DARK TIMES

Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Politics, History and Mourning

Jonathan Sklar

For my father

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Preface

On Sunday 4 October 1936, the British Union of Fascists (BUF), led by Sir Oswald Mosley, planned a mass rally in the East End of London, a poor area where the majority of Eastern European shtetl Jews had settled since arriving between 1881 and 1914, many having fled anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia, Poland, and other Eastern European countries. These Jews had followed previous waves of immigrants, the Huguenots and the Irish, settling in the same area that today contains a substantial Bengali community. Mosley was backed by a large proportion of the Conservative Party and, responding to appeals to stop the march, Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, said that banning it would be a negation of democracy (Auestad, 2015, pp. 139–140). The 6,000 police officers, including the entire horseback division, escorted the Blackshirts (as the supporters of the BUF were known from the uniforms they wore). The local Irish dockers (remembering the support of the Jewish community in the dock strikes of 1912), the trade unions, and the communists joined the Jews in an antifascist alliance, assembling barricades across Cable Street to halt the fascist march.

The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen, marching down Whitechapel Road wearing their medals, found that the police were blocking their path, and ordering them to disperse. Upon refusal, the police began to beat them. By this time, more than 300,000 antifascists had gathered at the point that the Blackshirts would have to pass, shouting "*¡No Pasarán!*" ("They shall not

pass!")—the International Brigades' slogan directed at Franco and the Nazis in the Spanish Civil War. The police, attempting to clear the barriers, were met with a shower of stones and other missiles. Eventually, the planned march through the East End was cancelled.

This was a people's victory against the state and a government that had allied itself, at that moment, with the fascists. It was a revolutionary moment. In addition, Mosley's provocation directly led to parliament debating the Public Order Act 1936, which was passed into law on 1 January 1937. The Act banned the wearing of political uniforms in public and demanded that public processions obtain police consent. This hindered the Blackshirts, who enjoyed dressing up in their quasi-military uniform.

I have begun this book full of stories with this story as it was told to me as a child. My father, a serviceman on leave at the time, had been at the barricades, and I marvelled in the romance and felt proud of my father for protecting the Jews and being on the right side of history and politics. One importance that this story occupied for me as I grew up, trying to understand the world, was as a reasoned argument that my father had set up a protective shield against anti-Semitism for his future family and children—an act that would cover my lifetime, ensuring safety. Over the years, however, and increasingly so in our modern times, this shield has become fractured and we begin to witness fascism returning from its repressed cavities. As my Serbian friend Marija Vezmar recently wrote to me:

> A thought: how history repeats. The situation in our country seems, believe it or not, never worse and psychoanalysis is, again, my stronghold. On the surface it's not like in Milošević time, but underneath I feel we're still going down. Maybe it's like that in the whole world?!
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> (personal communication, April 2018)

It is crucial that we respond actively to this threat of descent. Indeed, each generation must pick up the political thought and action of confronting fascism when the realisation hits, yet again, that this work is needed. With this task in mind, this book is my attempt to add to the barricades of *¡No Pasarán!*

About the author

Dr Jonathan Sklar, MBBS, FRCPsych is a training and supervising psychoanalyst of the British Psychoanalytical Society. Originally trained in psychiatry at Friern and the Royal Free Hospitals, he later trained in adult psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic, London. For many years, he was consultant psychotherapist and head of the psychotherapy department at Addenbrooke's and Fulbourn hospitals in Cambridge.

He now works in full-time analytic practice in London. As well as lecturing widely across the world, he has taught psychoanalysis annually in South Africa for over ten years, termly in Chicago for ten years until 2018, as well as regularly across Eastern Europe. From 2007 to 2011, he was vice president of the European Psychoanalytic Federation, with special responsibility for seminars for recently qualified analysts as well as new analytic groups in East Europe. He has been a board member of the International Psychoanalytical Association since 2015, with his term due to end in July 2019.

Acknowledgements

At the end of my first book, *Landscapes of the Dark: History, Trauma, Psychoanalysis* (2011), I wrote an epilogue that remained in my mind long after the book's publication. Three years later, in 2014, I began to expand on this short piece and the subjects it touches upon. The outcome is this book. It also has the word "dark" in its title, but it has a different focus from that of my earlier book; its subject is psychoanalysis applied to politics and society today. I am grateful to Karnac for permission to reuse and develop further the epilogue from my earlier book.

Much of this book has emerged out of a series of lectures I have given since 2015 in psychoanalytic societies, university departments, and small conferences, the discussions at which enabled further writing.

