

## **Psychoanalysis, Politics, SKIN, Resistance and Dignity**

by

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This is a particularly dire political season.

I'm a child of the seventies, of the anti-war movement, flowers in the barrels of the National Guard's rifles at Kent State, of student protests, and of Dr. King's nonviolent resistance movement. In these political times—and sometimes reminiscent of the atmosphere from which dictatorships were spawned—my mind turned to the topic of psychoanalysis and politics. In every instance that I put pen to paper to outline today's address, the political tenor of the times preoccupied me. Thoughts about political leadership and the world have come to the forefront of conversations with my children, colleagues and patients, and thoughts about rights, freedom, dignity, fascism and democracy have been interwoven in these conversations.

Then I remembered something I wrote in 1989, immediately after the Tiananmen Square protests, and at about the same time as new and violent crackdowns on protesting Buddhist monks in Chinese-occupied Tibet. As many of

you know, I don't make it a habit of quoting myself, but with your forgiveness, I'll quote the opening paragraph of this paper from the Journal of Contemplative Psychoanalysis, since it will lead me into the theme of my brief talk today about IFPE and politics. I began this article with a quote from Albert Camus:

*Man is Mortal. That may be; but let us die resisting; and if our lot is complete annihilation, let us not behave in such a way that it seems justice!"*

Then, in this article, I touched upon some thoughts about, "**The Good and Evil of Resistance,<sup>1</sup>**" as follows:

"Throughout history, resistance against oppression has earned respect because human beings want to live in dignity and thus feel a kinship with others who refuse to succumb to unjust authority. Recently, the rebellion of Tibetan monks against armed occupation forces and the portrait of a lone Chinese student blocking the path of a tank near Tiananmen Square continue to exemplify such acts of courageous defiance. At the root of all resistance is an attempt to maintain one's dignity in the face of a perceived threat to that dignity. *It is in this regard that all manifestations of resistance, whether in the political arena or in the therapy office, are basically similar.*"

The man that stood in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square, and to whom I referred 30 years ago, was a 19-year-old student of archeology who went by the alias Wang Weilin (a name he gave in order to protect friends and family). To this

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<sup>1</sup> Silverberg, F. (1990). Working with Resistance. *Journal of Contemplative Psychotherapy*, VII, 21-34.

day, no one knows for sure what became of him. Some reliable sources, such as the Yonhap Daily News in Korea, say he escaped to Taiwan. Some reliable US news agency sources suggest that Weilin was taken away immediately, and executed 14 days after the tank photo and film were taken. The latter outcome would certainly not be a surprising when dealing with repressive governments—and represents the ultimate consequence of resistance.



Photo Credit: Associated Press Photo/Jeff Widener, 1989

In terms of nonviolent resistance, as it relates to the subject of this year's IFPE conference, SKIN, I am reminded of the skin-related experience that people of color experience in this country every day. You will see this theme explored more deeply in some of this conference's presentations and special events, including the documentary *Black Psychoanalysts Speak*, and in our conference's

special Saturday night event, *Melanin Mythologies*, curated by Erin Christovale and with poet A-lan Holt.

Although it can't be compared, my own small and time-limited experience of skin-prejudice took place with daily, sometimes hourly, regularity, during a period of my life when I spent time in Korea, where, at the time, the population was almost 100% mono-racial, wherever I went. Being white, I was an *extreme* minority and devoid of white privilege—that I didn't fully realize I had until that moment. I hardly saw another Caucasian for weeks at a time. In some neighborhoods, I was followed by bands of kids harassing me at a distance, thinking I was military, and I was the one selected in the line at the airport to have my luggage completely unpacked and inspected.

I had cab drivers refuse to take me where I wanted to go and pretend they couldn't understand me when I spoke their language. I did my own small nonviolent resistance thing with these cabbies: I would bring a map with me, sit right down next to the cabbie, and say, "한성대 지하철 역" (*Hansung Deh ji-ha chul yeok*) since that is where I often had to go (Hansung University subway station). Typically, the driver pretended not to understand me, I'd show him on the map, and repeat my destination. Still, often, there was no willingness to drive me, and no cooperation. The drivers wanted me out of their cabs because of my race, appearance, and my accent—the markings of my otherness, *my skin*.

