they live. Yet these good intentions often confuse rather than clarify the relationship between psychoanalysis and culture. I find it useful to make a *soft* distinction between *political activism*, the analyst's *mandate to heal* the patient harmed by cultural trauma, and the psychoanalytic *quest for Truth*. These different agendas often get confused when psychoanalysts try to engage with the socio-political.

First, ACTIVISM: From the perspective of those endorsing political activism, the evolved psychoanalyst *should* consciously take on his or her political agenda by functioning as an aware and responsible political citizen in every aspect of her work (see Layton, 2009, and Harris, 2009b, complicating Layton's ideas; Cushman, 2015). The activist believes it is important for all to notice and address ethical and political choices, holds in mind that patient and analyst are always enacting political agendas, and encourages political awareness and activism in her patients (see Samuels, 2004).[1] The activist may also attempt to engage psychoanalytic theory to influence on the level of public discourse. If Holmes portended to be an activist leaning to the left, perhaps she would see it as her goal to encourage Mr. Smith to understand his racism and privilege in political terms and confront the discriminative and injurious repercussions of his positions. Their differing ethical-political positions may have been addressed head-on, leading to potentially combustive clashes between them (see Rozmarin, 2009).

Do our psychoanalytic theories imply particular political and ethical positions? Holmes mentions under the rubric of "*inattention*" to sociocultural matters moments in history when certain psychoanalytic communities colluded with antidemocratic and fascist doctrines and practice.[2] Rather than inattention, I would interpret these moments as revealing an implicit collusion between psychoanalysis and the ruling hegemony. The patriarchal-hierarchical structures of our institutes and guilds also betray this deep alignment with the states' ideological state apparatuses. Holmes assumes that psychoanalysis

[1] As an offshoot example of activism, Holmes (this issue) mentions the research that emanated from Adorno's concept of the *Authoritarian* personality, whereby psychoanalytic theory is employed to interpret and potentially change the course of political history. Adorno indeed originally saw in psychoanalysis the potential promise of a powerful critique of social coercion and exploitation; however, Adorno ultimately came to view it as a practice of conformism.

has an agreed-upon liberal political agenda. She speaks of "the pull on psychoanalysis of dominant cultural trends, even when they are adverse to our transformative, liberating ideals" (p. 644). I am not sure our theories necessarily align us with liberal ideals. In fact, I side with the Foucauldians and see many ways in which the discipline supports the dominant social order (see Abelove, 1985–1986, on the history of psychoanalysis and homosexuality) *while paradoxically promoting ideas of "freedom" and liberation*. This is a contradiction that we bypass by enacting a dissociative split between the private and social. Psychoanalysis has taken many implicit political positions that are not honestly aligned with the rhetoric of neutrality and freedom. The agenda of political activism is thus a complex one for our discipline.

Second, the problem of CURE: Holmes raises the importance of "recognizing and addressing the psychical harm done by *culturally imposed trauma*" (p. 641). Here it is important to be clear about the difference between the kind of massively traumatic events that human history unleashes, such as war and genocide, and the ongoing discriminative practices and concomitant microaggressions that are woven into the very daily fabric of society. We see patients who are harmed by both, from ethnic cleansing to racism and misogyny. How do we understand the meaning of psychoanalytic treatment and "cure" in relation to cultural trauma? Who is ill, and is "treatment" geared toward a return of the individual patient to an "acceptable level of functioning"? As a "mental health profession" the agenda of *treatment* and *cure* is hard to tease apart from the socio-political agenda of *aligning deviants* (Dimen, 2001; Foucault, 1988–1990). There are a variety of sophisticated treatment guidelines, even research-corroborated treatment manuals, designed to help the individual posttraumatic stress disorder patient. These protocols do not target the cultural context that produced the trauma. Do we work with our patients by actively interpreting symptoms as an expression of troubles caused by social pathology and injustices, or do we treat symptoms as an expression of Oedipal dynamics, or the individual's difficulties getting in line with an unquestionable social order? In the case of Mr. Smith, would Holmes explore the trauma of his loss of connection to Mary, his beloved nanny, by focusing on the work of mourning so that he could make his way toward the traditionally valued depressive position? Or would she contextualize the whitewashing of this loss as race and class based?

How we conceptualize "healing the harm of cultural trauma" reveals the ways in which our well-intentioned theories are an extension of our implicit politics and how comfortable we are with the existing regimes. Psychoanalytic theory is centered on the idea that *the possibility of cure resides within the patient*. This is reflected even in the *ideals* that Holmes espouses, for example, that psychoanalysis offers individuals the option to become "the principal agents in their own history and thought" (p. 643). This view of the sovereign individual maintains the problematic "privatization" of socio-political issues. Which is why when problems of race are treated psychoanalytically, when we "treat the harm," our theories implicitly pressure us to locate the pains of minority groups in the psyche of the individual and her family.[3] This loads both the identified patient and the analytic pair with a condensation and distortion that function to support the social order at the expense of the subject.