I want to thank all the participants in Dr Lene Auestad's 2017 conference in Paris, titled *Anxious Encounters and Forces of Fear*; the participants of David Morgan's 2015–2018 *Political Mind* seminars at the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London; Jasminka Šuljagić, Tijana Miladinović, and the Psychoanalytical Society of Serbia; Valentina Lessenska and the Bulgarian Society; and Moisés Lemlij and the participants of the 2018 *La Escena Contemporánea* conference in Lima. I would also like to thank Antal Bokay for hosting me and my paper at Pécs University in Hungary in 2012, and similarly Samir Gandesha at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, for hosting me in 2015; Dr Ken Robinson of the North of England Association for

Introduction

> I perceived ever more clearly that the events of human history, the interactions between human nature, cultural development and the precipitates of primaeval experiences (the most prominent of which is religion) are no more than a reflection of the dynamic conflicts between the ego, the id and the super-ego, which psychoanalysis studies in the individual—are the very same processes repeated upon a wider stage.
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> —Sigmund Freud, "An Autobiographical Study" (1925d, p. 72)

Psychoanalysts have largely avoided political and social commentary, usually citing the potential for it to be an intrusion into the privacy and confidentiality of the work of the consulting room. Their analytic skills have been perceived to be properly reserved for clinical use, and their application to society seen as rashness. There are, of course, notable exceptions: the writings of Otto Fenichel, Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, Marie Langer, and R. D. Laing immediately spring to mind. Freud also turned his analytic considerations towards society, of course, as the epigraph makes clear. However, despite living through the First World War and its aftermath, he did not feel able to speak up in an open way in the late 1920s and 1930s against the totalitarian regime. It is likely that he feared the identification of psychoanalysis as a Jewish science

and, as with the burning of his texts in 1933, that fate would envelop the discipline.

Today, with the rise of nationalism, the return of totalitarian parties in Europe to electoral success, and the rise of the alt-right and white supremacists in the US, I believe there is an urgency for psychoanalysts to speak out. The analyst's understanding of the mental mechanisms found in the consulting room—in particular, those of cruelty, sadomasochism, and perversion, which are often rooted in a harmful early environment—can also be applied to the atmospheres that can seem to erupt uncontrollably into society, infecting it and causing profound splits and ruptures, with an "us" vs "them" mentality. Like a mystic writing pad on which marks are preserved from previous writings, to which Freud likened the memory traces of an individual's unconscious (Freud, 1925a), society too retains the capacity for unconscious remembrances to return from the past. Such unconscious shards can erupt seemingly out of nowhere, as disconnects in the minds of both individuals as well as groups of citizens, influencing behaviour and politics. Many commentators have drawn analogies between the political, economic, and social developments of the present and those of 1930s Europe, including the rise of totalitarianism and fascism.

An example of this is Joe Kaeser, chief executive of Siemens, who received death threats in May 2018 after denouncing a speech by Alice Weidel, parliamentary head of the right-wing Alternative for Germany party, in which she labelled refugees as "girls in headscarves … good for nothing". His response: "This isn't about headscarves. It's about discrimination, racism and nationalism." This attitude evoked parallels with the "League of German Girls", the female equivalent of the Hitler Youth in the 1930s and 1940s. He had spoken up now because nobody had spoken up then. Between 1940 and 1945, Siemens used over 80,000 forced labourers, of which at least 5,000 were concentration camp victims (Kaeser, 2018).

Although comparisons to the 1930s and the Second World War are up for debate, the concerns of many people have been heightened by dark memories of that time assailing and preoccupying the mind.

It is interesting to consider the degree to which social oppression or violence can be repressed, states of control sometimes being adopted and sometimes discarded as society lurches towards or away from freedom. The recent departure of Robert Mugabe after 37 years of dominating Zimbabwe led to the great happiness of thousands of people who had been waiting, both in the country and abroad, for years to receive news of regime change. This eruption was similar to that of the citizens of East and West Germany

when the Berlin Wall was breached. For years the people had needed to mentally and physically manage this wall, and so the opening of it allowed the hope of freedom—which had previously been held in privacy, dangerous to openly articulate—to become real.

Walls, as boundaries, are interesting metaphors. We all need boundaries, as any parent will attest, and, indeed, as we are all aware from our own childhood experiences. Some of us are lucky enough to have grown up in a family atmosphere with an enlightened understanding: an appreciation of the value of a lightness and meaningfulness with regard to rules and a delight in the development of children. Others, however, grow up in the shadows of cruel and nonsensical restrictions; of attacks and punishments directed both towards thinking and the body, such as beatings or sexual attacks; or of just not being wanted. Political regimes can have similarly divergent atmospheres with regard to the freedoms or restrictions given to certain of its citizens. Is there a freedom for all or is there a split running through society between the haves and the have-nots, the insiders and the outsiders, the rulers and the *Untermenschen*? As in the family, the splits and boundaries in a society can be either benign or pathological, increasing either the freedoms of citizens—or certain groups of citizens—or the controls imposed upon them.