Skin was an identifier of my otherness and my unacceptability during this time in my life. I felt it, and concomitantly, developed a visceral empathy in regard

to such experiences (although I realize it doesn't compare, with the full-time experience for minorities anywhere). As we know, in many urban centers of the US, cab drivers are also known to discriminate against, and pass by, African-Americans who hail them. I also realize, with the horror that any decent person feels, that these days, in some countries (including now, with growing frequency, in our country), such skin identification of "otherness" might be just enough to get one shot and killed—because of skin.

Although I had been stopped at military roadblocks while being waved to a halt by submachine gun-bearing guards, the danger and threat to life of the skin-related situations had not reached the fever pitch that it has in this country lately. Or, I should say, lately **again?** ...as movingly reflected in the anthem performed by Billie Holiday in 1939, "Strange Fruit," the lyrics written by a Jewish Communist Bronx high school teacher as a protest poem against the lynching of African-Americans in the South. That song was another form of powerful, multi-disciplinary non-violent resistance, at the time. Recently, again, this movement has become a necessary —re-emerging in Black Lives Matter.

A contemporary reference to this movement was Beyonce's song "Formation" —that stirred up reactions at the 2016 Super Bowl, a non-violent resistance that was reacted to with calls to boycott her by Rudy Giuliani and various police organizations. In the second half of her music video of "Formation," a line of police surrender to a kid in a hoodie who is dancing, echoing the '*hands up don't shoot*' chant, and then the screen flashes, "Stop shooting us."

We now know the names of Amadou Diallo, Manuel Loggins, Jr., Ronald Madison, Kendra James, Sean Bell, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, and, as I was writing some notes for this talk, now unfortunately, add the name of Deborah Danner. All were black men or women who died at the hands of police, and how can we say this wasn't related to SKIN? To reflect back on my opening words about resistance, certainly any attempt to maintain dignity or resist in such situations, would be even more likely to get you shot.

Today's IFPE conference theme of SKIN—and its relationship to resistance and dignity—is of tremendous significance and life-or-death import at a time of political uncertainty and uncertainty regarding human rights, both at home and abroad. To come together to have this discussion and to leave here carrying the ideas with us into our own lives (wherever we engage them), can be viewed as our own resistance to, and rebellion against, non-humanistic trends in society and in the world.

In light of the current, and precarious, political times, it may be a relief for us to find out that psychoanalysis and the dialogue of the treatment continuously thrive, whether under a fascistic repressive government or under an open democratic government. In Argentina, even under the repressive government of the 60's, psychoanalysis still remained in use. When psychoanalysts are persecuted, it is not usually because they are psychoanalysts, but for reasons unrelated to their profession. According to research on politics and

psychoanalysis, (by Damousi and Plotkin<sup>2</sup>), even corrupt and fascistic governments have tried, not to exterminate psychoanalysis, but instead to incorporate psychoanalytic concepts and language into their master plans.

The freedom of thought and freedom of expression that psychoanalysis provides, and the humanistic, psychologically-astute insight into human nature that it offers, remain attractive no matter what the political circumstances or type of government in place. I find this oddly comforting in the face of recurrent worries about lessening freedoms, abuse of rights, and constriction of democracy. Possibly, freedom of thought can survive repressive times via psychoanalysis, and out of which the flame of humanitarian decency can be kept alive and re-emerge.

To paraphrase Lene Auestad<sup>3</sup>, one of the organizers of the *Politics and Psychoanalysis* forum in Europe, psychoanalysis has an intrinsic tenet of respect for “otherness,” the study of otherness, and the fostering of us-ness, as well, in the same dialectic. This respect is seen in much of the writings and work we do, is exemplified not only on a theoretical plane, but is in practice in our everyday interactions and empathy with the “other” in our consulting rooms.

We can see this in the ethos of IFPE, with our inclusiveness of multiple viewpoints and disciplines in dialogue, and our egalitarian processes at our conferences. This principle respect, so central to psychoanalysis, may, if you grasp

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<sup>2</sup> Damousi, J. & Plotkin, M.B. (2009). *The transnational unconscious: essays in the history of psychoanalysis and transnationalism*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> Krüger, S. (2013) Introducing Psychoanalysis and Politics – a conversation with Lene Auestad and Jonathan Davidoff, *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies*, Vol. 7(1).

its importance, contain a kernel of the salvation of humanity and the amelioration of hatred. It may help us to understand and undercut the evils of nationalism, and the collateral idealization of one group, with the consequent denigration of another group. We see this all around the world, and hear about it every day, in sad and disturbing news about lives lost.

Historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt noted that, in order to create the setting for empathy and egalitarianism, the free exchange of opinions is critical. She wrote:

“If someone wants to see and experience the world as it "really" is, he [or she] 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 is 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”<sup>4</sup>

I also want to reflect a bit on the spirit of resistance, the “Weilin spirit” so to speak, against the coming of the various “tanks” seen in the trends in mental health care, managed care, the supremacy of “empirically-based” treatments, and the age of quick cures and pharmaceutical cocktails that are so prevalent. Still, despite these things, with our interest in psychoanalysis and promoting self-knowledge, exploration and growth, we offer some resistance to those tidal trends.

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt, H. [1956-1959] "Introduction into Politics" in Arendt, H., Kohn, J. ed. (2005). *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books, p. 128.



Even within psychoanalysis, despite our field's inherent respect for otherness and its humanitarian bent, there also exist trends towards quelling dissent and towards the oversight, regulation and standardization, towards the favoring of bigger institutions overriding the small, towards the formatting of conferences and meetings with regimented goals listed, requisite post-tests, and contortions made in order to obtain the stamp of approval offered in the form of continuing education credits, that brings with it being beholden to certifying bodies, umbrella organizations, and government bodies. These factors also begin to affect the shape and nature of conference spaces and the freedom of speech and nature of the egalitarian dialogue within. I like to think that IFPE resists this tide—at least has been able to do so up until now and I hope IFPE will continue doing so for a long time to come.

Past president and my conference co-chair, Judy Vida, once described IFPE in architectural terms as a “cushion of air” between larger structures, existing only through “a fantastic set of impossibilities.” I would like to add to that description that IFPE, in taking a stand, also says no, and resists the march of those larger structures. Instead, IFPE rebels, and doesn't conform to the rising tides. By staunchly protecting the freedom, egalitarianism, and safety of our presentations and dialoguing conference space, something can still happen here—a rare sort of magic—that can occur when people fully speak their minds, without fear, about human nature and our own experiences—an experience that is found less and less in formats that conform to the requirements of and trends in our field.

As you know, and as you can hear from talking with friends and colleagues (in all our many related disciplines), it can become too easy to forget about the core value of heart-to-heart dialogue, and too easy to let the in-depth exploration of the human condition go by the wayside. It is easy too to lose focus while we try to keep our families fed and sheltered, our children in school and on track, our patients from setbacks and moving forward toward health, our offices open, our mortgages paid, our continuing education credits fulfilled, and the insurance companies, professional organizations and government oversights, satisfied.

Sometimes I wonder if the original psychoanalytic congresses, over a century ago, contained the same level of exploration, sharing and cutting-edge intensity that can happen at an IFPE conference. Sometimes I wonder if the same multidisciplinary richness that banded the original groups in psychoanalysis together is what bands us together. IFPE bands together writers, artists, scientists, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, counselors, music therapists, movement therapists, art therapists, philosophers, and people from all walks of life with a self-expressed interest in psychoanalysis—and this forms a creative synergy that has no set form or goal at the beginning other than to enjoy our time together learning about human experience from a psychoanalytic perspective. Yet, that synergy may ultimately serve a greater good.

At IFPE we don't record our talks or dialogues that we hold dear in our conference space, we don't intrude upon the deep exploration and sharing that happens as we explore topics relevant to life in our consultation rooms as well as in society in general. We don't have to worry about any record of our words or

positions when we choose to stand in front of the tanks of dogmatism, or the current trends. For as long as you, our members, support the continued existence of IFPE and our conferences, this space and what can happen within it goes on.

I say, Viva la Revolucion! Viva marching to a different drummer! Viva being refuse-niks to the current trends and Viva to saying no to being beholden to overseeing organizations or bodies! Viva psychoanalysis! Viva to keeping the flame of humanitarian decency and respect for otherness alive! And, of course, Viva IFPE for as long as we continue to be able to exist in this ever more regimented, goal-oriented, time-pressured zeitgeist in which gathering to enjoy each others' thoughtful and interactive exchanges is a precious rarity that is, in itself, a form of resistance.