Third, TRUTH: Psychoanalysis is committed to a quest for Truth, for an honest grasp of our conditions of living, or, as stated earlier, to the analysis and deconstruction of what unconsciously mediates our relationship to reality. From this perspective, *all* that shapes our imaginary

[2] To which we can add the more recent controversy around membership in Division 39 and the American Psychological Association's stance on interrogation and torture.

relationships to our material conditions could and should become object of psychoanalysis. How could this not include the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, systems of definitions, unconscious practices, and fantasies that lead one to perceive, think, feel, and act in determinant ways? The ideologies that organize societies are the very networks of meaning that provide the means and parameters with which individuals grasp their existence. These networks operate by delimiting as well as providing possible signifiers of existence, both inviting and restricting perception, thought, fantasy, and experience. In short, our ideologies (Althusser, 1969, 2000) and habitus (Bourdieou, 1984) define our psychic reality and intersect in the deepest ways with our fantasy life, early attachment, and object relations history.

I find the quest for truth the most compelling reason as to why analyzing and deconstructing socio-political factors must be part of our psychoanalytic practice. How would Mr. Smith emerge from his analysis if race, gender, and class were not addressed as central features that defined the very practices of his family, as well as all the other social institutions he was surrounded by, such as school? These practices shaped what he could perceive, think, feel, desire, and experience—the horizons of his very psychic life. They also had to be explored as they played out so clearly in the transference–countertransference matrix for any honest progress to be made.

As a general statement, I believe the structural contradictions between our ideals of freedom and our confused loyalties to the existing social order complicate what could be our relationship to the socio-political world. What we should be able to expect of our discipline is a firm commitment to be curious, educate ourselves, and embrace the goal of understanding and deconstructing the socio-political coordinates that shape our psychic lives. Why has this proven so difficult?

## THE STRUGGLE TO ENGAGE THE SOCIO-POLITICAL

Holmes (this issue) discusses what she sees as an institutional "norm" that relegates the socio-political outside of psychoanalytic discourse.[4] This is quite a puzzling reality, as actually there is an impressive body of work that has accumulated over the years that does integrate socio-political and psychoanalytic discourses yet is systematically overlooked. Feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism and cultural studies, Queer theory, and postcolonialist race studies have each made profound contributions addressing the relationship between the psychological and the political. Notable have been the Berlin School's and then Frankfurt School's psychoanalytic-Marxist analyses of society, Lacan's work on alienation upon succumbing to symbolic social law, Irigaray's critique of patriarchy, the second and third waves of feminist critique that challenged psychoanalysis's gender bias as symptomatic rather than essential, Foucault's critique of the regulatory functions of the mental health discipline, Deleuze and Guattari's read of individual conflict as an expression of bio-politics, and more recent gender and Queer studies (Butler, 1990; Corbett, 2009; Dimen & Goldner, 2002; Harris, 2009b; Hartman, 2011). Specifically regarding race, postcolonial race studies (Bhabha, 2004; Fanon, 1952/2008; Gherovici, 2003) have influenced some psychoanalytic writers (such as Apprey, 2014; Harris, 2007, 2009b; Suchet, 2004) to

[3] During World War I the American government took a strong position supporting psychoanalysis's treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder as a secondary response to childhood issues (Aron & Star, 2012).

[4] In writing about it, Holmes is also performing a challenge to the larger scale institutionalized exclusion of women from the public discourse about the down and dirty masculine business of race (hooks, 1995).

shift from fixing categories of race (that function to *Other* and enable structures of domination and exploitation) to psychodynamic categories of *racialized subjectivities* (Harris, 2007; Guralnik, 2011) that have deepened the cross-application of psychoanalytic and cultural studies. Yet this canon of work repeatedly migrates to the margins, cyclically forgotten and rediscovered, evacuating the socio-political dimensions of psychic reality from mainstream psychoanalysis and leaving it in a defensive and lacking position.

Having been writing and teaching about practicing psychoanalysis with culture in mind, my own experience includes meeting a great degree of pressure from editors, readers, students, and audiences to "translate" socio-political interpretations back into the language of family drama. The two most common critiques have been the following:

First, political ideologies reside in a superficial layer of the psyche, while true unconscious motivations are of "developmentally earlier" origins that link up with the sexual instincts. To put it simply, psychoanalytic discourse still sounds most familiar when it is organized around drive-based desire negotiated within the family (= the love/hate relationships of the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal kind), which in turn leads to various constellations of object relations. Desire as negotiated within and against the family is supposedly the earliest, truest, deepest, and by extension most important realm of psychoanalytic exploration (e.g., a patient's anaclitic reaction to a depressed mother is a more *correct* psychoanalytic interpretation than one focusing on the legacy of the same mother's Nazi history in the sense that it supposedly addresses the right register that psychoanalysis should target; Boehleber, 2014).