For example, the law in the US has for decades enshrined the value and importance of women's rights over their own bodies, abortion being legalised by the 1973 *Roe* v. *Wade* decision. But there has recently been a sharp shift towards a patriarchal society dismantling those freedoms, aiming to control women's bodies and minds. How strange that this convergence followed the uncovering of Trump's nasty boasts that "I just start kissing them. … I don't even wait. … When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy" (Donald Trump *Access Hollywood* tape, 2016), along with the many accusations of sexual harassment or assault levelled at him during the election. In spite of Trump's blanket denial, attempting to shut down debate around his misogynistic leadership, a new atmosphere is prevailing in which women are speaking out and being heard, and this is having a profound impact. A balance of unconscious forces has existed in which complex layers of denial and obfuscation have smothered what was said, done, and reported. It is exhilarating to sense the sudden collapse of these forces and the consequent leap towards greater freedom, away from a sadomasochistic fixity. Perhaps it is the accretion of small victories towards the main imperative of fighting oppression that allows us small aliquots of hope. When enough has been done, we break out of the darkness and into a clearing.

What might Freud have made of these modern-day political and social corruptions? Of the sense of normality settling around the issue of "fake news", for instance, casting a shadow over the governance of many Western and Eastern European nations, as well as that of the "United States" (an obvious misnomer when we consider the disunity between many of those states, particularly around the issue of immigration)?

In the context of these worrying developments, it is perhaps helpful to consider a method of communication and affirmation that will always be available to us: that of irony. As René Major and Chantal Talagrand describe in *Freud: The Unconscious and World Affairs*, Freud made frequent use of irony in his writing, which is comparable to his use of psychoanalysis, both being characterised as a "[giving up of] illusions and thereby [an affirmation of] the triumph of the spirit over life's adversities" (Major & Talagrand, 2018, p. 2).

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud wrote of this linguistic technique that:

> Its essence lies in saying the opposite of what one intends to convey to the other person, but in sparing him contradiction by making him understand—by one's tone of voice, by some accompanying gesture, or (where writing is concerned) by some stylistic indications—that one means the opposite of what one says. Irony can only be employed when the other person is prepared to hear the opposite, so that he cannot fail to feel an inclination to contradict. As a result of this condition, irony is exposed particularly easily to the danger of being misunderstood. It brings the person who uses it the advantage of enabling him readily to evade the difficulties of direct expression, for instance in invectives. It produces comic pleasure in the hearer, probably because it stirs him into a contradictory expenditure of energy which is at once recognized as being unnecessary.
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> (Freud, 1905a, p. 174)

In describing irony in this passage, Freud is describing language's capacity to express many meanings that differ between the surface and the unconsciousness of a word or expression. Crucially to our current topic, we can see that this capacity also makes it possible to express oneself under an authoritarian power when it is dangerous to say other than what is expected.

Such pluralities of meaning offend totalitarianism's drive to control. As Major and Talagrand describe, totalitarian language, rather than modifying

the vernacular, "invents new speech that establishes a new rule intended to break with tradition" (Major & Talagrand, 2018, p. 2). This is an attempt to limit the multiplicity of meaning in language, and so to control communication and thought.[1] An example of such invented language is the infamous "*Arbeit macht frei*" ("work sets you free"), set into the metal gates at the entrance to Auschwitz and other concentration camps—an attempt to disarm the processions of Jews entering the death camps.[2]

In contrast to this narrowing, irony plays between multiple existing meanings. By doing so, it provides a way of dealing with an intolerable position, allowing one to provisionally accept the force of the regime whilst simultaneously maintaining a resolve to oppose that force and stay faithful to the truth. In this way, irony serves the double purpose of enabling both discreetness and an affirmation of self. It is thus a form of survival in the face of the invitation to agree to oppression, to capitulate to that which is an attack on one's own humanity, dignity, and relationship with reality. Language's inalienable multiplicity will always hold the potential to disrupt the desires and demands of authoritarian regimes to regulate and police meaning. A recent example of the political use of irony is provided by a Shanghai business that makes drinks with darkly comic names and slogans that mock the oppressive regime. "A cup of negative energy a day", for example, plays on President Xi Jinping's slogan "positive energy", with which he appeals to young people to contribute to their country's development (Yang, 2018).