The focus on sociocultural factors is an imposition of the analyst's "unresolved countertransference" and not the patient's ultimate true pain-point. Since family drama is supposedly where the *real* action is, the assumption is that patients' reactions to current events, political, historical, and ideological material are manifest content through which the "deeper" conflicts are played out.

Willy Baranger's (1958/2009) paper on the function of Ideology makes the case most clearly. He asserted that ideology is the manifest content of latent unconscious fantasies and object relations and that ideology functions to integrate these into a coherent world. He sees ideology as serving to negotiate the *real drama*: contradictions and persecutory relationships between the ego-ideal, the superego, the ego, and reality. Contrast this view with Deleuze and Guattari's "politics of desire": Ideology and its apparatuses—the judges, commissioners, and bureaucrats—are *not* to be interpreted as substitutes for the father; rather, it is the father who is the condensation of all these forces to which he submits himself, and invites his son to submit.

Critical theory, and particularly the direction it took over the past few decades, views the social world as *calling* upon the individual to become a subject of the social-order. The concept of interpellation offers us an elegant way to understand how individuals are called upon to become a member of the social order and to identify with collective and State purposes, through their implicit internalization of prevailing ideologies. It offers psychoanalysis a different language to work with the socio-political. The basic assumption that culture is secondary to the subject is turned on its head; the individual is understood to be constituted in discourse. The extreme version of this approach calls for an interpretation of individual symptoms as the manifest expression of latent collective maladies (e.g., the work of Fanon, Gherovici) and sees progress as moving beyond the individual toward the political. Many of us believe it is possible to integrate these sensibilities while keeping a psychoanalytic focus on the individual subject (Dimen, 2011), yet this is obviously no simple matter.

Holmes (this issue) asserts that there is nothing about our theories per se that precludes addressing the socio-political realm. I am not convinced. Psychoanalytic theory began with Universal claims about

human psychology that were to preexist and transcend cultural and historical specificity. These supposedly universal theories actually rest on assumptions that are a direct expression of the cultural imperatives and biases of their particular time and place. This problem becomes quite obvious, for example, in the permutations of what gets attributed to the *true self*, attributions that harbor unquestioned essentialist assumptions about social constructs such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Similarly, the unquestioned references to a normative view of the Patriarchal Oedipal family as the benchmark of developmental health recycle a very particular social order. Our theories are in no way independent of the cultural discourse from which they emerge. Yet the ideal of the analyst as immune to socio-political influences and practicing dispassionate neutrality actually blocks any possibility that the analyst would willfully engage with the cultural biases nested in psychoanalytic theory or played out in the room (as described by Holmes's painful early supervisory experience, when she was instructed to "go elsewhere" to explore the function of race in the transference).

There are other ways in which our theories are designed to delink the personal from the political (Layton, 2009). We understand children's attachment to their parental love-objects very concretely. We do not address how the infant is looking to her parents for instructions in how to live in the parents' world (Cushman, 1991); we fail to see *parents* as transferential objects, as placeholders or symbolic representatives of the patriarchal dominators at the top of the social pyramid (Kovel, 2007). The collective organizes infant–parent interactions into *value systems*, with the parent sanctioning what is good versus punishable behavior from the very first moment of suckling, adjusting a feeding pose or the right schedule to meet environmental expectation. It is clear that in the earliest of interactions *ideology* is one of the secret ingredients that binds the infant and child with her parents, and with society, and that every interaction deposits ego-syntonic beliefs about what *the good life is* (including the belief that we choose to participate in the system we were born into; Foucault, 1988–1990). Yet the psychoanalytic exploration of early development does not take this register as a central object of analysis. The traditional psychoanalyst is trained to stop at the pre/post-Oedipal drama and view it only as a concrete love story, which occludes a bigger story, the story of the transmission of ideological narratives between parents, children, and society (Deleuze & Gauattari, 1986).

## A PSYCHIC REGISTER THAT IS SOCIO-POLITICAL

I resonate with the way Holmes describes the sleeping dogs of cultural trauma as a "*layer within the psyche that contains and secrets crimes of humanity and their history*" (p. 642). I believe there is indeed such a layer, a *Register*, perhaps Freud's underworld or navel, which parallels the structures we imagine when we talk about the inner object world. This layer is not simply there to mediate "deeper" internal object relations but is of primary existential importance, there to organize basic questions we all spend a lifetime plumbing: *What is a livable life, and how does one live it?* (Guralnik & Simeon, 2010). Holmes refers to Freud's writing about trespassing his childhood poverty and class lines when climbing the Acropolis (Freud, 1936). Rather than take on the issue of class, Freud ends up ultimately "explaining his success neurosis entirely in terms of oedipal conflict" (p. 642). In contrast, Holmes (2006) asserted that most of those suffering success neurosis linked to racism and classism are apt to find that the disavowing messages take hold in the mind in a *primary way*.[5] Why is psychoanalytic theory compelled to translate this register into something else? Holmes (1992) reported how often patients' racist remarks and

preoccupations are interpreted as a defensive shift away from supposedly more important underlying conflicts and that therapists are trained to interpret a patient's focus on racism as resistance. Similarly, Moss (2001), in his attempts to understand the function of hatefulness linked to race, gender, and sexual preference, suggested that these are to be interpreted as disavowed anxieties about the loss of one's love object.

I would suggest that we pause and resist automatically translating concerns with social categories such as race into domestic language. Just as we must implicitly figure out the basic laws of physics for our bodies to know how to interact with the world, we must come to understand the structure of society and our place in it directly. We do so through immersion in the cultural world we are born into, a world that supplies us with an infinite stream of information. This stream of information is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product, and it interpellates us into an unconscious acceptance of society's legacy of differences and hierarchies, living in us through a sense of our place.

## MR. SMITH

I deeply appreciate Holmes's (this issue) insistence, despite her traditional training, on the importance of analyzing "cultural transferences," as in her reference to Mr. Jones's transference of the racist South onto his analyst. Mr. Smith's analysis demonstrates what it means for Holmes not to restrict her *curiosity* "… as to how this Southern White man chose me, a Black female psychoanalyst, as his therapist" and truly engage with the political register (p. 649). She of course immediately finds herself up against the cultural wall of disavowal: "He eschewed any cultural/dynamic factor as being important in his decision to consult me." (p. 649). Yet Holmes is undeterred and over time finds ways to go to core issues: "He knew he was being irrational and felt ashamed about his feelings about Black people. I asked him what those feelings were. He said he thought of Blacks as powerless, poor, and undesirable" (p. 650).

Holmes's analytic inquiry reached Mr. Smith's ideological register of Race, and eventually tapped into the complex intersections of race, class, gender, and how these interpellate desire. This is evident in their work on his relationship with his "surrogate mother" (Harris, 2007)—his Black nanny, Mary. Holmes (this issue) learns that for Mr. Smith neither "Mary nor I could have any deep or lasting meaning to him. After all, we were Black, and Mary was a working class servant" (p. 651). By assuming the analytic space was saturated in socio-politics, and listening to the countertransferential reactions emanating from her own cultural register, Holmes was able to unearth how class and race operated behind the scenes to organize Mr. Smith's desire. These aligned him with implicit social structures, while banishing into the land of melancholic foreclosures potential experiences of love and desire that did not. Mr. Smith described how when he was a young boy, Mary "partially allowed him his feelings, telling him it was okay to not like girls, but that he had to love family" (p. 650). I found these reports deeply telling; they so clearly articulate the workings of interpellation, including how Mary herself,

[5] It is interesting that it is the only paper in which Freud describes becoming depersonalized. Elsewhere I have theorized that dissociative mechanisms, and in particular depersonalization, express tensions between competing cultural injunctions and interpellations. In my work on dissociation I proposed that the very experience of being an *intelligible human*, and the counterparts of alienation, shame, and disconnection, all emanate from this primary socio-political or ideological register.

après-coup, had to become erased from mind, once the ideological injunction to disavow any passionate attachment to a Black caregiver set in.

These ideological inscriptions are powerful examples of just how interpellations around class, race, and gender took hold of Mr. Smith, colonizing the deepest aspects of his psychic reality, leaving him split between "puzzling discrepancies regarding Blacks—discrepancies among what he felt, what he knew, and what he had personally experienced" (p. 650). As summarized by Holmes (this issue), for any child growing up in class or race stratified cultures, strong early attachments crucial to the maintenance and elaboration of self are always being reinscribed and reinterpreted. Early pleasure and early ambivalence or conflict (whatever the form of any particular childcare arrangements were) is now reunderstood in the light of knowledge about history, social and economic force, and political realities. The most grave, external, political circumstances penetrate right at the core of the most archaic relationships.

## THE POLITICS OF THE ANALYTIC ENCOUNTER

The psychoanalytic situation brings abstract questions about the relationship between the subject and her socio-political context to a most immediate testing ground. It is different to be talking *about* race and experiencing its workings in real time between patient and analyst. If properly attended to, patients have the chance to realize how such factors have come to shape their history and witness these very dynamics play out in vivo, in the transference–countertransference matrix. The analyst has an opportunity to work with the remarkable shifts in power, anxiety, and shame, as well as the potential reparation and solidarity that these subject-positions trade in. The ideal of dispassionate observations crumbles and makes way to the radioactive relevance of the analyst's very own thrownness and subject positions. Therapeutic action thus must issue from a view of a culturally situated analytic field.

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