Freud's view, consistent with his use of irony, was that we must face reality rather than live in an illusory world. He did not ignore the waves of savagery gradually engulfing Europe. A sequence listed by Major and Talagrand includes the following events:

> On 22 March 1933, the first concentration camp opened in Dachau, … intended for political opponents of the Nazi regime. On 1 April 1933, the boycott of Jewish businesses and shops came into effect; on 7 April 1933, Jews were forbidden to teach in universities and hold public service jobs. On 26 April 1933, the Gestapo … was established by Hermann Göring. On 2 May 1933, German trade unions were dissolved. On 10 May 1933, a book-burning took place. … The Nazi party become the only party in power … [and] Hitler was elected President, while remaining Chancellor of Germany. On 15 September 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws were passed, "for the protection of German blood". On 3 March 1936, Jewish doctors were forbidden to practise. … On 13 March 1938, Austria was annexed to the Reich

(*Anschluss*). … On 30 January 1939, Hitler announced "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe".

(Major & Talagrand, 2018, pp. 2–3)

It was impossible for Freud to ignore these developments. From 1929 to 1939, he kept a diary of long, loose pages of brief one-line notes describing what happened each day and covering the family, the world of psychoanalysis, and the politics of Germany and Austria (Molnar, 1992). He wrote to his close friend, the Dutch analyst Jeanne Lampl-de Groot: "We are all curious what will come of the program of Reichs Chancellor Hitler, whose only political theme is pogroms" (ibid., p. 141). Freud is under no illusions here, playing derisively between "program" and "pogrom". And how brave an activity that during the decay of institutional systems in Germany between 1933 and 1938, Freud was crafting his ideas on anti-Semitism in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939a), albeit with anxiety about the impact of its publication (to be allayed by his departure for freedom to London, following the ransom paid to the Third Reich by another close friend and analyst, Princess Marie Bonaparte). The exile of the unconscious Oedipus is echoed by that of Freud, although Freud, by contrast, was an exile with a conscious knowledge of himself and his times.

The above sequence outlining the destruction of the rules of state is a sharp reminder of what can happen as a result of the governance of a particular leader bent on ruling through the imposition of internal states of prejudice on the nation. This form of governance is increasingly becoming the norm once again, seen in abusive takeovers of power and reductions in representative justice in Poland, Hungary, the UK's right-wing Brexiteers, and America. This book is an attempt to face this reality, and it will meander with this aim around many diverse themes. Language, with its many obvious or more private meanings, will be a central theme, as will stories—from fairy tales beloved and feared from childhood to the tellings of impossible histories that we are led to bear witness to, hearing their many layers of deeds committed and suffered.

The first chapter focuses on the importance of mourning, listening to difference, and authentic knowledge in order to preserve freedom and counter systems of control, deceit, and abuse. It also considers attacks on alterity and the dynamics of splitting in society. The second chapter examines both storytelling and the elision of thought and history in today's world. It takes a closer look at the dynamics of mourning and considers psychic and

historical gaps, splits, and tears in society, including in the context of anxieties around immigration. This chapter, particularly in its consideration of the brutalities inflicted by ISIS on the Yazidi, is the most visceral of the book. By this, I mean that it was written and will be read in a psychosomatic sense, as some of its descriptions need to be felt in the body (reflecting Freud's early idea that the original ego was the body ego). These feelings can overwhelm the capacity of the conscious mind to take them in, yet to my mind there is still a need to notice them. The third chapter is a meditation on the relationship between cruelty in the early environment and hatred of the other within society, looking particularly at racism in the US.

Although small, this book goes against the grain of the current trend for brief soundbites that allow us to pass swiftly over painful information. It will go into the details of some extremely dark occurrences, not to glorify cruelties, but in order to understand them, as well as to give thought to the individuals who have suffered them. In turn, this will provide the reader with greater access to things residing in the unconscious. It will, hopefully, also allow the reader to become more in touch with the humanity in human beings—with qualities that totalitarian mentalities prefer buried, so they do not hinder our loyalty to the regime.

Listening to stories such as those collected within this book enables us to become more aware, not only of what is going on *over there*, but also what is happening *here*. In our increasingly joined-up world, *here* is always implicated and affected too. My hope is that the reader will be brave enough to listen, and to face disrupting the illusions of our political times. Ridding ourselves of these illusions is crucial if we are to find the freedom to think, develop, challenge, and create hope—for future generations, as well as for ourselves.

Endnotes

1. This drive is examined amply by the philologist Victor Klemperer in *The Language of the Third Reich* (1957), following Nazism's destructuring of language and reduction of German thought and culture into new, narrow meanings.
2. One could perhaps call this an irony, of course, but this is a perverse and vicious text.